

St Augustine of Hippo: An Orthodox View

Andrew Louth

Augustine: a controversial saint

St Augustine is a controversial figure in Orthodoxy. It is not uncommon for him to be cast as the one responsible for the split between the Greek East and the Latin West: he is regarded as the architect of the doctrine of the double procession of the Holy Spirit and the addition to the Nicene Creed of the Filioque clause; his doctrine of original sin is regarded as an innovation, foreign to the spirit of the Fathers; his distinction between the validity and the fruitfulness of the sacraments is seen to introduce into theology a mechanical understanding of the operation of the sacraments, and its institutionalization; his defence of the 'just war' theory foreshadows a corruption of the Gospel by the admission of the legitimacy of force. This is made worse by his readiness to endorse the persecution of the Donatists by the State, so that Augustine can be blamed for the Inquisition; and finally, his doctrine of predestination, with the implication that God has created some human beings for hell and damnation, regardless of what kind of lives they have lived, seems to turn human beings into automata, deprived of freewill, and God into a cruel tyrant. However, apart from the matter of the Filioque, most of these accusations are comparatively recent among Orthodox theologians, and many of them, indeed, are drawn from squabbles among Western theologians in relatively modern times, between the more strict followers of Augustine – Calvinists and Catholic Jansenists, and the stricter Evangelicals, and their opponents – Arminians (i.e., followers of the sixteenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian, Jacobus Arminius, not to be confused with Armenians), Jesuits and liberals.

In the Spiritual Academies of nineteenth-century Russia, there was in general a positive attitude towards Augustine. St Photios the Great, the ninth-century Patriarch of Constantinople, who was one of the first to raise the issue of the Filioque, referred to Augustine as 'our Father among the Saints'. The failure of the Orthodox calendar until recent times to recognize Augustine was probably no deliberate matter, but simply a reflection of the parochial nature of most calendars, in both the East and the West, until recent times (after about 400, mutual recognition of saints between East and West is rare, and even Greek calendars include few Slav saints).

The principal cause of the Orthodox attitude towards Saint Augustine has been ignorance: Greeks did not read Latin, and translation is a laborious and painstaking business. Augustine's *On the Trinity* was not translated into Greek until the end of the thirteenth century, and even St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain, who was responsible for Augustine's being commemorated in some Greek calendars from the beginning of the nineteenth century, seems to know Augustine only from anthologies: he quotes the famous passage, 'Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new...', not from the *Confessions*, but from a pious anthology called *Lovers' Prayers*!

Augustine, the best known man in Late Antiquity

There is, however, no excuse now for an Orthodox view of Augustine to be based on ignorance: there are plenty of translations of Augustine's works, even if it is still the case that too many Orthodox theologians have little Latin. What I want to do in the following pages is to introduce Augustine, along the lines I attempted at the Fellowship's Study Weekend in January. Let us start with the man himself. We know a surprising amount about St Augustine, probably more than about anyone else in late antiquity. This is because he wrote so much, and wrote about himself. Whatever else his *Confessions* are, they contain an autobiographical account of his life up to his conversion – it is, indeed, the first autobiography. Moreover, it is not just in his *Confessions* that we feel we are encountering Augustine. In his letters (a voluminous correspondence survives), and in his sermons, we cannot but feel that we are hearing the authentic accents of the man himself. Though a superb rhetorician, he does not disguise himself behind his rhetorical artifice, as is often the case with rhetoricians in late antiquity; he lets us catch a glimpse of his heart.

His biography

Augustine was born at Thagaste (Souk-Ahras in Algeria) in 354, the son of a pagan father and a Christian mother, Monnica. He was marked out by his intelligence and managed to secure a fine education, first at Thagaste, and later at Madaura and Carthage. He was set for a career as a rhetorician, which, if he could catch the attention of some member of the senatorial aristocracy, might have led to a position in the imperial administration, a governorship and maybe even admission to the senatorial aristocracy itself. And he did attract the attention of that aristocracy – in Rome, where he

went after finishing his studies in Carthage, he became a protégé of one of the most exalted senators, Symmachus, who secured a professorial chair for him at Milan, then in practice the Western capital of the Roman Empire. By this time, Augustine had lost his infant faith (though he had only ever been enrolled as a catechumen, not baptized – a common practice in the fourth century), and embraced Manichaeism, a dualistic missionary religion that constituted the most serious threat to Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries. In Milan, however, he came under the spell of the bishop there, Ambrose, and after much hesitation sought baptism as a Christian, being baptized by Ambrose himself in the baptistery at Milan at the Easter Vigil in 387. For Augustine, as for many of his time, becoming a Christian meant embracing an ascetic lifestyle, and the rest of his life is marked by a series of experiments with life in community: at Cassiciacum, outside Milan, and then in North Africa, first at Thagaste, and then at the port of Hippo Regius (modern Annaba on the Algerian coast), where he became priest in 391, bishop (initially as coadjutor) in 395, and where he remained until his death on 28 August 430, when the Vandals were besieging the city.

Augustine the Pastor

We know so much from his *Confessions* about the period from his teens (c.370) until his conversion in 386, that it is easy to forget that Augustine spent most of his life as a pastor in Hippo – 40 years, from 391 to 431. The previous 20 years are packed with excitement – ‘To Carthage then I came/ Burning burning burning burning/O Lord though pluckest me out...’, as T.S. Eliot has it in *The Waste Land* –, his mistress (whose name is unknown), his son Adeodatus, the patient prayers and tears of his mother (occasioning the response from a bishop she consulted that ‘it cannot be that a son of these tears should perish’: *Confessions* III.12.21), his succumbing to Manichaeism and his reading of the ‘Platonists’, his encounter with Ambrose and his conversion, but it is in the following 40 years that we encounter Augustine the pastor, the theologian, the author of great works such as *On the Trinity* and *The City of God*, the preacher of so many sermons, including the great series of sermons on the Fourth Gospel and on the Psalms, the controversialist – against first the Manichees, then the Donatists, then the Pelagians, and all the time against the paganism that was still a prominent feature of the world in which he lived. During those 40 years, however, the fundamental reality of Augustine’s life as a priest

and bishop was as the pastor of the Catholic Christian community in Hippo. It was there that he prayed day by day with his congregation, preached to them, and celebrated the Eucharist as their bishop. For around 35 years, that was his principal, daily concern. Once a bishop, he never left North Africa, but spent his whole time there, mostly at Hippo, though also in Carthage. He preached several times a week and many of those sermons have been preserved for us, though many more have been lost. It has been estimated that Augustine must have preached about 8,000 homilies, of which 546 survive. If you add to them the homilies on the Psalms, and the Gospel and First Epistle of John, the total of surviving sermons comes to a little over 1,000, so we have about an eighth of his preaching.¹ But this is a good deal, and it is here, I think, that we find the heart of Augustine. It is here that again and again scholars over the last half-a-century or so have sought to discover the ‘hidden Augustine’, the priest and pastor.

The real Augustine and the Augustine of controversy

I would like to introduce you to Augustine through his sermons, but this would take too much time, and I am afraid you want to know what an Orthodox view should be on those doctrines that seem to separate East and West, and we find little of that in the sermons. Augustine preaches the Gospel, the power of the transforming grace of the Resurrection; he tells us of the Body of Christ, to which we belong through baptism, which is constituted by the celebration of the Eucharist and the offering of the Eucharistic sacrifice; he tells us of the difficulties of the Christian life, the paramount importance of humility and patience. The sermons breathe the patient understanding of the pastor who cares for the souls of his people. That is the real Augustine—a true Father of the Church!

Briefly, however, let me tackle a few of the issues that cause dismay. I shall just take three of them: his doctrine of original sin, his doctrine of predestination, and his teaching on the procession of the Holy Spirit. But do not forget what I have said so far, about the Augustine who is unquestionably a Father of the Church. Photios himself reminds us that even the greatest Fathers of the Church can err, and that we should not focus on their errors, but on the faith that we hold in common.

¹ See Goulven Madec, *La Patrie et la voie*, Paris: Desclée, 1989, pp. 115-16.

Original sin

Augustine maintained that we are born into a sinful state, that the sin we see around us is not just the sum of the actual sins human beings have committed, but is an accumulation of sin inherited from our ancestors, ultimately from our forebears, Adam and Eve. For Augustine, this is just a matter of fact. We are born with a propensity to sin. We are not born innocent and then become subject to sin; we have never known a life without sinful propensities. In book 1 of the *Confessions*, for instance, Augustine reflects on the selfish greed of tiny babies. It was only gradually that he developed his doctrine of original sin, which is essentially that we are implicated in the sin of Adam, that in some sense we sinned in Adam and suffer the consequences of that sin – even that original sin is passed on as a kind of inherited taint. The consequence is that sin is, as it were, our first instinct. It is only baptism that wipes away the burden of sin – both inherited, original sin, and in the case of adults accumulated, actual sins – though even baptized Christians still suffer the wounds of sin; our besetting sins do not vanish overnight in the waters of baptism. No Orthodox Christian, reading the Great Canon of St Andrew, could think that Augustine is exaggerating the effect of sin. Augustine's understanding of the human will as so wounded that it is incapable of good seems, however, to deprive human beings of responsibility, and the Greek Fathers never go as far as that in their understanding of the human plight; for them, however wounded, the human will remains free and is responsible for its succumbing to sin.

Predestination

Together with original sin, there goes in Augustine's thought the doctrine of predestination. For Augustine this doctrine is essentially about salvation. It sees predestination as a corollary of the fact that salvation is a matter of divine grace, not human effort. Predestination is not at all for Augustine an aspect of a more general determinism, a belief that everything that takes place has been predetermined, either because everything is ruled by universal causality, or because God has predetermined everything. Some later Augustinians – such as Luther, in his *On the Bondage of the Will*, directed against Erasmus, for example – argued for predestination as a corollary of a more general determinism, but Augustine never does that.

Although predestination, in the Augustinian sense, was virtually unknown in Byzantine thought, Byzantine theologians and philosophers were fascinated by predestination in the sense of predetermination by God, and in particular whether the hour of our death is predetermined by the divine will. But this is very different from Augustine's doctrine of predestination. Original sin and predestination belong together in Augustine's thought, and are based on his experience of God as interpreted by the Scriptures. The main purpose of the *Confessions* is to demonstrate how, throughout the course of Augustine's life, its real meaning is to be found in God's purposes. Even when Augustine seems to be turning completely against God, in reality he can see, as he looks back, the hand of God drawing him to Himself. Augustine does not see his conversion as something that came about as a result of his own searching and struggle; it is rather a gift from God – and a gift in which God gives, too, the capacity to receive it.

'Grant what you command, and command what you will' – the prayer of Augustine (*Confessions* X.29.40) that was anathema to Pelagius – goes to the heart of the human condition. Original sin explains why this is so: we are too wounded to turn our wills to God. Predestination explains God's part in our salvation: we cannot save ourselves, it is solely through grace that we are saved; therefore, those who are saved are chosen by God (cf. John 15:16: 'You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you...'), they are the elect (*electi* being the Latin for 'chosen').

The danger is that one will go on to ask about those who are not chosen – and one cannot but ask: are they then chosen by God to be condemned eternally? Augustine does not want to take this line. For him, we are all justly condemned because of our implication in original sin. If we are saved, it is because God has chosen us. All we see is the God who chooses and predestines in his love, a love that we can never deserve. Some of Augustine's language, however, mentions side-by-side the elect and the reprobate, as if both related to God through his predestining will, some predestined to salvation, others to damnation. It is at this point that Augustine calls on the incomprehensibility of God's purposes – 'O the depth of the richness and the wisdom and the power of God! How unsearchable his judgments and his ways past finding out!' (Rom. 11:33).

One might think that such a confession of the ineffability of God belongs earlier on in our consideration of the mystery of the working together of the Divine and the human – not just when we draw back

horrified from what seems to be a glimpse of a horrendous vision of a God of both love and hate!

The Procession of the Holy Spirit

Reflection on the Holy Spirit's place within the Trinity is something that developed late in the Church's consciousness. By the end of the fourth century the Latin Church had come to speak of the Holy Spirit as being 'from both', that is, from the Father and the Son. The Greeks were more subtle and tended to think of the Spirit as being 'from [out of] the Father', sometimes adding the qualification, 'through the Son'. But there was no sense in the fourth century of any controversy over this: these were various ways of thinking of the persons of the Trinity, both of their activity in the divine economy, and their sharing in the divine life. Augustine belongs to the Latins in this, as one would expect. One needs, however, to distinguish between the doctrine of the double procession of the Spirit and the addition to the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople of the phrase 'and from the Son', in Latin, *Filioque*. So far as the latter is concerned, Augustine is quite innocent – he cannot be accused on promoting a doctrine at variance with an already known œcumenical creed – for he almost certainly had no knowledge of the Creed of 381 (that is, the restatement in amplified form of the Creed of the Council of Nicaea of 325 that is associated with the Council of Constantinople of 381). That creed does not seem to have been known at all until it was cited at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 as the faith of the Fathers of 381. It was still later that the Creed of 381 began to be used liturgically (initially by the Monophysite Patriarch of Antioch, Peter the Fuller, in the 480s), and though Rome for a time seems to have abandoned the Apostles' Creed as its baptismal creed for the Creed of 381, it did not use the Creed of 381 in the Eucharistic liturgy until 1014 (then with addition of the *Filioque*).

Conclusion

There are other matters we could have talked about: Augustine's sacramental theology, his alleged defence of the 'just war' or his justification of persecution of heretics by the state. In all these cases, however, I think we would find that Augustine has either been misunderstood or held responsible for what others have made of his ideas. I want to end by returning to where we began, and to underline the importance of giving due weight to the heart of Augustine's theological endeavour: his concern, day by day

and week by week, to help his congregation to participate more deeply in the mystery of Christ, revealed in Scripture and celebrated in liturgy of the Church.

Very brief bibliography:

The *Confessions* is essential reading. There are good modern translations by Sister Maria Boulding (New City Press, 2001), Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1991), and an older mellifluous translation by F.J. Sheed (Sheed & Ward, 1945). Make sure your edition has all thirteen books!

Best introduction to Augustine's theology: Carol Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

Best recent, large biography by Serge Lancel (SCM Press, 2002); see also the revised edition of Peter Brown's classic biography (Faber & Faber, 2000).

There are also brief introductions to Augustine's thought by Henry Chadwick (OUP, Past Masters) and Richard Price (OUP, Very Short Introductions).

FELLOWSHIP SUMMER CONFERENCE 2008
Ushaw College, Durham, 11–13 July

Living the Liturgy

Living the Liturgy: Daily Life

Columba Bruce Clark

O wad some Power the giftie gie us

To see oursels as ithers see us!

Robert Burns

The prayer of Scotland's national poet – for a better sense of how we appear in other people's eyes – is one in which all Orthodox Christians can join. That doesn't mean, of course, that we should be obsessively concerned with our 'image' in the world. On the contrary, there are times when we are positively obliged to behave in ways that most other people may find idiosyncratic or downright wrong. But it is also generally true that for any small, and (to most people) unusual group, some minimal awareness of public perceptions is a necessary condition for survival. As individuals and as a whole, the participants in such a group have to make careful judgments about how much, and precisely how, their beliefs and practices should be shared with the rest of the world. That doesn't imply systematically deceiving outsiders; but it does imply wise discernment of the best starting-points in any interaction with people who belong to other groups, or no particular group. That is precisely the challenge facing most Orthodox Christians who live in the West – and are surrounded, for the majority of their waking hours, by work-mates, team-mates, neighbours or fellow-students to whom Orthodox Christianity is utterly foreign.

Sometimes we are brought face to face in a comical way with how other people regard us. Let me tell a couple of stories from my work as a journalist. A few years ago, I found myself in Jerusalem, spending the evening of (Orthodox) Easter Sunday with three colleagues: one a devout but politically moderate Jew, another an Englishman who specialises in Palestinian affairs, and finally, a very distinguished English lady who has spent a lifetime writing and editing stories from the Middle East. Perhaps because it was the most neutral topic of conversation, the three of them spent much

of the evening asking me about the Paschal celebration I had just experienced. Then the Englishman asked: ‘How do your colleagues react to the fact that you’re an Orthodox Christian?’ Sensing my slight discomfiture, the lady from London interjected: ‘The fact is that we’re all *pretty odd*....’

Odd indeed, but we vary in the degree and modality, so to speak, of our perceived oddness. Let me also tell about a harmless but maybe revealing piece of teasing which I faced recently. Early on a Thursday morning, the editorial team of our magazine assembles and we read one another’s copy. A correspondent had made the controversial assertion that the Celtic cross, in Italy at least, was regarded as a neo-fascist symbol. So the cry went out – is that something we can agree with? And I immediately piped up that I wear a Celtic cross, and certainly don’t regard myself as a neo-fascist. A colleague retorted: ‘No, Bruce we think of you more as an old-time fascist, a paleo-fascist....’ Well, it’s always nice to be appreciated.

What both these little incidents recall is the dilemma faced, I would imagine, by almost every faithful Orthodox Christian in this country: how do we keep our integrity, and at least in a quiet way bear witness to our faith, in environments, especially work environments, where the discourse and practice of Orthodox Christianity appear utterly unfamiliar, and perhaps ridiculous, to most of our colleagues? How do we steer a course between proselytizing in an aggressive or condescending way and conceding all the ground to our colleagues? In an ideal world, what are the things about Orthodox Christianity that would somehow be picked up by our colleagues and fellow-citizens? If we were faithful to our calling, what would people make of that calling? What should be the hallmarks of our faith that inspire at least respect among those who find the contents of our beliefs (or indeed the idea of any elaborate and systematic religious practice) strange or bewildering?

I would like to share a few thoughts about this dilemma. First, if we are true to our faith, it must be the case that in practical as well as theoretical ways, we remain perpetually open to the mystery of the human personality. That is something we talk about a lot in our theological discussions, sometimes coherently, sometimes not. But in the work-place and in other situations of temporary intimacy (travelling, for example), the mystery of humanity can crowd in on us in entirely unexpected ways. People of whom we know very little may suddenly open to us and reveal parts of themselves (their deepest hopes, fears and insecurities) that are far from obvious on the outside. Indeed, some relationships at work and in other con-

texts, are almost of necessity one-dimensional. Every day for ten years, I may greet the person who mends the photocopying machine, or despatches the post or guards the entrance to my building, without ever exchanging more than a few polite words about the weather or other anodyne topics. And then suddenly the relationship changes, because of some incident, some snatch of conversation, which enables us to see that person in an entirely new light. Even with very close associates – people with whom we are obliged to co-operate and accomplish complex tasks – there are always features of their lives that we would never have imagined, and about which it would be quite wrong to ask intrusive questions. And when people around us do open up, showing part (it's never the whole) of their mystery and personhood; we have to be ready for that moment, while at the same time being extra careful to avoid the temptations of pride and power which arise almost instantly whenever you are on the receiving end of somebody's confidences and vulnerability. I would like to think that readiness for such a moment is or should be a hallmark of an Orthodox Christian.

Closely related to this, I think, is the willingness to *forgive* colleagues and other associates who offend us and harm our interests (often because we have harmed theirs) without trivialising or simply repressing the extent of the mutual hurt. It is a hard fact of human life that in any group – of work-mates, campaigners for a cause, members of a political party – people are going to hurt one another, either wilfully, or by accident. Where a professional tie is longstanding, and for some reason unbreakable, the danger exists of wounds that fester and spread. To state the obvious, it is relatively easy to forgive people from whom we can detach ourselves, people with whom we share no real community of fate. And modern urban life allows us plenty of opportunity to detach ourselves from those we find unbearable; we can change jobs, social groups, cities, countries and of course spouses and life-partners with an ease that would have been inconceivable in most other eras of human history. And yet there are people to whom we have to remain close, because of the place where we work, the causes we support, or for more subtle reasons; and we will all give an account to God of how we dealt with those people and handled the difficulties that were bound to arise.

On forgiveness, 'Western' Orthodox Christians may have something to learn from the Orthodox heartland. I certainly don't idealise the reality of historically Orthodox cultures, or assume that these cultures perfectly reflect the Orthodox faith. But I do think that, compared with most modern

Western societies, Orthodox countries – which are, of course, different from one another – have a better sense of the need for forgiveness in human affairs, without underestimating the difficulty of forgiveness. In a paradoxical way, this may reflect the deep traumas that many Orthodox lands experienced in the twentieth century, and the absolute need for some mutual forgiveness if communities are to survive. Scratch the surface of any town in Greece, and you will find memories of the most appalling acts of cruelty that individuals or families perpetrated upon one another in the course of the German occupation, the civil war or the military dictatorship. It hardly suprising that some deep grudges are borne, and that these grudges continue to affect personal relations half a century after the events that gave rise to them. What is more striking is that there are plenty of cases of people who were on opposite sides during these terrible events who somehow managed to bury the hatchet, to say ‘*Perasmena, Xehasmena*’ – what is past is forgotten.

To outsiders, the Orthodox Christian world must often seem exceptionally vindictive and quarrelsome. But there is at least some heartening evidence to the contrary. If you are familiar with the Greek Orthodox scene, you will remember the intensity of the dispute that raged between the late Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens and the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I, over jurisdictional questions in northern Greece. During 2003, the dispute was close to becoming a national obsession in Greece, with newspapers stirring the pot by adopting one side or the other and making personal attacks on the other camp. But that wasn’t the end of the story of the relationship between those two clerics. In the final months of the Archbishop’s life, he was battling with liver cancer, and Patriarch Bartholomew made a point of visiting the Archbishop and offering whatever comfort he could as a pastor, a fellow Christian and a human being. And the dying Archbishop expressed the wish that the Patriarch should lead his funeral. In January 2008, the Patriarch left his modest quarters at the Phanar and led a funeral procession of about 200,000 people through the streets of Athens. And through that act of reconciliation between the two clerics, there came a broader reconciliation between the Archdiocese of Athens and the Patriarchate.

So I don’t think that it is being excessively idealistic to say that cradle Orthodox know how to quarrel but they can also forgive. I’m sorry to say that when I became an Orthodox Christian in 1996, I often found there was more evidence of the former quality than of the latter among the small,

disputatious community of Orthodox faithful in Britain. Indeed it seemed to me, and it still seems to me, that as groups of people go, the Orthodox Christians of this country are exceptionally prone not just to hurt one another but also to nurture grievances for years and years. ‘Love keeps no score of wrongs’ – that is the New English Bible translation of a famous verse in the letter to the Corinthians. It seems to me that many of us are exceptionally zealous in keeping a score of wrongs. Unless we show more forgiveness to one another, we shall never be able to bear witness – even silently – to anybody else. We should bear in mind that, whatever we do, people are likely to think of us as cranky, obsessed with obscure details and even narcissistic. That is how any elaborate religion seems to anybody who does not follow such a practice – in other words, to the vast majority of people around us. If we compound that impression of self-obsessed crankiness by behaving vindictively (to one another, or to outsiders), the message that we send to the world will be a truly dire and dreadful one.

To lighten the tone a bit, I would like to suggest a third way in which we communicate with one another, and through which Orthodox Christians can communicate something of their deepest selves to people who know nothing of our faith. And that is through humour: the very important signals we send by what we laugh at, and what we don’t laugh at. I wouldn’t have mentioned either of those workplace anecdotes at the beginning of my talk if I hadn’t been confident that my colleagues’ words were meant in the most kindly way. One of the hallmarks of a devout Orthodox Christian is an ability not merely to rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep, but also to laugh – joyfully – with those who laugh. The everyday details of life between people who are very close to another, and trust one another, are very funny. We all tend to take ourselves a bit too seriously – but at the same time, we can eventually be made to see the funny side if somebody punctures our pomposity. The line between cruel humour and the gentle sort can be quite a fine one, but it is a very important one to maintain. Many of the holiest people of our time, and of other times, have been very funny characters: mimics, raconteurs, adept practitioners of self-mockery. In the first chapter of St John’s Gospel, we find the rhetorical question: can anything good come out of Nazareth? Whatever other meanings this enquiry may contain, there is surely a piece of light local humour – rather like saying, as I was taught in my Northern Irish childhood, that if somebody asks you for sixpence before answering a question, you know you’re near Ballymena. But the

dividing line between gentle humour and cruel mockery – mental torture, if you like – is quite thin. It is surely an important Christian duty, in any social situation, to watch that line very carefully – and to protect anybody who is a victim of collective cruelty.

What else should Orthodox Christians try to be in their dealings with a world that is neither Orthodox nor in any serious way Christian? In an ideal world, we would be perpetually prepared to bear witness to our faith, its teaching, its values – on those occasions when we are called on to do so. We would have the knowledge and also the discernment to understand the level at which our faith can be shared in any particular situation.

Yes, we have to be extremely sensitive to how other people see us, and at the same time we need to be very careful not to accept unconditionally other people's perceptions of where and who we are. If other people view us as odd or eccentric – and use that perception as a way to cope with the fact that we are different – so be it: Christians have been, and still are, called much worse things than that. But that doesn't mean surrendering to the rest of the world or internalising its judgements. To restate that paradox in a different way, it is a matter of common sense that we have to speak the language of the place where we live; but that doesn't mean that we have to speak or think in the same way as other speakers of that language. In this context, language means far more than a form of speech like English, Spanish or Swahili: it means the entire set of symbols and references by which meaning is communicated. If it seems to us that people around us are speaking a language that somehow incorporates false values, that leaves no room for sacredness, transcendence or awe, we must look for ways to start 're-forming' that language – but the only starting-point for this process is the particular set of signs and symbols now in use.

Modern culture is very powerful and intrusive; it seems to imprint its electronic images, its artificial sounds, its computer-generated values, deep inside the consciousness of every human being. We have to be sufficiently in tune with that culture to communicate with people who know nothing else; and at the same time, refuse to be imprisoned by that culture. Among people who would only use the word 'God' or 'Jesus' or 'prayer' in an ironic or blasphemous way, we have to suggest, somehow, that these words have primordial meanings that are infinitely more important. When people try to guess at these primordial meanings, it may be that the only real evidence they have is the effect these words have on us: what do we, who claim to be believers, seem to be saying when we speak of the import-

ance of God in our lives? What do we mean when we say that ‘God created the world....’; that ‘God loved the world’; that ‘God’s Son died for the world’? By the lights of modern culture, these statements are on the verge of being meaningless; that is why, even as Christians, we don’t often use such words in public places. (It is no accident that when people from right outside Christian culture suddenly have a glimmering of what it’s all about, it’s very often through some non-verbal symbol, such as an icon or a piece of music that seems to speak of another world.)

But most of the time, language in its present, rather defaced form is the only tool of communication available to us, unless we happen to be talented composers or artists. Finding the right, simple words to express ourselves – and build a bridge to those who use words in a different way – is never simple matter: it requires ingenuity, and in the deepest sense, inspiration. Perhaps that it is part of what Our Lord meant when he taught that as we go about our daily lives in an indifferent, hostile or uncomprehending world, we must be ‘as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves’ (Mt 10:16).

Living the Liturgy: Private Prayer

Mother Sarah

Prayer is everything

I find myself a little perplexed by the sub-title of this part of our conference: ‘Private Prayer’. I want to question whether any real prayer can be described as ‘private’. Surely we are all so linked to each other that what we do affects everybody else. When we truly stand before God in prayer, in a mysterious way we bring other people with us; the people who share our daily lives and concerns, and indeed the whole of humanity of which we are part. A Coptic monk recently advised a visitor to his hermitage: ‘When you pray, remember that *you are Adam.*’

‘But you, when you pray, enter into your closet and when you have shut the door, pray to your Father which is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret, shall reward you openly’ (Mt 6:6). So let us put the word

‘private’ aside. ‘Secret’ seems to me much more appropriate. It immediately suggests an activity of the heart, of the innermost, the hidden and most vital working of the person. Once we have established that, we know that we are talking about something supremely important, something which determines the quality of our relationship with God, and something which is sacred for each one of us.

Surely this particular ‘closet’ is one which can be entered anywhere, in front of our icons at home – yes, of course, but during the Liturgy too, and as an ultimate goal, that personal place of heart to heart communion with God should be occupied during all aspects of our daily lives. Secret prayer should become something that characterises and colours everything in our lives. I’m reminded of the words of an Arab lady I met in Jerusalem earlier this year: ‘Prayer is everything.’

This talk has three sections: First, reflecting a little on the tension, or balance, between striving and trusting in prayer, second, some practical suggestions about the way we can make prayer more part of the essential fabric of our daily lives, and last, a suggestion about a secret weapon the Lord has given us that enables us to encounter him wherever we are and whatever we are doing.

Striving or Trusting?

Prayer is like a very narrow bridge on either side of which is an abyss. On the one hand there is the danger of not trying hard enough (‘the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and it is the men of violence who take it by force’ Mt 11:12) and on the other is the danger of not trusting, not recognising what is right in front of us all the time

Here is an example of how this tension was resolved in one person’s experience: In his book *School for Prayer* Metropolitan Anthony describes a pastoral encounter he had with an elderly lady in an old peoples’ home. She singled him out for advice because he was a young priest, recently ordained. She was tired of classical advice about prayer which didn’t work for her, and she thought that he might ‘by chance blunder out the right thing’. So he did ‘blunder’ out what he thought and said, ‘Well, if you speak all the time, you don’t give God a chance to get a word in.’ He advised the old lady to go to her room after breakfast, tidy it, put her chair in a strategic position where she would not see the jumble of things which

(he says) are often pushed into the corners of old ladies' rooms, light the little lamp in front of her icons, and knit before the face of God. But he forbade her to say one word of prayer. 'You just knit and enjoy the peace of your room.' She took his advice and some time later greeted him with delight. 'You know, it works!'

This is what she described: 'I felt so quiet because the room was so peaceful. There was a clock ticking but it didn't disturb the silence, its ticking just underlined the fact that everything was so still and after a while I remembered that I must knit before the face of God, and so I began to knit. And I became more and more aware of the silence. The needles hit the armrest of my chair, the clock was ticking peacefully, there was nothing to bother about, I had no need of straining myself, and then I perceived that this silence was not simply an absence of noise, but that the silence had substance. It was not absence of something but presence of something. The silence had a density, a richness, and it began to pervade me. The silence around began to come and meet the silence in me... All of a sudden I perceived that the silence was a presence. At the heart of the silence there was Him who is all stillness, all peace, all poise.'²

'At the heart of the silence there was Him who is all stillness, all peace, all poise.' What a beautiful description of an encounter with God in prayer. In a way we can say the old lady was just waking up to the presence of God who was there all the time. She was just knitting after all! But if we look more closely at the example we can see two very important disciplines without which the old lady would not have had this wonderful encounter with God.

First, she had to put the time aside. She had to make the commitment to *sit* for those 15 minutes, and not do any of the things she might previously have done at that time of day. As we all know, she would have had no difficulty in finding 101 urgent tasks that had to be done at that particular moment if the prayer time had not had priority. As some Buddhist meditation teachers say: 'Don't just do something, sit there!' I'm going to be talking about the discipline of putting time aside for prayer later. For the moment, let's just note that it was an essential condition for her encounter with God.

Second, she had to keep bringing her attention back to what she was doing. She had to keep knitting and not 'tell' God things, in order to hear

² *School for Prayer*, p. 61.

Him in the silence. She had to stop herself thinking about her difficult daughter in law, her rheumatism, or whatever else.

In another place, Bishop Anthony likens prayer to bird watching. It is essential to be alert and alive, and at the same time still and relaxed. The bird watcher has to get up before the birds and hide herself in some out of the way place. (In other words, make the time to do it). She has to stop fidgeting, and keep her *attention* fixed on the birds she is trying to observe.

And this constant bringing of the attention back to the task in hand is one of the most fundamental characteristics of secret prayer. Ignatii Brianchaninov says: ‘The essential and indispensable part of prayer is attention. Without attention, there is no prayer.’³ Bishop Ignatii goes on to say that attention itself is a gift of grace, but of course this does not mean that we do not have to force ourselves and struggle to attend to the words and meaning of our prayer. How do I expect God to listen to my prayer if I’m not listening myself!

And what about the struggle in prayer that we see in the life of someone like St Silouan? In his life we see an awe-inspiring example of a heroic and Herculean struggle to break through to the grace of God. But can we not say that that very struggle was itself the result of the grace of God?

In the tension between trusting and striving in prayer, there is no simple formula or easy solution. I believe it is a tension which demands watchfulness and creativity for all of us.

Metropolitan Anthony describes prayer as a creative endeavour. Many teachers speak of prayer as ‘infinite creation, the supreme art’,⁴ like, but far greater than, the struggle that any artist or scientist puts into their work. Metropolitan Anthony develops the idea of creativity in a slightly different way, likening the outcome of prayer, the person we become through prayer, to the result of artistic endeavour: ‘We must have faith in the chaos in ourselves, (which is) pregnant with beauty and harmony. We must look at ourselves as an artist looks, with vision and sobriety, at the raw material which God has put into his hands, out of which he will make a work of art, an integral part of the harmony, the beauty, the truth and the life of the Kingdom. ...An artist must learn to discern the peculiar potentialities of the given material and call out of it all the beauty hidden in its depths. So must every one of us discern in himself...his particular capabilities and

³ *The Art of Prayer*, p. 197.

⁴ *His Life is Mine*, p. 64.

characteristics, both good and bad, and make use of them to achieve in the end that work of art which is his true self.’⁵

Some thoughts about practicalities

I hesitate to make any suggestions about the difficulties we encounter in prayer because all of you have good spiritual fathers, with whom you have no doubt discussed these problems and come up with solutions applicable to your circumstances. However, since I was specifically asked to talk about this; I will make one or two observations; actually seven!

1. It seems to me quite hopeless to build a routine of prayer around times when we are exhausted. Prayer before sleep is of course good, but few people can concentrate well just before they go to sleep. Similarly, not everyone is at their most alert early in the morning, especially if they are caught in a mad rush to get to work, get the children to school, etc. It can be useful to have a look at the pattern of the day, and find a time that is most auspicious for regularity, ease of concentration and lack of disturbance. Like so many things, it can be helpful to talk this over with someone else. A fresh pair of eyes can help with some creativity and ‘thinking outside the box’ in considering the pattern of our daily lives.

2. Daily prayer is essential for those who take prayer seriously, but what about a *weekly* ‘Sabbath’ or ‘desert’ time?⁶ Many people find it helpful to set aside a time each week, longer than their usual daily prayer time, when they can read and get to grips with prayer in a way that is not always possible on a daily basis. Some people use this extended prayer time during the week as part of preparing for the Sunday Liturgy – and have found that their participation in the Liturgy on Sunday has been significantly deepened. For this mid-week Sabbath, the same requirements of regularity and lack of disturbance are important. Well, I know it’s a challenge, but how many people go to the gym, not just once but two or three times a week. Nobody thinks that’s unreasonable!

3. I’d like to make an appeal for regularly incorporating the Bible into our prayer, both prayerful reading of the Gospels and using psalms and other

⁵ *Meditations on a Theme*, pp. 9-10.

⁶ For this and many of the other suggestions in this section I am much indebted to Fr Yves Dubois who has mentioned them in sermons and talks given to our parish.

texts as part of our actual prayer. Do we have a strong enough sense of the sacramental nature of our Bible reading? Do we approach it with an expectation of a real encounter with the Lord? May it not be said of us that the Orthodox are the people who kiss the Bible but don't read it!

4. I think we should be creative and proactive in choosing/gathering the texts we use in prayer—taking the trouble to get hold of prayers that really inspire us, give us a feeling of being in touch with reality, and therefore with God.

5. This also may be controversial, but I think it is legitimate to make full use of technology, to help us to keep prayer going. When I travel by public transport I see people using MP3 players and other devices. I like to imagine that all these people on their way to work are all listening to the Akathist to the Mother of God or the all night vigil in an Athonite monastery! Listening to recordings of services made in places where we have ourselves sensed the fragrance of prayer can be particularly inspiring.

6. Pray with friends during the week. Some of us are lucky enough to live near Orthodox friends. Why not meet up with them to say the Jesus Prayer, pray Vespers or sing a canon or Akathist? Keep inspiring yourself. Keep feeding your spiritual imagination, whether by reading, talking with friends, exchanging books or visiting monasteries and other centres of active prayer life.

7. And lastly, make sure that great feasts, like Transfiguration and Dormition are incorporated into our lives as far as possible. As we pray in the Akathist, Glory to God for all things: 'Why is it that on a feast day the whole of nature mysteriously smiles? Why does a marvellous lightness then fill our hearts, to which nothing earthly can be compared: the very air in the altar and in God's house becomes luminous? It is the breath of grace, the reflection of the glory of Mt Tabor: heaven and earth then sing this praise: Alleluia!'⁷ Personal, 'secret' prayer won't flourish unless it is fully integrated into the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church.

⁷ Akathist Glory to God for All Things, Kontakion 9.

The Lord is hidden in his own commandments

And now we come to the secret weapon! In the *Philokalia* we find the following striking statement by Mark the Monk: ‘The Lord is hidden in his own commandments.’⁸ I find this a most remarkable saying – in our *doing* what the Lord commands us, he is encountered!

Let me tell a story that illustrates this. During the persecution of the church in Romania, a certain priest found himself in prison. He desperately wanted to be faithful to the Lord despite the difficulties of his imprisonment, but he was tormented by the fact that, because of his hunger, all he could think about was food. He wanted to speak about God to his fellow prisoners, to pray, to share his meagre possessions, but all he could think about was roast chicken and chocolate mousse! He begged the Lord to free him from his obsession with food, but nothing happened. One day a food parcel arrived for him. He opened it and found it full of all kinds of delicious things. He was not alone in his prison cell, and as he gazed into the package, he was faced with a terrible choice. Was he going to eat the food himself, or share it with the other people? He reached into the parcel and, with a stupendous effort, he took out the first thing that came to his hand and forced it into the hand of the person next to him. At that moment, he was freed from his obsession! From then on, he was able to act as a true priest in the prison; in exactly the way he had begged the Lord to enable him. Indeed the Lord was hidden in his commandment!

So if the Lord is hidden in his commandments, there are a multitude of encounters with God waiting for us out there in the market place of our daily lives. Father Porphyrios, an outstanding elder who died in 1991, used to urge his spiritual children to remember that the Lord came to people when they were *doing things*: threshing, looking after sheep, mending nets, fishing, etc. Father Porphyrios had a great love of work, and he saw it as an aid, rather than a hindrance to prayer.

This principle of the Lord being hidden in his commandments opens up for us the meaning of the repeated plea in the great Torah psalm (Ps 118/119) and in our services: ‘Blessed art Thou O Lord, teach me Thy commandments; blessed art Thou O Lord, enlighten me with Thy command-

⁸ *Philokalia*, vol. 1, p.122.

ments; blessed art Thou O Lord, make me to understand Thy commandments.’ It could also shed light on the puzzling words of our Lord to the woman who said, ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts which nursed you’ – ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it’ (Lk 11:28). Does he mean that in obedience to the word of God a real encounter is waiting for each of us, the coming of the Lord to dwell in our own depths?

‘Prayer is everything.’ Prayer shapes our life, giving it a fiery colour and enabling us to see the radiant beauty of the people around us. I’d like to finish with a quotation from Archbishop Anastasios of Albania, which I think describes very well people who pray:

Prayer ‘will continue, everywhere and in every epoch, to transform people who are repentant, to lift them up, and to make of them a “new creation”. It will continue to ... reveal a communion of free persons who are loved. It will continue to guide people toward redemption – toward that movement “beyond” that leads to participation in the divine. In other words, ... people’s unquenchable longing for theosis. ...Down through the centuries, the thing that has made the Church relevant in every era has been and remains its ability to present to the world people who, in their personal lives, experience the mystery of freedom, the mystery of Christ’s sacrificing love. [The Church] will continue, in perpetuity, to offer this spiritual rebirth that gives meaning to life, helping people confront dissolution and death with the inspiration and power of the Resurrection.’⁹

⁹ *Facing the World*, p. 201 (paraphrased).

Pilgrimage to Lindisfarne

13-14 July 2008

Following the annual conference, a group of conference participants continued on a pilgrimage to Lindisfarne:

I had never been to Lindisfarne in spite of having seen many holy sites throughout the world, so I was eager to go. The weather was good so the excitement mounted as we crossed the causeway, having checked we had got the times of low tide right. We drove past the dunes down to the southern part where the ruins of the abbey lay. The ruins are good, especially the dramatic arch of which one set of stones spans the sky above. By now the sky was vivid blue and the sun was shining, giving a warm patina to the lovely red sandstone of which the abbey was built. The Castle 'hovered' in the background enhancing the views all round.

The first thing to do was of course to gather to sing Sext with the choir that had served us so well in the conference at Ushaw, and of course with Fr Kyril, who always turns up with all the service printed and laid out for all to follow. Then we enjoyed lunch together in the lovely quiet garden of the nearby pub. Quiet – that was it, that was what was pressing in on over-stimulated senses. I loved it. But there were things to see. St Cuthbert's isle was for me the first and foremost. I could not feast my eyes on this jewel set in the sea enough. This was the place where, after being in charge of the monastery for ten years (after the Synod of Whitby), he prepared himself for the hermit life. (For us in Keswick, it is always nice to know he found time to come and visit us – or at least his friend and hermit Herbert on his island in Derwentwater.)

Then to the church, where I wanted to grasp the plan of St Aidan's early monastery (founded 635) that lay beneath it. As we wandered round in lazy mode, I also enjoyed the little film at the Centre. It conveyed well what a terrible sight those Viking ships must have been as, in 793, they came to pillage and slaughter. In my mind flashed all those many places, Christian sites East and West, which suffered similar fates. Yet we are so grateful that even now so many of them can still be visited. I love going round these places. It is always a 'disappointment' to have to leave. Thank God these great saints pray for us. Let us all press on to found more 'holy sites' in our land! How about a few more prayer cells in the North?

Fr John Musther

The Challenges for Young Orthodox Christians: Syndesmos meeting at La Servagère, France 7-13 August 2008

Miriam Craddock

Grenoble: the fringe of the Alps, was where I began my Syndesmos journey this Summer. The Gorges of Nan beckoned my mountainous spirit. After one hour, the car started the relentless task of zigzagging up the forbidding high roads. A Catholic statue of the Virgin looked prayerfully down upon us as we began our ascent. The climb got steeper, the road narrower and the drop down the gorge, on the passenger side of the window where I sat, deeper. I began to say the Jesus Prayer! In places, the road just seemed to hang off the edge of the gorge. We passed through from one tunnel into the next, and continued to chisel our way onwards up the mountain. Eventually we reached the remote village of Malleval, served only by a church and a tavern for explorers. No school here – too few children; so their parents send them to boarding schools. This was clearly a remote spot – no wonder the Orthodox liked it! However, we were heading for the farmhouse at La Servagère belonging to ACER–MJO (Christian Action of Russian Student’s Movement of Orthodox Youth, www.acer-mjo.org), where the Orthodox children’s camp is held each summer. The road continued to climb the contours up the hair-pin bends and the views became more spectacular. As we passed a farm that made goats cheese, I had to keep reminding myself that I was not on the set of the Sound of Music. At last the building came into sight in the fading light. It was a vast farmhouse, fully equipped from top to bottom to feed an army of 150-200 children. I tried not to be envious as I inspected the building, wondering why we could not have something similar in Snowdonia.

Greeting my 21 fellow delegates, who ranged in age from early twenties to mid-thirties and more, I was reassured to find that I was not the oldest there. Seven countries, Albania, Greece, France, Russia, Belgium, Finland and Great Britain, were represented at our Olympian event. In true Hellenic style, the Greek delegation arrived one hour after everyone else, and I immediately felt at home. Everything was reassuringly familiar! We ate dinner together and exchanged travel anecdotes.

The next morning the chapel bell rang out monastically to wake us for morning prayers, followed by a beautiful French breakfast outside in the

morning sunlight under the eaves of the overhanging cliffs. Shortly afterwards we divided into three small groups to discuss the challenges of being Orthodox Christians in our modern society.

An initial question was raised: Do we see the church as our home or are we consumers? Where is our sense of belonging? To the body of Christ, or to the pervasive beckoning secular voices of materialism that are fired at us every day via marketing. Our culture is so insistent on wanting to exclude God from every aspect of society, and after reflection we concluded that if we do not really know our true home and sense of belonging in the church then we are too readily and willingly seduced.

The barriers to young people feeling at home in the church were also discussed. For example, the off putting concept of the church presenting itself as a serious intellectual organisation that publishes theology for the learned, or the image of a museum which guards precious treasures so tightly that they are inaccessible to the world outside. This having been said, it was agreed that denying correct dogma or treating the sacraments lightly were completely unacceptable.

We discussed the notion that when the church seems outwardly to be controlled from the top, the people of God sometimes forget they themselves are guardians of the faith and have an active role to play in the lives of their churches. This was considered to be relevant for 'Generation X and Y' who are so ready to consume, but slower to contribute.

There were reflections on how many churches really functioned as true living communities of faith, and, if they did, what effect this would have on the world around them. The question of whether the church has become too hierarchically institutionalised, with the consequent loss of a role for lay people, was also discussed.

The dangers of a consumer mentality in the church were touched upon: the people come; they expect the priest to do everything; he does everything; and they return home again seemingly satisfied. Do the people have a distorted view of the role of hierarchy in the church? It was concluded that to be a member of a family one must both give and receive. I remembered having once heard Metropolitan Kallistos say that we need each other to become more our true selves and salvation is a collective process, and one that is also expressed by reaching out to others together.

Do our communities feel like home, and if so, do they have open windows? We concluded that, if we participate in the Truth, we must be open to share it with others, rather than guarding it for ourselves by building or

maintaining barriers. The dangers of constructing seemingly ‘safe’ ideological walls around the church were discussed with reference to the use of language in services and the usual hot potato topics of the role and dress code of women. A church community life that is open to the Holy Spirit was contrasted with certain traditions (small ‘t’) that can readily turn young people off.

Here are the questions that I was left to ponder: Do I look forward to returning to my church family? Is my community a place of belonging? Is joy reflected on my face when I am in my true home?

Our time together comprised just under a week of talks, workshops, Bible studies and mountain walks, all interspersed by prayer and climaxing in the Liturgy. In addition there was much merriment in music, dancing and drama (see <http://www.dailymotion.com/chkamette/video/11866512>). In short, a wide variety of activities to rejuvenate the whole Orthodox person: body, mind and soul. The diversity of people’s experiences added a richness to our dialogue which I had not experienced before. There was a spirit of honesty and a genuine desire to learn from one another. This Syndesmos event served as a tool to inspire young people to take their roles in their local churches more seriously. We were challenged: Do I see the church as my home? Am I motivated to play my part in it?

This event also allowed for the opportunity to visit the impressive town of Pont en Royans with its Athonite style buildings overhanging the river. Later on the same day-trip we had the privilege of a guided tour of the beautiful icon workshop called Atelier St Jean Damascène by Father Nicolas Garrigou (<http://www.atelierdamascene.fr>). In the afternoon we were received by Father Placide Deseille, Abbot of the monastery of St. Anthony at Saint-Laurent-en-Royans. This surprising and dramatic monastery was set deep within another gorge of overhanging rocks. An unexpected place, particularly for its authentic Byzantine chanting which washed over me during Vespers: a fitting and prayerful end to the week.

If you have ever wondered what a Syndesmos event is, I hope this will inspire you to visit the website (<http://www.syndesmos.org/>). I was not disappointed. My experience is that it has extended my global perspective on what it means to be an Orthodox Christian. This small group of 20 friends allowed me to participate in Christian community life, which has deepened my faith. I hope that I will be able to take some of the joy I received back to my place of belonging. Take up the challenge – there is everything to be gained.