North wall, Church of Holy Wisdom, New Skete Monastery, NY. Photo by Inga Leonova.

CLOUD OF WITNESSES

When the Saints Go Marching In

Stavros Winner

The landmark recording of the American gospel hymn "When the Saints Go Marching In" was produced in 1938 by Louis Armstrong and his orchestra. Undoubtedly, Americans over the age of thirty can immediately hear the tune in their heads: "Oh, when the saints go marching in…Lord, I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in." But what most people do not know is that the lyrics were inspired by the biblical book of Revelation and other parts of Scripture.

The vision of the Son of Man in Revelation 4, which draws on Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Daniel for its imagery of the one enthroned, was often interpreted in Byzantium as the Pantocrator and linked with the parable of the Last Judgment (Matt. 25), which describes the Son of Man as he takes his seat on a throne of glory. According to Revelation, "all nations will be assembled" (25:32), referring to every human being from the span of human history. The assembly of saints being vast, divine scrutiny is meted out not according to a creed or profession of correct dogma, but on the basis of our behavior toward one another: did we feed the poor? give drink to the thirsty? extent hospitality to the stranger? clothe the naked? visit the imprisoned?

The vision portrayed in "When the Saints Go Marching In," drawing on the New Testament, includes details depicted in the icons of some very ancient Christian churches. I have experienced the visual impact of this imagery as a worshipper in such diverse churches as Santa Maria Assunta on the isle of Torcello, northeast of Venice; Sant' Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna; the *katholikon* of Vatopedi Monastery on Mount Athos; San Mineato al Monte in Florence; and the Abbey Church of Saint Foy in Conques, France. It is also the inspiration for the

scheme employed in the design and decoration of the *katholikon* at New Skete, Cambridge, New York—my own community.

New Skete's *katholikon* (main church), dedicated to Holy Wisdom, has two windows at the east end and three at the west end. They admit the special light of sunrise and sunset that dramatizes a cosmic subtext with the daily reappearance of the sun—the archetypical sign of Christ who is our light and our life. In the rectangular liturgical space, set along an east-west axis as in earlier basilica-patterned churches, the very rising of the sun symbolically orients us to the Lord's coming and reinforces our custom of facing east to pray. As in the golden era of early Byzantine architecture, the altar or holy place is not walled off by a solid iconostasis, but is demarcated by an angular U-shaped templon screen, which allows clergy and people to see and hear one another and to remain one worshiping body.

In both churches at New Skete (the smaller one erected in 1970 and dedicated to the Transfiguration and the larger one completed in 1983 in honor of Holy Wisdom), the east end is marked by a large image of the Pantocrator at the center of the *deisis*. This icon scheme focuses the prophetic expectation of the Son of Man in Jesus, conceived and given birth by Mary and baptized by John. Above the oak wainscoting on the long north and south walls in the Holy Wisdom temple are two lines which extend the *deisis*, and nod to the verse from Matthew 25, "all nations will be assembled."

Our iconographic scheme is directly modeled on that of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, which dates from the sixth century—imitating the symbolism, not the form, since the Ravenna iconography is in mosaic, and the style is very classical and rather stiff, with men on the south side and women on the north. New Skete's unhurried procession focuses on Christ over the *synthronon*, the raised seats behind the Holy Table that lined the apses of ancient churches. On its wall behind the Holy Table are depicted bishops, chosen to represent the Church across history and geography, including SS Clement and Ignatius, disciples of the apostles, and St. Innocent of Alaska, with a fur-trimmed miter.

The head of the line of saints at the east, at clerestory level, features the apostles and equals-to-the-apostles, the faithful female disciples. At the west end of the line are four prophets: Moses, David, Isaiah, and Elijah. We made a reasoned choice to make the rest of the depicted assembly as diverse as possible, allowing for more women and for individuals of both Eastern and Western Churches. In this way, we emphasized a point made by Nicholas Denysenko, to which we shall return later—that "the Church [has] elastic borders designed to include all."[1] In the center of the procession, on both sides of the temple, we inserted contemporary figures, not indicated as "saints" by title or the conventional halo, who are nonetheless holy and worthy of joining in this heavenly pilgrimage. Mother Maria of Paris, whose sanctity was officially recognized by the Church of Constantinople sometime after we erected her image, stands in the south tier, along with Dorothy Day of our own country, whose cause for canonization is open at the Vatican, and Mother (now Saint) Teresa of Calcutta, who was recently canonized by Pope Francis—these are all women who lived gospel-centered lives.

[1] Nicholas Denysenko, "Retrieving a Theology of Belonging: Eucharist and Church in Postmodernity, Part 2," *Worship* 89 (2015): 36.

Altar, Church of Holy Wisdom, New Skete Monastery, NY. Photo by Inga Leonova.

Our times are so afflicted by multifarious divisions, many stoked by politicians and religious theocrats sowing fear and hatred and thereby engendering suffering and death. These divisions have resulted in the colossal displacement of Middle East populations; in persecutions; and in the deaths of countless men, women, and children emerging from the schisms within Islam, in a land where, in the conciliar era, the Christian Church experienced similarly serious theological rifts. Ecumenism is a movement that seeks to heal divisions with love and understanding and to build on the enormous patrimony we have in common, and so we chose to include three fathers of the ecumenical movement that achieved its apogee in the 1960s and 70s: Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I, Pope Paul VI, and Archbishop Michael Ramsey. The inclusion of these champions of ecumenism disturbed a few people who had not seen them in context, much less taken account of the overall theology this article espouses. Their unease mirrored the concern expressed by some people in past times to see, in depictions of the Last Judgement such as at Torcello, monks, nuns, bishops, princes, and rich merchants consigned to the flames at the left. But just as sacred Scripture should challenge us and provoke *metanoia* (repentance, change of mind), so should sacred art.

We might also have included on our nave walls Matushka Olga Michael of Kwethluk, Alaska, healer and counselor, or the educator Sophie Koulumzin; and Father John Meyendorff, theologian and historian, deserves a place at the side of Father Alexander Schmemann. Given our means and ability at the time, however, there was only limited space.

The inclusion of images of Christians who were not formally members of the Orthodox Church might be problematic for some. Perhaps it relates to how one would treat living Roman Catholics or Anglicans. The approach varies greatly throughout Orthodoxy. The late Bishop Basil Rodzianko of San Francisco (1980–84), on a visit to New Skete, was delighted to find an icon of St. Francis of Assisi, which was

subsequently presented to the Hosanna Community in Moscow. When the bishop was told that our community had encountered a few Orthodox who were not so pleased by its presence, he retorted, "When they get to heaven, perhaps there will be partitions, lest they notice that Orthodox are not the only ones there!" Brother Luke, our former prior, also offered a rationale for our iconographic choices in a Palm Sunday homily several years ago:

> We also find sanctity in modern martyrs of prejudice, such as two individuals of Jewish background who committed themselves to Christ and still died because of their faith and their race: St. Benedicta (Edith Stein) killed by the Nazis, and Father Alexander Men, axed to death on his way to church in 1990. Then there is Maximos the Greek, a refugee from Constantinople who fled to Florence, became a Dominican, then returned to Orthodoxy and was invited to Russia to help in liturgical reform, for which he was ultimately imprisoned. Or what of St. Nektarios, who died in 1920 and was the last Orthodox hierarch to have the courage to ordain a woman deacon? Does anyone doubt that these saintly individuals stand side by side in heaven, where God sees no division between his children? They remind us that holiness is not to be found exclusively in the comfortable safety of the familiar, but in those who challenged the status quo of the status seekers, who spoke the uncomfortable truth in the face of criticism and death, who lived the gospel message and, for many, paid the ultimate price, as did Christ. As we enter into the week of Christ's Saving Passion, when he offered forgiveness to his executioners, entry into paradise to the thief, and the unspeakable joy of resurrec-

[2] Michael Plekon, *Hidden Holiness* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009) and *Living Icons* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

Ancient Greek philosophers, katholikon narthex, Monastery of Great Meteoron, Meteora, Greece. Photo credit www.diakonima.gr.

> tion to all humanity, may these models of sanctity help focus our minds and hearts ever more firmly on the message of Christ: love your neighbor.

Praying in a church where you can rub shoulders with saints works on your psyche. They become as familiar as family. They dispel the sense that I am alone on this journey to my true homeland. As we learn from hearing the genealogy from the first chapter of Matthew on the Sunday before Christmas, the family tree of the Incarnate Word is full of characters. Some may be more or less savory than others, but together we make up the People of God, a Holy Nation, a Royal Priesthood.

It is crucial, in this new era of spiritual deracination, for ordinary people to appreciate that "saint" is not a forbidding designation for someone whose life was so exotic or reclusive that she could never model a life for our own day. Michael Plekon has expressed this in his writings on the feasibility of a life of genuine holiness in the twenty-first century—its resonance, roots, and ramifications.[2] Yet we have a linguistic difficulty in English, insofar as the words *holy* and *saint* sound different. The latter now has a narrower connotation, implying official recognition. We have long lost the sense of *saint* as an ordinary, striving member of the family of God. In the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of the New Testament, it is simply the ordinary work for a Christian.

This meaning is reinforced by the text of the Liturgy itself. We know that, before the fall of Constantinople in 1204 and the eclipse of the form of the offices of Hagia Sophia, what is now known as the Little Entrance was, in fact, the entrance of the entire assembly into the temple—the Church into the church—as indicated by the entry prayer in the oldest codex of the Byzantine euchologion (Barberini Gr. 336): "Receive your Church which approaches you." We make such an entry into our Holy Wisdom temple for the beginning of the Synaxis of the Word, or Enarxis. It is no accident that the blessing assigned for this occasion, and still said by every bishop or priest who presides over the assembly, is "Blessed be the entrance of your saints"—that is, us.

Absidian mosaic, San Miniato Al Monte, Florence, Italy. Photo by Luca Volpi.

The space, texture, and iconography of our *katholikon* reminds us of the purpose of the church and of our gathering within it. The Sunday Eucharist is its primary raison d'être, and the text of the Eucharistic Liturgy teaches us why this is so. For this reason, the clergy should always proclaim these texts, so all can hear, and reception of the Eucharist should be the norm, as is our practice at New Skete. Does not Christ say to his friends at table when he passes them the cup, "Drink of this, all of you" (Matt. 26:27)—words

Santa Maria Assunta, 639 A.D. West wall. Veneto-Byzantine basilica on the island of Torcello predates San Marco in Venice. Photo by Remi Mathis.

repeated at every Divine Liturgy in every Christian tradition? In the gospels, Jesus does not exclude Judas, even though moments earlier his betrayal was confirmed. Denysenko, commenting on the *anamnesis* which follows the *epiclesis* in the Anaphora of Saint Basil the Great, writes:

> Who, then, are these people that the Church commits to God's divine memory? Basil's prayer presents an almost inexhaustible list of different others that reveal the Church as an elastic cosmic tent, with room to expand. The genius of the intercessions lies in the apparent attempt to include everyone. . . .
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> The Church asks God to remember each category of person, a tacit acknowledgment that everyone invoked can belong to the divine fellowship; the breadth of people invoked in this prayer is infinite, and the prayer does not provide checkpoints that exclude sinners; the Church's recitation of this prayer is potentially formative. Participating in the prayer by hearing it and affirming it with the "Amen" has the capacity to form the consciousness of the participants so that they would view the Church as having elastic borders designed to include all.[3]

The many signposts in this essay each point in the same direction. Sacred art and architecture, liturgical renewal, and the lineage of saints all call us to an awareness of oneness as a divine imperative that warrants inclusivity, if we believe the Body of Christ is a mystic reality. These symbols speak to us over and over, through the centuries, across geography and cultures, from New Orleans to Conques, from Valamo to Skete. This is not the only age beset by vicious wars and colossal suffering, nor the only time in which the fabric of society has seemed so threadbare and our future so opaque. Nonetheless, we have the means to make sense of it all, perhaps best understood through an analogy from music, provided here by Peter Bouteneff in his recent book on the Orthodox composer Arvo Pärt:

> The arts and the sacred traditions alike, where they are true to life as we know it, will often reflect this interweaving of sorrow and consolation, brokenness and wholeness. . . . [Pärt's] music says that there is no joy that is not tinged with grief, and no suffering beyond redemption. His compositions are never simplistic, however simply they may be structured. They are faithful both to

[3] Denysenko, "Theology of Belonging," 34–36.

South wall, Church of Holy Wisdom, New Skete Monastery, NY. Photo by Inga Leonova.

> the brokenness of the world and to our hopes for its transfiguration.[4]

This past feast of Transfiguration, August 6, marked half a century of our monastic witness at New Skete. The Divine Liturgy, which crowned the celebration, gathered pilgrims from neighboring states and from distant places, like Alaska and British Columbia. What enabled us to reach this milestone was our inner spirit and unified vision, our daily struggle, and our nagging *askesis* not to lose heart, not to fear change, and not to have the status quo in a death grip. This vision governs the architecture of our Holy Wisdom temple and its iconography. It also engendered the long road of liturgical renewal, of textual balance and inclusivity, which we have travelled, and our support for new music. It is all of a piece.

The striving is the same, whoever and wherever we are as beings in relationship with God and each other. For a genuine relationship, inclusivity is imperative, if not indispensable, and it extends to all creation. New Skete's setting in the mountain wilderness is a daily reminder that we are all part of the goodness of creation and that this planet is our only home. Disrespect for it through greed and waste, pollution and poaching, dishonors our communion with God and contradicts the very idea of transfiguration, where Christ shows us the true beauty and goodness of all that is by its very "is-ness." ✠

[4] Peter C. Bouteneff, *Arvo Pärt: Out of Silence* (Yonkers: SVS Press, 2015).

Brother Stavros, one of the founding brothers of New Skete, oversees the liturgy and general order of the community's churches. His education at Georgetown and the Catholic University of America concentrated on the origins and evolution of Eastern Orthodox liturgical traditions and helped facilitate the community's renewal of their own liturgies. He has written and lectured internationally on this subject, and recently contributed to ***Fossil or Leaven: The Church We Hand Down,*** a collection of essays commemorating the monastery's fiftieth anniversary, to be released in Fall 2016.