

An Approach to Orthodox Eschatology

*Rev. Fr. Alexandre Turincev*¹

*Translated by Brad Jersak (with the monks at
Holy Transfiguration Hermitage – Gibsons, BC Canada)²
and Fr. Michael Gillis³*

The theme of eschatology concerns all mankind in equal measure, without exception, whether believers or non-believers, because it touches on a fundamental question that inevitably arises, sooner or later, for everyone who lives, who suffers, who loves and who thinks. Already in Biblical times, Job cried from the bottom of the abyss of his misery, “Does man live after he dies?” Does he live again? And centuries later, the tormented genius, Blaise Pascal, who already possessed, it seems, a comprehensive answer to Job’s question, nevertheless continued to probe the same mystery and asks, “Where does man come from and where is he going?” Again and again, in all times and in all souls hungering and thirsting for righteousness, truth and light, rises the same anguished cry –and still, few are those who have ears to hear the response of Jesus of Nazareth, their brother and friend, “I have come from my Father ... and I am returning to my Father” (John 16:28).

¹ Alexandre Turincev (1966) “Une approche de l’eschatologie orthodoxe,” *Contacts* 18, no. 54.

² Translator’s note: this article also appeared in part in Olivier Clément, *Dieu est Vivant: catéchisme pour les familles par une équipe de Chrétiens Orthodoxes* (Editions du Cerf, 1979), the original French edition of *The Living God: A Catechism for the Christian Faith*, 2 Vols. Trans. by Olga Dunlop (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988) but that chapter was omitted in the English translation.

³ Holy Nativity Orthodox Church, Langley, BC.

Posing this question is enough to make us realize that it takes us beyond the limits of this world. By meditating on it and going deeper, we are faced with the enigma of the origin of the world and of mankind, the final end of the evolution of the cosmos, the meaning of human history, each of our fates, and the final orientation of the “humanization” of our planet, taking place before our eyes through the concerted efforts of all mankind.

The world cannot be explained with itself as the reference point. Its meaning and its supreme goal are hidden in the history of mankind, not in the evolution of the cosmos. The positivist idea of historical progress—oriented towards some ambiguous ‘brighter tomorrow’ —is nothing but a deformed transposition of the conscious and creative Christian aspiration for the final end of the world: the Kingdom of God. We should also not forget that the whole natural world (*natura naturans*⁴) has received at its creation its task, its dynamic teleological energy, its ontological seeds (the *logoi spermatikoi*⁵ of the Stoics), which is what St. John speaks about in the prologue to his Gospel when he says: “All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.” Thus, this same intuition that has taught man that the world is alive, that it is in a perpetual state of becoming, that it evolves – since “My Father is working right until the present” (John 5:17) – this intuition is right, but that does not mean that evolutionary theories, which express this intuition, are correct and sufficient. In our universe, which undoubtedly has a soul, man alone possesses freedom and spirit. The spirit of man is the meeting point of two worlds, the divine world and the human world. Mankind seeks in vain to explain – outside Christ – the enigmas of the world, its ongoing drama, and its crucifixion. It searches, but cannot find the meaning and purpose of existence – it is torn by the problem of suffering, evil, and death that prevails in the world.

⁴ Latin: ‘Nature does as nature does.’

⁵ Greek: ‘Seed principles.’

Neither science nor natural reason can solve these ‘accursed questions,’ to use Dostoevsky’s expression. All utopias of an ‘earthly paradise’ that arose in the feverish imagination of Dostoevsky’s own characters, as well as the ideals of simplistic optimism (devoid, alas! of prophetic depth), advanced by Marxism – or again, the intellectual acrobatics of existentialists and contemporary phenomenologists – are only mind-games entertained carried to the limits of emptiness and absurdity. All these conceptions ultimately lead only to a black hole, to total death, to nothingness – or, to what is even more frightening – the nightmare of an ‘eternal return’ – a cyclical repetition in infinite time of an identically absurd life.

We are already seeing the beginning of a certain decline, of a disillusionment that is eating away at the faith of the militants who call themselves materialists – their faith in the building of a Golden Age, in the fellowship of the new ‘classless society’, in the messianic peace... The de-Christianized masses still accept, but without enthusiasm and reluctantly, to work and live for an ideal that is always in the future, but that devours their present. The young elite of the supposedly ‘free’ world, like the so-called ‘non-free’ world, tormented by their conscience, tired of the monotony and dullness of phraseologies of all kinds – whether socialist, democratic or totalitarian – begins to doubt, and even timidly to affirm that “man does not live by bread alone” (the title of a novel by a Soviet writer⁶), and to feel a great weariness with any ideal of *dolce vita*.⁷ Without fear of being mistaken, we can assert, following Father de Lubac, that ‘the tragedy of atheistic humanism,’ is already in gestation – it is underway.

Of course, none of this is new to Christians. Throughout all history, we are always the actors and the spectators of the same tragedy summed up in the words of Christ: “The light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light” (John 3:19). But we who claim to be the children of light cannot “sleep easily in this time.” Nor must we forget the crisis, which in our days, courses through the

⁶ Stanislav Govorukhin’s *Not by Bread Alone* (1956).

⁷ Italian: ‘the good life.’

Christian consciousness... We, Christians – are we prepared enough to answer all these ‘accursed questions’? Are we “always ready to give an answer to those who demand a reason for the hope that is in us?” (1 Peter 3:15).

Throughout the bi-millennial history of Christianity, the greatest upheavals and dangers that threatened it did not come from outside, but from the inside: the weakening of the faith which must ‘overcome the world’ – the extinguishing of the Spirit. “Do not quench the Spirit; do not despise prophecy,” Paul beseeches us (1 Thess. 5:19). The problem is not in the religious freedoms conceded – or not – by the “great ones of this age;” it is in the weakening of the inner strength and freedom of each of those who claim to be Christian. Even in chains, we can – and must – be free. Never mind that by the end of this century, according to the forecasts of statisticians, there will be one Christian for every ten non-Christians in a world of 6 billion human beings. In the Age of Enlightenment, Robespierre could say that atheism was aristocratic, and today we are observing the opposite. It is in no way a calamity or failure for Christianity if, returning to its depth, it becomes aristocratic (noble) in the qualitative sense, in the most noble, spiritual, and evangelical sense of the word. And then, perhaps, the Lord of our life Himself – the Master and Vinedresser – wants to prune the dead branches in the vineyard to give way to new branches that live and bear more fruit... “Fear not, little flock, take courage, I have overcome the world” (Luke 12:32). Oh, if we could say again now as in the past: “we are poor, yet we make many rich; we have nothing and yet possess everything” (2 Cor. 6:10) – and then go and teach all nations. But it is necessary that we ourselves first pass through a series of “heart-rending self-examinations,” i.e. through repentance.

We see how the whole world stands attentive and awake, having felt the breath – though still very weak – of the spirit of renewal that has yet only barely touched Christianity. Certainly, it seems that the whole Christian world now feels that one of the most urgent tasks, incumbent on us all, is to make the walls that separate Christians fall and thus finally visibly manifest our Christian unity to the world. Disunited, we are without strength and we do not know how to become again the real “salt of the earth” or “leaven,” whose purpose is to be thrown into the

dough of humanity. Disunited, we are, in the eyes of the world, a glaring refutation of our own religion of reconciliation and unity.

But this is not enough. To announce to everyone who is “in darkness and the shadow of death” the hope of the transfiguration of this world – a world which is proceeding through all of its vicissitudes towards the convergence of all oppositions in the one ideal worthy of the name “the Kingdom of Love,” which is a Kingdom not of this world – it is also necessary to revise all of our “exclusivist theologies” and abolish the barriers, erected by zealots of all churches, barring access into the coming Kingdom. Woe to us! for it is we ourselves who shut men out the Kingdom of Heaven: “You do not enter yourselves, and you oppose those who wish to enter” (Matt. 23:13). The light of Christ illumines all mankind. All of humanity – without exception – is called to be heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven. Those who do not call themselves Christians also, for God knows His own who do not know Him. “All nations will come to bow down before Him” (Rev. 21:24). And genuine Christians know they shall enter after (if you can say “after”) – after all, after all the sheep from the other sheepfolds. Because they know they are ‘chosen’ to ‘save’ the others, to ensure that others pass through them. As for those who for centuries threatened others with hell, and love to recite, “There are many called, but few are chosen,” let them reflect on whether it would not be appropriate to distinguish between “chosen” and “saved.” The chosen being those who, through the unifying call of the Holy Spirit, and of their own free-will, consciously undertake to work for the salvation of the world.

And yet – and this is very important – if our vocation and our duty as the people of God is to witness to the world of our faith and our hope, we must never forget that faith is a vision of the invisible, something that does not exist in the eyes of the world. Faith is what makes present the things we hope for; it is the evidence of realities we do not see (according to the inspired definition of St. Paul). Therefore, we cannot – we must not – preach and propose to the world our ‘ontological’ ideal by placing it at the same level as all other human ideals, alongside other objectives to be attained. Our ‘ideal’, which has its origin in history, brings the world out beyond the limits of history. Our ideal – that of the New City –

is placed above all other ideals invented by 'fleshly' reason; it is "on the boundary of two worlds," two eons. We cannot, without betraying our faith, witness to the *mirabilia dei*⁸ by adapting and reducing them to the level of the concepts of the average man. Also, it would be futile to continually offer the same milk as food to contemporary man, who is now an adult. His soul, which has passed through the depths of doubt and temptation, has grown, has become more complex, more refined. The apologetics of scribes of all sorts appear too naive to the new consciousness. It is impossible to impress him or to attract him to the Church by our timid attempts at renovation and by superficially optimistic perspectives. Our Master never promised us the 'Golden Age' of happiness on this earth. He teaches that man and the world must carry the Cross, and He Himself will remain crucified along with all those who suffer until the end of the world.

One of the causes – if not the main one – of the crisis in Christianity in our era is its secularization, its rationalization of the truths of faith. Christian thought – Christian theology – is losing more and more of its mystical and prophetic dimension (especially in Western Christian thought). The salt of the earth – that is, the people of God – becomes insipid if there is not a real and constant communion with the mystery. The mystery is not a secret that can easily be revealed to everyone. Neither is it a problem we can solve after much pondering. The mystery is an unfathomable depth of the super-consciousness (as it is called now). We can feel the mystery, we can bear it in ourselves by communing with it, but we cannot rationalize it. It is always covered by a 'divine veil' and suffers no exploration (by our reason). In the depth of the mystery we touch something divine – the grace of the Holy Spirit – and we feel (vaguely or unconsciously) His presence, His gentle touch. The vision of the mystery, the communion with the mystery and its verbal expression (its formulation) are never adequate; an abyss separates them. For example, it is often said that the Church is the 'mystery of mysteries', or 'the sacrament of sacraments'. And the eternal Church truly is that. We all confess: I believe in One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. We believe in the Church – therefore we see its mystical nature: the Church is the fullness of the One who fills

⁸ Latin: 'the wonders of God.'

all in all (St. Paul). It has a dual nature – divine and human (theandric), visible and invisible. It is impossible and dangerous to separate the two. They are ‘unconfused’ and ‘inseparable’ (the Dogma of Chalcedon). Thus, living in the Church, acting, witnessing and preaching – we must always be immersed in its mystery, and constantly carry it in our hearts and thoughts. If we forget the mystery of the Church, if we do not regard it with the eyes of faith, it ceases to be for us an object of faith and we are left face-to-face only with its historical actualization – the visible Church. But what nourishes our faith is precisely the mystical potentiality of the Church – while its structures and actualizations, although necessary, are always incomplete and insufficient, and sometimes terribly distorting, compared to its mystical essence.

Mankind thirsts (whether it is aware of it or not) for a more complete and more daring proclamation of the eternal truths of Christ. It expects of us the fire and the folly of our faith. Well then, if we were to confess without embarrassment before the world all the follies of our faith; if we were to talk a little more often about ‘the last things’; if we were to simply announce the Gospel (which speaks of nothing but this: the New Kingdom); if we were to put the Word of God before (and well above!) the doctrine of this or that church – then maybe “the Spirit of truth will come, and He will guide us into all truth” and He will proclaim to us the things to come. (John 16:13).

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After these extensive preliminaries, it is time to directly address the theme on which I will meditate: the Parousia⁹ in Orthodox spirituality. The Parousia – that is to say, the Advent of our Lord, when He will appear a second time (Heb. 9:28), when “He shall come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom shall have no end” (The Creed). In other words, it is also the Advent of the Life of the World to Come, when “God will be all in all,” that is to say, the

⁹ Greek: Lit. ‘the Coming’ – referring generally to Christ’s “return in glory.”

deification of ‘everyone and all’¹⁰, the manifestation of God’s kingdom – the New City, the heavenly Jerusalem – in the full power of the Holy Spirit. This event is indissolubly linked with two other events, or rather two other aspects of the same Parousia: the Transfiguration of the cosmos and the Resurrection of the dead – and all this represents, at the same time, for all mankind, the Last Judgment.

The Orthodox Church does not possess dogmatic formulations about these ‘last things’ – eschata (which we must not “objectify” (reify), since they are spiritual) – except for the articles of the Nicene Creed. She has no eschatological doctrine. So we will just try to highlight some characteristic features of Orthodox eschatology based on the written tradition, and drawing inspiration from various literary sources – the liturgical texts in particular.

The Gospels, like a large portion of the epistles, are eschatological par excellence. The whole Gospel is written “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” (St. John 20:31). The entire Gospel strains towards the Resurrection of Christ: “If Christ is not risen, our faith is vain,” “If the dead are not raised, not even Christ is raised,” affirms St. Paul (1 Cor. 3:16). The Good News is good and radiant because Christ is Risen, trampling down death by His death and opening unto us entry into the eternal life of His Kingdom.

In Christ Jesus “all times and all ages converge.” He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. In Him was fulfilled the mystery and the plan of divine wisdom. He united that which is of the earth with that which is of heaven. He is the “heavenly Man” and the “earthly God” (according to one liturgical text). He represents the first fruits of the deified humanity; in Him, the ultimate reality is already present in our world. Since the Incarnation and Pentecost, there is a new reality in our world that exceeds it, is invisible but real, hides itself but also manifests itself, is in the world but not of this world. The Apostle Paul speaks of this mystery “hidden from ages and generations, but now has been made

¹⁰ From the Anaphora of the Divine Liturgy.

manifest... this mystery which is Christ in you (abiding in you), the hope of glory” (Col. 1:26). “The King has come, but His kingdom is yet to come.”

The first generations of Christians not only expected, but invoked the Day of the Lord: Maranatha! Come! The mysterious presence of Christ on earth, together with the other Comforter who descended upon mankind in the form of fiery tongues, as well as the Eucharistic presence of the Master among the disciples, already set them within the sphere of the Parousia. The expectation of the coming of the Day of the Lord, and thus an imminent end, was fairly quickly lost in the course of history and has been replaced by a sense of the brevity of our lives and an immediate retribution after death. Our personal destiny, “the little Apocalypse” (Father S. Bulgakov) has taken on more and more importance. However, the eschatological tension has never weakened in the Orthodox Church. Her liturgical life still remains focused on the bright centre which is the Feast of Feasts, the Holy Day of Holy Days – the Great Day of the Resurrection, when the Church celebrates “the death of death, the destruction of hell, and the beginning of the new life” (Paschal Canon). The Church renews this Paschal – and therefore eschatological – joy every Sunday, at every Dies magna.¹¹ And in every Eucharistic Liturgy, the Church recapitulates the whole faith, the whole spiritual experience of the Christian life, both of which are nourished by her messianic expectation. Thus, when the priest, immediately after communion, exclaims, “Grant that we may more perfectly partake of You in the never-ending Day of your Kingdom” – he invokes the coming of the Kingdom – the Parousia. So also when he utters the following words from the Anamnesis (memorial), evoking the totality of the dispensation of salvation, “Remembering all those things which have come to pass for us: the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the Ascension into heaven, the Sitting at the right hand of the Father, and the second and glorious Coming; we offer unto You, Your own of Your own, on behalf of all and for all.”

The fulfilment of our messianic ideal – the Parousia – is guaranteed by the Blood of the New Covenant. All human history is moving towards this purpose, this

¹¹ Latin: ‘Great Day.’

end. Here lies the answer to all the questions that tear the souls of those “who seek in groaning.” By his longing for the encounter with Christ and his desire for the Kingdom coming in glory, by his efforts to become a House of God in the Spirit, the Christian can and must “hasten the advent of the Day of God” (2 Peter 3:12).

Today more than ever, this eschatological tension cannot remain a passive and ‘futurist’ waiting (for which we are often criticized). We Christians must participate, each in his own place, ‘in his state,’ to use St. Paul’s expression, in the combined efforts of humanity to build a ‘better world,’ or – let us say more humbly – a world habitable for all. We must understand participation in the sense explained by the great English theologian C. H. Dodd, in the sense of The Divine Milieu of Teilhard de Chardin, or before him, the active eschatology of S. Bulgakov and N. Berdyaev. We do not preach an ‘exit from the world,’ but of Christian action in the world. It is not a case of ‘social’ Christianity, nor – worse yet – a ‘theocracy,’ but the building up of the Body of Christ transfiguring all life. And the ‘summit’ of this action – must we be reminded – can only be the Cross. A creative religious culture is possible and necessary, but not as an ‘order’ apart, objectified in parallel with the world. Whatever a Christian does in the world, he does in God, in Christ. He no longer brings death to beings and things, but rather, the Life-giving Spirit – and this is authentic religious culture. The multitude of Christians who have shone with the Light of the Resurrection in the world and therefore have illumined the world from the inside, have contributed – and are contributing – to its building up, or ‘edification.’¹² This is the ‘edification’ often spoken of by St. Seraphim of Sarov when he says: “Acquire the Holy Spirit – and thus peace and inner light – and thousands will begin to live and be saved around you.” This is the ‘edification’ also spoken of by Elder Zosima in the Brothers Karamazov: “If you were to shine with light, your light would show others the way ... even if your light is shining and yet it seems that people are not being saved, remain firm and do not doubt the power of the heavenly light. Believe they will be saved later.”

¹² French: *l'édification* also has the sense of building (as in building an edifice).

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The Advent of the Life of the World to Come implies the end of the one in which we live – i.e. the End of the World. But our world, which God its Creator has called into existence, is, for this very reason, indestructible; for there is no greater power than the one that created it. What is passing (away) is “the (present) form of the world” (1 Cor. 7:31).

It is precisely in this sense that we must understand the End of the World. The final catastrophe of the universe does not entail a new creation from zero, from nothing; but it is a renewal of the world that has been created once and for all. The continuity between the old earth and the new earth is not interrupted, but there is a passage, a transcensus,¹³ a leap from one mode of existence to another. The Parousia, or Second Coming of Christ, is not part of the sequence of historical events, but is an event that completely changes the state of the world and is beyond history. It is a metaphysical phenomenon – meta-cosmic – which modifies the nature of the universe. The change that will happen will not be the result of a combination or explosion of exclusively natural cosmic forces. It requires the intervention – the bursting forth – of supernatural, divine power. The Father sends the Son who comes in the glory of the Holy Spirit. The fire, which is the action of the Holy Spirit, renews, glorifies and deifies all creation. That is why it is wrong to speak of a real possibility of provoking the end of the world by the power of an atomic explosion, by a material disintegration. The action of the Holy Spirit cannot be forced: we cannot cause the Parousia. A global atomic catastrophe that would cause the total disintegration of our planet (but not the cosmos...) would only be the suicide of the world, or a planetary assassination. Our universe is not only the place in space of the Advent of the Lord, but rather its spiritual receptacle. This receptacle is primarily human souls, also called the Body of Christ, the hidden Church. The heavenly Jerusalem, which descends from heaven, finds itself in a mysterious correspondence with this Kingdom of God which germinates and grows from strength to strength in the heart of man – in other words, with Christ who

¹³ Latin: ‘a thing that has been transcended.’

lives in all human souls, who “enlightens every man coming into this world.”¹⁴ “The Kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). All that is spiritual is ‘within,’ is interior. Man must be ready to encounter Christ in glory, as he must be ready for his personal ‘little Apocalypse,’ for his death. It is for this hour that we are born. The appearance of Christ must first be accomplished within the soul and the world... We ask, just as the disciples of Christ once asked, “When will it happen?” And the Son of Man Himself responds, “Nobody knows the day nor the hour except the Father.” The Lord tells us only of the signs that the end is approaching (in Matt. 24), but definitively we can only ‘intuit’ that the Lord “is near, at the door.” “Because you yourselves know,” the Apostle Paul says, “that the Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When men will say, ‘peace and safety,’ then sudden ruin will surprise them” (1 Thess. 5:3). Our time, our ‘calendar’ will be abolished, and no one will remain to watch and contemplate from outside the universal and salutary catastrophe. “We will not all die,” St. Paul prophesied, “but we shall all be transformed in a moment, in the blink of an eye, at the sound of the last trumpet.” This world will never see Christ coming in glory, because at the time of His appearance, it will already be transformed.

The Day of the Lord will be the Day of the Resurrection of the dead and the living. The change that will be accomplished in the world will correspond (*mutatis mutandis*¹⁵) with the change that will occur in man: all that is mortal and corruptible in man will die; but that which in him is authentically alive, belonging to Being, will resurrect and live again. “The body is sown corruptible; it rises as a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:42). All resurrected bodies will be incorruptible and *pneumatophoros*¹⁶ – spiritual. The Lord Jesus Christ will “transform the body of our humiliation, making it like unto the body of His glory” (Phil. 3:21).

¹⁴ From the Baptismal Liturgy

¹⁵ Latin: meaning “changing [only] those things which need to be changed” or “the necessary changes having been made.”

¹⁶ Greek: ‘Spirit-bearing.’

What can we say about this ‘state of glory’? How can we see things that “eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, that have not entered into the heart of man”? And if we do sometimes see the flickering of the light, we see it “as in a tarnished mirror, in a confused manner” (1 Cor. 13:12). “Beloved,” says St. John, “we are now children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made manifest, but we know that when it will be made manifest, we shall be like Him” (1 John 3:2) – the glorious Christ.

Continuing our meditation, we can affirm that this entry into the Divine Glory, this encounter of man with God, will be – this time – inevitable; it will be impossible to evade because it will not be external but internal. This is comparable to the discovery, like an unavoidable evidence, of the existence of a world ‘beyond’ that awaits us after this transition called death. The same unavoidability of the encounter with the Lord on the Last Day bears in itself the final Judgment for all.

This judgment is as well an internal act, immanent and personal. The judgment is carried out by the Spirit of Truth and the Love of God. Man will see the truth concerning himself. He will see himself in the light of Truth. He will be placed face-to-face with the image of his perfection, when the ‘Book of Life’ of each of us will be opened. Nothing that is lie, sin, blindness, error, hatred or vanity will have a place in the Kingdom of Truth and of Love. The spiritual sword, which is the Truth and the Power of the Word of God, will cleave man to the very depth of his being. “Everyone will be saved,” says St. Paul, “but as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:15) – through fire that consumes all that is impure and unfit for the Kingdom. For man to be ‘forgiven’, all the evil that dwells in him – all the ‘writhing vipers’ in his heart – must be eliminated through suffering and thus be redeemed through himself also.

We cannot emphasize enough that the parables of the separation of the wheat and tares, sheep and goats, are only images, symbols. They must not be understood in a literal, simplistic way. As St. John Chrysostom explained, our Lord spoke by adapting Himself to the level of understanding of those who listened to Him. The line of separation will not be between two categories of souls – the

righteous or the sinners, but within each of us. There is no man who is not a sinner, and everyone contains that which must be either destroyed or purified. Neither is there a sinner who does not also have within him at least a speck of light.

The fact that at the Last Judgment we will be judged by the love and truth of God certainly does not diminish our responsibility for our lives and removes nothing of the tragedy of our situation. However, in our meditations on the Last Judgment we must rid ourselves of our juridical depictions of the judgment and the Judge. In the history of the Church, we have too often had excessive recourse to the ‘pedagogy of intimidation’ in the spirit of ‘the most pitiless penal code,’ and we too often have forgotten the ‘abyss of the mercy of God,’ thereby distorting the image of the God of Love. The mercy of God is limitless. Before it, the “sin of all flesh,” says St. Isaac the Syrian – all the sin of the world – is “but a handful of sand thrown into the Immense Sea.” Only man, by a free refusal or rebellion, may oppose this mercy and remain always in the suffering of his refusal. The Eastern Fathers love to repeat this saying: “God created us without us, but He cannot save us without us.” St. Isaac the Syrian, in his 19th Homily,¹⁷ says the following, characteristic of the Orthodox view of ‘the last things’: “Let the sacrilegious thought that God ceases to love the sinner never enter the mind of man. But love acts in a double way: it torments sinners and becomes a source of joy to those who have performed their duty.” “In my opinion,” adds this Father, “the torment of Gehenna is repentance.”¹⁸

We have arrived at the crucial point: Gehenna, hell, damnation, eternal suffering ... First— one remark: the notion of eternal (Greek: *aionios*) does not belong to the category of obvious and clear concepts. In the vulgar sense of the term, eternity is understood as a measure of time, or rather as a lack of measurement, as an essentially flawed infinity – an absence of end. But in the Bible, Eternal is synonymous with God or Divine Life. For this reason, eternity is not commensurate with time (although eternity – the Eternal – can enter the content of the temporal). “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only

¹⁷ The 28th Homily (in the English editions).

¹⁸ The 48th Homily.

true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3). Where is the concept of time here? Eternity – is a life of another ‘nature,’ another quality. Eternity is the fullness of Divine Life. And hell? Does it exist or not? St. Thérèse of Lisieux has written somewhere, “I believe that hell exists, but I do not think anyone is there.” It is easy to understand her. The pure and angelic Thérèse seeks to defend the infinite love of her God against the dogmas of the implacable guardians of the faith.... But she, along with them, is mistaken if she thinks hell exists as an objective place, designed or created by the Creator and predestined for the damned. Hell as a place or objective sphere is only the ‘projection’ (or even alienation) of the tendency of the ethical will that wants to partition humanity into two parts, two camps, two categories: the good and the evil, the righteous and the sinners. These categories have their respective outcomes - one paradise, the other hell. The objective hell is nothing other than the construct of those who consider themselves ‘the good people’, the righteous, the guardians of the truth – and who, already from this world, dispatch the souls of the wicked to torture, whether temporary or ‘eternal.’ But this is the case with verdicts in human tribunals, and not at the Last Judgment of God. The judgment of God, which we all await anxiously and in hope as our liberation, will not be like human judgments. Many surprises await us. What does it mean, for example, that “the first shall be last,” or that “many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness” (Matt. 8:11)?

As for the other hell, the hell of the internal subjective sphere – it is terribly real. That hell, in spite of St. Thérèse’s hope, is very ‘crowded.’ A great many people know this from experience, or have observed it in others. Even in this life we can have this experience of hell, just as we can have the experience of paradise. Hell is brought about by the sin of man and the false orientation of his freedom. It is immanent (subjective) and psychological. The beginning of the spiritual life in man is the beginning of his liberation from hell. Hell is the darkness of the soul that suffers from the absence of light. Man longs for the light and cannot find it, or worse, he refuses it. Hell is the isolation of man in himself – total solitude, separation from all others. It is the ‘I’, hermetically sealed within itself that is hell, and not ‘others’ (as suggested by Jean-Paul Sartre). Hell is suffering due to the

inability to love (Dostoevsky). Hell, in as much as it is a state of rebellion of the soul against the light, a desperate and obstinate refusal of God – consequently, a state of total absence to God – is an unspeakable and unbearable torment that, in principle, can extend into the next age – unto the ages of ages.

The ‘problem of hell’ is, of all, the most crucial. The moral conscience may accept hell, understood in the sense of a state of purification of the soul – lasting, perhaps, but not perpetual. But here is what matters: hell can be vanquished, and it is already vanquished. This is the central affirmation of our Faith. To believe in Christ is to believe in His victory over hell. He is the vanquisher of death and of hell.¹⁹ He is our Deliverer. He alone can liberate us from hell, even now or in the next life. It should be added that the Orthodox Church disregards the Latin distinction of hell and purgatory. She prays for all the dead and does not accept that there are any who are already damned forever. The existence beyond the grave is nothing but the continuation of the deceased’s destiny, with its progressive purifying and liberating action – a healing, a maturation and a creative expectation.

One cannot overstate the revelatory significance for the Eastern Church of the event that follows the death of the Redeemer: His descent into hell. The icons show Him forcing open the gates of hell and stretching out His hand to the first Adam who, dazzled, sees the Paschal light in the darkness of death. Hell is annihilated and releases its prisoners. On this theme, we have found in the writings of a Catholic theologian, Fr. Hans Urs von Balthasar, the following description of a medieval Paschal ‘mystery play’: “Christ brakes down the door with a great noise to carry the Paschal light into hell, which is now transformed into a church.” And the father adds: “Thus it truly is in the Christian vision.” Yes, it is indeed thus. St. John Chrysostom, whose inspired sermon concludes, in the Orthodox liturgy, the Paschal Matins, exclaims: “Hell was struck dead when it met Christ,” and he adds: “It was struck dead, because You have annihilated it; struck dead, because You

¹⁹ An alternative understanding in Orthodox theology of Christ’s descent into the realm of the dead is that Christ overcomes death by death by descending into Gehenna, the realm of the dead, which is distinct from hell, which is an eschatological event for torment (*editor’s note*).

have humiliated it; struck dead, because You have chained it; struck dead, because You have slain it.”

In the general eschatological context, how must we consider these wildly categorical affirmations of St. John Chrysostom concerning the chaining, humiliation and death of hell – its annihilation? Let us state frankly – the idea of eternal hell and eternal suffering for some and eternal bliss (indifferent to suffering) for others, can no longer remain in the living and renewed Christian conscience as it was formerly presented in our catechisms and our official theology courses. This archaic conception which claims to be based on the Gospel texts, understands them in a literal, coarse and material sense, without penetrating the hidden spiritual meaning of the images and symbols. This conception is increasingly showing itself to be an intolerable violation of Christian conscience, thought and faith. We cannot accept that the sacrifice of Golgotha has revealed itself to be powerless to redeem the world and conquer hell. Otherwise we should say: creation is a failure, and Redemption is also a failure. It is high time for all Christians to witness in common and reveal their mystical experience – intimate in this area – as well as their spiritual expectations, and perhaps also their revolt and horror before materialistic, anthropomorphic representations of hell and the Last Judgment, and of the heavenly Jerusalem. It is high time to be done with all these monstrosities – doctrinal or not – often blasphemous, from ages past, which make of our God of Love that which He is not: an ‘external’ God, who is merely an “allegory of earthly kings and nothing else.” The pedagogy of intimidation and terror is no longer effective. On the contrary, it blocks entry into the Church to many who are seeking a God of Love “who loves mankind” (the “Philanthropos” of the Orthodox liturgy).

A holy monk of Mount Athos,²⁰ a staretz who was almost our contemporary wrote the following, addressed to every Christian: “If the Lord saved you along with the entire multitude of your brethren, and one of the enemies of Christ and the Church remained in the outer darkness, would you not, along with all the others,

²⁰ St Silouan the Athonite (died 1938, canonized 1988).

set yourself to imploring the Lord to save this one unrepentant brother? If you would not beseech Him day and night, then your heart is of iron – but there is no need for iron in paradise.”

And St. Paul, who was so truly united to Christ that he was able to affirm: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me,” – did he not say that he was ready to be “separated from Christ for his brothers?”

Must not each of us plead with the Lord in the same way: May all my brothers be saved along with me! Or otherwise, may I also be damned along with them! Does not our Lord also wait for us to pray such a prayer? And would not this prayer also be the solution to the ‘problem’ of hell and damnation?

* * *

The Church, who is the Bride of Christ, prepares herself to meet the Bridegroom. The sacrament of marriage is the prefiguration of this final meeting. According to the Apostle Paul, “this mystery (that of marriage) is great – it refers to Christ and the Church.”

The Church is the Body of Christ – ultimately it includes all of humanity and all of creation. She is the Betrothed of the One in whom “dwells all the fullness of Divinity.” He has purified His Betrothed from every defilement with His Blood and by the Laver of Baptism. And He continues to purify her in order to present her to Himself “without spot or wrinkle, but holy and immaculate.”

Toward this final union, toward this ultimate moment, we must all strive by ‘collaborating’ with God. The whole liturgical life of the Church is nothing other than this expectation and invocation of the Advent of the Bridegroom for the mystical wedding. Do we not pray without ceasing the words of the Lord’s Prayer, “Your Kingdom come!” Let us also bear in our hearts the words of the beloved disciple of Christ: “The Spirit and the bride say, Come! Let those who hear also say, Come!” (Rev. 22:17).

“Yes, come, Lord Jesus! ... Amen.”