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Practices of Compassion
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Passions and the Disciplines of Compassion
Christian Orthodoxy on the Spiritual Life
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“What I do I would not. What I would I do not.”¹ Why is it that so often we human beings fail to act out of our own centre? Rather, we react to what is before us out of previous experiences, forgotten struggles or idealized hopes and dreams. What is uppermost in our mind or heart frames and colours how we see what is coming to greet us. Our mind has prepared the ground for what we assume is before us and our passions, our suffering, shape how we react. We fail to be present to what is. Old patterns are called forth, fill the space and bracket new possibilities, spontaneity, actual engagement. Of all the creatures in the world, at least as far as we know, we human beings are the only ones who have the capacity to *not* live our own life. We live the moment based on the landscape of yesterday or our dreams of tomorrow. “What I do I would not. What I would I do not.” This diagnosis of our spiritual dis-ease dates from the foundations of the Christian tradition.

The central challenge to the spiritual life of human beings is not acquiring virtue, not even the virtue of compassion. The central challenge is our passions², our suffering, our illusions, our stepping out of life, our “missing of the mark”³. So, it is not surprising that we have a story called, “The Passion”⁴ at the centre of the Gospel. Odd, how such an awful story of the killing of the best of human beings, an innocent man, comes to be seen as a divine revelation, indeed, the “good news” at the very heart of human nature and what holds the world together. The passion story of Jesus Christ anchors all Orthodox spiritual discipline. It is a haunting, tragic, and liberating narrative. It is a narrative of him who we see as the fullest expression of the human nature and all we really know of God. His life, acts, and teachings reveal to us the “Word of life”, unveiling for us our deepest nature. It invites us to the

¹ These are the words of a great struggler, a Jew with a good Greek education, in the first century of the common era. The Apostle Paul knew this condition in the marrow of his being. In many of his letters he discusses one or another aspect of this disease. Romans 7:15-20.

² “Passion” means “suffering” in the Orthodox literature on the spiritual life. In the Orthodox understanding of the human nature human desires are not disordered. The narrative of the Fall in Genesis 3 did not lead to a change in the being of creation as Western theology teaches in its doctrine of Original Sin. Rather, the Fall narrative is a revelation of self-forgetfulness. In Orthodox spiritual theology healing and restoration is the point.

³ “Missing the mark” connotes an archery term, to miss the target. For Jews, the goal or target of life is life itself, being present to the existence given when we are born into the world.

⁴ The “passion narratives” take up a substantial part of the four Gospels, Matthew 26:30-27:66; Mark 14:26-15:47; Luke 22:39-23:56; and, John 18:1-19:42. These texts are at play in every Orthodox Liturgy and form the bulk of the liturgies shaping Holy Week leading up to and including *Pascha*, the Feast of Resurrection.

recovery of our nature through emptying ourselves of our passions so we may be present to what is given in each encounter in the life of the world. It is the disciplines of self-emptying⁵ that opens, nurtures, and enlarge our capacity to be present without desire or fear. In that presence our heart and mind are attentive to the passions of others, to their suffering. Co-suffering love, compassion, bubbles up when our own struggles, our passions, are no longer front and centre.

Confession as Self-Emptying

Many years ago when I first began my field research on the liturgical life of the Orthodox Church I witnessed a young man bow and place his head on a Gospel Book that graced a side altar. This was his final preparation for ordination. A fresco icon of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ flanked by the two thieves covered the wall in front of him. If he had looked up he would stare into the dark pit underneath the cross. He would be looking at a skull and cross-bones, looking into the face of death. Tradition has it that Golgotha was the burial place of Adam and Eve, the burial place of the human nature. Holy tradition has it that the blood of Jesus Christ flows down onto the bones and, as the icon of the Anastasis⁶, the Resurrection, unveils, calls forth Adam and Eve from the grave. The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ restore human nature. A priest in full vestments moves beside him and places his *epitrachelion* (stole), the insignia of holy office, over the head of the penitent. He leans down and whispers in his ear. I, of course, did not hear what he said or what the penitent spoke as he knelt there for the better part of an hour. Later I asked the priest what he had spoken. He told me that he assured the young man of God's enduring love, that there was no sin that God had not already forgiven, and that he was free to speak whatever was on his heart. He then gave a meditation of the icon of the Crucifixion and the two thieves. He asked: "Which thief are you? Are you the one on the left, who, even when he was dying refused to recognize his situation and simply cursed the Giver of Life? Or, are you the one on the right who recognized he was in death's grip and turns to the Lover of the World saying, 'I know why I am here, that I am dying. Remember me today in your Kingdom.'"

These words echoed the following day in the Sunday liturgy. As the priest is praying the Eucharistic prayer over the gifts of bread and wine, and calling on the Holy Spirit to make them the body and blood of Jesus Christ, he is joined by the faithful in a prayer that includes the following: "Of thy mystical supper, O Son of God, accept me this day as a partaker; For I will not speak of the mystery to thine enemies, nor will I give thee a kiss like Judas; but like the thief I will acknowledge thee: Remember me, O lord, in thy Kingdom."⁷

"Remember" is not about memory. We often confuse the two. Rather it is an expression of the human heart to resurrect from what has cut one off from life. And, death in Orthodox theology is not the same as mortality. Death is a spiritual condition, being possessed by

⁵ "Self-emptying" is at the centre of the apophatic theology of the Christian East. See, "The Spiritual Way", John Chryssavgis in *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology*, edited by Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008):150-163

⁶ *Anastasis, The Making of an Image*, Anna D. Kartsonis (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986).

⁷ *The Orthodox Liturgy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982):89

passions in ways that remove one from the presence of life. The priest went on to tell me that he asked the young man what it was that was getting between him and the life of the world, the fullness of life that is the Presence of the Kingdom.

Some years later the practice of confession became part of my spiritual discipline. My liturgical family chants the Vesper Liturgy on Saturday evening after sunset in candlelight. Since light comes out of darkness, Orthodoxy, as with the Jewish tradition, has its first service of the Sabbath on Saturday night. As we chant the Psalms some of the faithful are prompted to move forward to the side altar, bend their head down to the Gospel Book and, as with the young man, engage the discipline of confession in the hope of healing. This liturgical family has people from many different walks of life. I sometimes think it includes the whole “ship of fools”, the brilliant and ignorant, pleasant and boorish, arrogant and humble, those with words and those who have yet to find a language that speaks their heart. One of the faithful is a man of national reputation. He has a style I have slowly learn to appreciate and, I have often thought, his politics is beyond the pale. I had grown to a modest appreciation of him although his politics continued to stick in my craw. I remember the evening I first saw him slowly make his way to the side altar and bend his head. We were chanting Psalm 141:

With my voice unto the Lord have I cried, with my voice unto the Lord have I made supplication.
I will pour out before him my supplication, mine affliction before Him will I declare.
When my spirit was fainting within me, then Thou knewest my paths.
In this way wherein I have walked they hid for me a snare.
I looked upon my right hand, and beheld, and there was none that did know me.
Flight hath failed me, and there is none that watcheth out for my soul.
I have cried unto Thee, O Lord; I said: Thou art my hope, my portion art Thou in the land of the living.
Attend unto my supplication, for I am brought very low.
Deliver me from them that persecute me, for they are stronger than I.
Bring my soul out of prison that I may confess Thy Name.
The righteous shall wait patiently for me until Thou shalt reward me.⁸

As he slowly rose from his confession, received the priest’s blessing and wiped a tear from his eye my heart was filled with warmth and I wanted only to embrace him and ask his forgiveness for the “snares” I had set for him, for not knowing him in his deep humanity. I had cared more about his politics than for his soul.

In the early Christian community the spiritual discipline of confession was public. Speaking of one’s passions to the whole community became too much for many to bear and elevated shame in ways that damaged instead of healed. In the Roman Catholic tradition this lead to private confession with a priest. In Orthodoxy, however, it simply came to be shaped as I have described since part of the discipline of the public act of confession in the midst of worship deepens our compassion for each other by strengthening our recognition of the common human struggle.

⁸ *A Prayer Book for Orthodox Christians* (Boston, Massachusetts: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2005):36-37.

The spiritual discipline of confession is cradled in the whole of the liturgical life. The Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom is the large common prayer of the Church, itself a discipline for the healing of the mind and heart and of our relationship to self, others, and the life of the world.⁹ The most common word in Chrysostom's liturgy that continues to be used in its original Greek form is *kyrie eleison*, "Lord have mercy." It is a short repeated prayer that punctuates all the cries of the human heart that makes up the public work that is the churches' prayer. We first encounter it in the *Apostolic Constitutions* (ca. 375). But, of course, it is much older with deep roots in the Hebrew Bible. The writers of the Greek New Testament, particularly the Apostle Paul, were steeped in the Psalms where the Hebrew word *hesed* is ubiquitous. It means "steadfast love" and is usually translated with the English word "mercy." In every Divine Liturgy *kyrie eleison*, is chanted at least forty, fifty, a hundred times. The root Greek word is *eleos*, the name of the olive tree. This should not surprise us since olive oil was the primary ointment in the ancient world. It purifies, aids healing, and ultimately makes the scar tissue of wounds supple again. While the invocation of God's mercy in the Western church, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, carries a juridical sensibility, a plea before the divine judge to be forgiven, the Orthodox sensibility is one of healing.¹⁰ God is the "Lover of Humankind" as the Divine Liturgy repeats, the One whose love is steadfast, forgiving, seeking the return of all creation to wholeness.

In Christian Orthodox tradition compassion is not a heroic virtue. Rather it flows naturally from every human heart when the heart and mind are restored, healed of the cumulative sufferings that mark human experience. The spiritual disciplines of a liturgical life anchor the faithful in divine mercy and invite the unspoken passions to surface and the will to open to the "grace that is everywhere present". They seek to restore the deepest of human desires, the desire to be present to the gift of our life together in the world and accept the healing of all that stands in the way. And, that is why confessors and spiritual fathers and mothers will often remind the penitent that the sin, the passion, they have confessed is also a gift revealing our human struggle and inviting us to a deeper compassion for others with whom we share such struggles. And when they anoint the penitents forehead with oil it is the oil of gladness healing the wounds so mercy may flow into the life of the world.

⁹ The word "liturgy" has been used for the church's common prayer since the first century. It is the Greek word for public service or public work. In Orthodox spiritual theology the liturgy is thought to be the prayer, not for personal salvation or the salvation of those who are faithful. Rather, it is the prayer for the healing of the world and preparation of the faithful to engage in the compassionate works of mercy for the life of the world.

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that the word "justice" is only used once in the Orthodox Liturgy and many times in Western liturgies.