Fractio Panis (celebratiion of the Eucharist), second century, the catacomb of Priscilla, Rome, Italy.

CLOUD OF WITNESSES

Sanctity and Saints

Denis Kostomarov

Every day of the church year is marked by the memory of saints. We come across references to the saints in the pages of Scripture. We celebrate the memory of the apostles, the martyrs, the righteous reverend, holy bishops, pious rulers, and so on. Local churches themselves perform canonizations with various frequency. But, as often happens in the history of theology, the meaning of *holiness*, of what is meant by "you are a holy nation," has been transformed since the apostolic era. In this short theological reflection, I want to explore the reshaping of this term across the life of the Church and in Christian practice in order to come to a better appreciation of how to apply the concept of *holiness* in our contemporary lives.

Holiness, first of all, is an attempt to understand the reality of death for a Christian. Today, we feel a tragic line between the world of the living and the spiritual world of the dead, where we have the saints as our "patrons" and seek their prayers for ourselves. But is this the same understanding of death as in early Christianity, which was marked by a living memory of the risen Christ? Among the early Christians, who still had a vivid recollection of their risen Lord, death was not comprehended this way.

Attitudes toward death in the New Testament and in the early Christian literature and culture bear the impression of Easter. In the graves of catacombs we encounter numerous inscriptions reading, "he is alive," or "she is alive."[1] "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain," exclaims Paul (Phil. 1:21). The martyr Ignatius of Antioch implores his readers, "Do not interrupt me; let me become the food of the wild beasts, through which I will find my God. I am the Lord's wheat, and the teeth of the beasts will cut me into pieces to become the pure bread of Christ."[2] This understanding of death was common in

[1] Cf. Alexander Schmemann, *Литургия смерти и современная культура* (Moscow: Granat, 2014).

the early Church. Death had been consumed and overcome by Jesus Christ; hell was destroyed. Death was not the end of a life, but the connection with life in Christ. This connection began at the moment of baptism, when a person shed his shabby clothes and died with Jesus to be resurrected with him.

In subsequent years, the Church took a momentous step backward, returning death once again to the defeated devil. Christianity had transformed the funeral sob into a triumphant "Alleluia," but could not endure the contrast between this transformational aspiration and a sad and difficult world. In response, an infinite and incomprehensible discussion of "posthumous fate" and of the "other world" began. Step by step, the basic motive of Christian prayers for the dead became obsessive and fearful requests for indulgence, mercy, and forgiveness, as though a cup of human love would be more complete than the depthless eucharistic cup of Christ's love.

Christians of the early Church commonly used variations of the word *saints* for themselves not as an honorific, but as descriptive of their reality as a community that had been set apart by God. For example, Christians are labeled as a "holy nation" in 1 Peter 2:9, not because of their inherent impeccability but owing to their belonging to Christ and their commission to demonstrate God's designs for the world. Paul begins many of his letters with a reference to "holy brothers" in Rome, Colossae, Ephesus, Philippi, or Corinth.

Knowing that Paul's letters were often occasioned by conflicts and troubles in young communities, we can confidently say that his attribution of "holiness" to these "brothers and sisters" did not mean that they were extraordinary or unusual people. The understanding which Paul and the young Church brought to the term *holy* becomes clear if we open the Old Testament and look at its meaning there. The Hebrew word *qadosh* stands for "separate," or "detached," denoting a person or thing that either belongs to God or is able to withstand close proximity to God. Although there were "not many wise, not many powerful, not many noble" (1 Cor. 1:26) among the members of the young communities, they still belonged to Christ, and were consequently set apart from their surroundings, even if this was not visibly obvious to the non-Christians around them. Because of this belonging and the community's unique understanding of death, an unusual comprehension of life and holiness becomes clear. Christians may be imperfect and commit sins, but their inseparability from God's love leaves them unalterably holy. As becomes painfully evident in the further history of Christian theology, this understanding was gradually eclipsed, and it has guided us to the modern condition where it is difficult to imagine using the endonym "holy" in relation to ourselves without being indicted for either pride, delusion, or both.

In order to really comprehend this, we have to consider the phenomenon known as *canonization*. In the current practice of the Orthodox Church, personal canonization is preceded by a comprehensive study of the life of an ascetic and can reveal a number of facts relevant to a person's elevation to sainthood.[3] Saints may be widely venerated by at least local Christian communities, be certified to have performed miracles, or have left behind incorruptible relics (incorruptibility of remains is not a prerequisite to the canonization in all of the local Churches; for example, in monastic communities of Mount Athos

[2] Great martyr Ignatius of Antioch, Epistle to the Ephesians. http://aleteia.narod.ru/ignat/efes.htm.

[3] Cf. Hegumen Andronik Trubachev, "Канонизация святых в Русской Православной Церкви" in *Orthodox Encyclopedia* (Moscow: Православная энциклопедия, 2000).

The myrrh-bearing women and the angel on the tomb. Byzantine miniature.

the attitude toward incorruptibility is very cautious). In the Roman Catholic Church the canonization process is even more complicated and takes place in two stages: canonization is preceded by translation to the ranks of the beatified (from the Latin *beatus*, meaning "happy" or "blessed"), and only after that does the Church advance a person to canonization.

Canonization was not always so complex. Universal veneration of the apostles and other apostolic figures encompassed a broad range of cities and communities. Old Testament patriarchs and prophets were commemorated as forerunners of the Savior. The Eucharist was celebrated on the graves of Christians, emphasizing the paradox of the life of the dead and the continuation of their involvement in the practice of serving their communities. But with the beginning of the persecutions, a new attitude took root regarding Christians who remained loyal to their Lord in the face of threats to their lives and well-being. They received the name *witnesses* ("martyrs," from the Greek *martys*). Such veneration was recorded in writing in the fourth century by composing lists of recognized martyrs; in these lists, the date of a martyr's death was also the date of her birth in Christ. At that time, the veneration of ascetics was a matter for a local community and its bishop, and was understood to concern the Eucharistic life of the Church and the unity of all Christians in Christ. An issue that seems very important to us today—canonization as the assurance of Christian salvation—was not central for early Christian communities.

In time, this situation changed. After the Edict of Milan began the process of converting Christianity into the favored religion of the Roman Empire, the Church was filled by many people who wished to be part of the new religious order, yet clearly only a small minority were personally interested in pursuing a Christian path. The great expansion of formal Christianity altered attitudes toward death and holiness; the practice of Christian life in the new legal regime often stood in sharp contradiction with the teachings of the Church and with the ethical maxims of the New Testament. Nominal Christians could hardly be called "saints,"

[4] Yevgeny Golubinskiy, *История канонизации святых в Русской Церкви*, 2nd edition (Moscow, 1903), 13.

even by the logic of the Apostle Paul, as they were no longer separated from the fallen world. In many cases, Christians now differed from non-Christians merely by having been baptized. In fact, many new Church members did not show their faith in their deeds, opting simply to make it formal, observing the required rituals and following the necessary traditions. The belief that the victory of Christ over death and hell was gifted even to these Christians disappeared from practical theology. The attention of apologists and hierarchs was diverted from intellectual opposition to the pagan world to critique of the internal theological and disciplinary problems of the institutional church.

These developments notwithstanding, it should be noted that the joyful attitude to death still persisted for a long time. We can look at a remarkable figure given by Professor E. E. Golubinski: of the seventy-four hierarchs of the see of Constantinople between 315 and 1340, only twenty-five are known not to have been canonized (and eighteen of these were, in fact, heretical).[4] Golubinski's statistic demonstrates that, during the first millennium, those who died within the walls of Church were regularly venerated as "saints," even if the expression of this veneration was reoriented away from regular individual Christians to the highest Church authorities.

The theological postulate of Christ's victory over death and hell causes an Easter light to radiate from the pages of the New Testament, the theology of the apostolic fathers, and the liturgical worship and quotidian practices of the early Christian communities. This belief framed the death of any of the brothers and sisters as an entrance to a quiet and joyful life in Christ and stemmed naturally from their life in the Church. Canonization was not understood, at first, in relation to arguments about "post-mortem" salvation, but as a natural veneration of Christians whose lives were particularly exemplary and edifying for Church members. This veneration was directly related to the Eucharist: the letters of the apostles were read as Holy Scripture and the Liturgy was often celebrated in the catacombs on the graves of the dead members of the communities or on the graves of the martyrs. The changing of this attitude toward death and sanctity coincided with the beginning of numerous other crises in the life of the Church: its worldliness, dipping into speculative theology, decline of liturgical life, and clericalization. ✠

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