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Bulgarian Catechetics

Orthodox catechetics is a difficult question today as all the five large Orthodox Churches – apart from the Greek Orthodox Church – are living in Communist countries. I have examined the problem of Orthodox catechetics in the Soviet Union, Rumania and Bulgaria. Religious instruction is prohibited in all schools in these three countries.

In the Soviet Union the Church by the decree of February 5, 1918, was separated from the State and the schools from the Church: 'Religious teaching is prohibited in all State, public or private educational establishments where a general education is given.' Article 27 of the new Constitution of the People's Republic of Rumania states: 'No congregation or religious creed may open or maintain general teaching institutions, but only special schools for the preparation and training of religious staffs.' In Bulgaria the Constitution of December 1947 contains a similar statement.

The catechizing of the believers of all ages inside the church buildings is, however, allowed. When I visited the Russian Church (for the first time) in 1952 I received information on catechetical sermons especially at the evening services on Sundays, but I have never listened to such a catechizing. At the Leningrad Theological Academy I found no text-book of Catechetics. And I am almost sure that such a text-book is not to be found at the Moscow Theological Academy (in Zagorsk).

In Rumania I have read the text-book of Catechetics, *Curs de Catehetica*, which was typewritten in 1954 and contains 369 pages. Here it is stated that the Rumanian priest – according to 'the programme of the Holy Synod for the catechizing of the believers of our Church' of October 5th, 1950 – 'at the holy liturgy shall make a catechetical speech, containing themes from the catechism or connected with a hymn which shall be taught, or shall read parts from the catechism, making a short commentary'. It is for 'believers of both sexes and of all ages'. I do not know to what extent this programme has been followed. Neither in the Soviet Union nor in Rumania such catechetical speeches have been published.

In Bulgaria no text-book of Catechetics has been published, but I found three volumes of the Orthodox catechism, *Our Faith* (1950, 316 pages), *Our Hope* (1957, 209 pages) and *Our Love* (1958, 243

pages). All three books are written not for theologians but for ordinary church members. The typical Orthodox catechism is just divided into these three parts: faith, hope and charity. Our Faith is an explanation (pages 179–245) of the twelve articles of the Nicene Creed. This section is written as short explanations of each article. In addition the volume includes (1) the history of the Old and the New Testaments (pages 5–176) with illustrations by Doré and (2) a very popular explanation of the Orthodox liturgy and the other services (pages 248–278). Our Hope and Our Love are lectures delivered in churches at the ‘vecernie’ (evensong). I have often listened to such lectures, usually delivered in the churches by the professors of the Theological Academy in Sofia or by archimandrites. The ‘vecernie’ is shortened and followed by a lecture of 30 minutes. Almost only old people who are generally not at present educating the children attend the lectures. The lectures are very well announced by printed posters outside on the church walls, they are delivered once a week in several churches in Sofia on different days of the week. After 1959/60 when the new Soviet anti-religious drive started no catechetical books have been published by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. When I visited Bulgaria in the autumn of 1966 I heard, however, the rumour that a second edition of Our Faith might be published. All these three books are now out of print as they were almost at once bought by the believers.

The author of the books Our Hope and Our Love and of the catechetical part of Our Faith is the Archimandrite Seraphim who before the war studied about four years at the Old Catholic theological school in Berne and was a member of the Pan Orthodox Theological Conference in Belgrade in September 1966, he was a Bulgarian representative in the Orthodox section for negotiations with the Old Catholics. Formerly he was head of the cultural department of the Holy Synod in Sofia, about 1964 he became a lecturer in Dogmatics at the Theological Academy of Sofia. He is highly estimated by the believers for his great Orthodox piety.

The last edition of the Bulgarian Orthodox catechism is from 1930. It closely follows Metropolitan Philaret’s Russian catechism, but does not use its form with questions and answers. Philaret’s text has here often been supplemented with additions and explanations. The Archimandrite Seraphim uses of course in Our Faith the last Bulgarian edition and his work is therefore in a very popular form closely following the definitions of the Russian catechism. It is a

short examination of the whole of dogmatics with a great number of popular illustrations from the lives of the saints and from everyday life. This work is most interesting, not so much on account of the details, but more because such a work has been published for the common believers and not especially for the theologians.

I shall, nevertheless, mention some explanations in detail. With reason only it is not possible to understand the truths of faith, faith is founded on trust in our Saviour. The sources of divine revelation are Holy Scripture, Tradition, nature and human conscience. I shall only mention a single illustration: A rich man had only one son, but he gathered all orphans in his home in order to bring them up. He called them 'my children' and even made them heirs of his riches. He did not, however, abolish the difference between his own son and the adopted orphans. His son was his child according to nature, blood and birth, but the orphans were his children according to mercy, condescension and adoption.

'Christ is the Son of God and the son of the Virgin, begotten in heaven of the Father without a mother and born on earth of a Mother without a father' (page 191). The whole teaching of our Lord can be reduced to that: how sinners with God's help can be cleansed of their sins, reach holiness and come near to God. 'The God-man redeemed us from sin, curse and death, i.e. he paid the debt instead of us and reconciled us to his heavenly Father' (page 195). His redeeming sacrifice is not only an act of justice but also the work of God's boundless love to men. The most powerful proof of the real redeeming character of Christ's sufferings and death is his resurrection. Christ ascended into heaven with our human body, therefore we must take care of our body so that we do not sully it with our sins and can rise with our bodies when Christ shall come again. Christ sits on the right hand of the Father; this is meant spiritually, for God is spirit and omnipresent, and the right hand means the place of honour. Sinners who do not repent would not be able to rejoice in heaven, therefore true Christians shall strive through repentance to cleanse themselves from their sins — in time.

Spiritual life is inconceivable without the grace of the Holy Ghost. We cannot go on the way which leads to salvation without the help of the Holy Ghost. Why do we today not feel the grace of the Holy Ghost in ourselves as the saints formerly felt it? Because we are sinners and love more with the flesh than with the spirit. If we are cleansed completely from our sins we too shall begin to feel the Holy

Ghost in ourselves. 'The Orthodox Christians must remember that they are members of one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church and that they cannot lead a right spiritual life outside it and will perish. Outside the Orthodox Church there is no salvation' (page 218). The unity of the Church in Heaven and the Church on Earth is especially felt during the divine liturgy when the priest celebrating the 'proskomidija' mentions from the Church in Heaven the Mother of God, all the saints and all the deceased Christians and from the Church on Earth the names of the living. The Orthodox Church believes in the wonderworking power of the prayers of the saints (James 5: 16), of objects belonging to them (Acts 19: 12), and of the relics. Sinners who are cleansed by true repentance do not prevent the holiness of the Church. Sinners who do not repent fall as dead members away from the one body of the Church. Without God's grace which works in the Orthodox Church nobody can be saved.

Baptism gives birth for a new life and the Anointing with Chrism gives the power of grace which serves us in the growth of the spiritual life and the strengthening of the good. The Eucharist in itself cannot save us in a magic way, without any effort from our side. If we sin and do not repent our sins the Eucharist will mean damnation to us. Therefore it is necessary to confess our sins before the Eucharist. There are sins which can be forgiven after death. 'Prayers, alms and memorial services celebrated in honour of the deceased can propitiate God and cover a multitude of sins. Especially the liturgy for the deceased is giving help' (page 240).

This section ends with the following thoughts: The past and the future do not belong to us but only the present which we have now. We do not know when we shall die. Therefore we must be ready to die every hour and every minute if we wish to be saved. The Christian must live in continuous repentance, in the works of faith and in piety.

The books *Our Hope* and *Our Love* consist of real lectures delivered in churches. These volumes also contain a great number of illustrations from the lives of the saints and many quotations from the church fathers. Each lecture begins with the word: Beloved (brethren). The volume *Our Hope* does not treat of the first section of the second part of the Orthodox catechism: the Lord's Prayer, but only of the second section: the Beatitudes (Matt. 5: 3-11). Man has been created for blessedness. This blessedness man will reach by keeping God's commandments.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. These are the humble ones. The poor man has nothing and expects all from others as alms. Without any other virtue than a true humility man can be saved. Without humility but with many other virtues man cannot be saved. The publican had no other virtue than humility. The Pharisee had many virtues, but he was not humble. The other virtues are not without importance but they obtain worth only by humility. Fasting in itself cannot save as it makes man proud, man must cover his fasting with humility. Humility is not a passive powerlessness but the most active spiritual work, humility does not kill the longing for spiritual progress.

Blessed are they that mourn. There are tears which show human despair, sorrow and weakness and grumbling against God and there are tears which God loves and appreciates, they are the tears of repentance. The godly sorrow liberates man from eternal sorrow. Joking and amusements prevent the weeping according to the will of God. Meditations over Christ's sufferings help man to return to God. Fame and riches do not help man when he has sold his soul to the devil.

Blessed are the meek. Meekness is not a sign of a weak character but of a great hidden courage which can bear the most severe offence without wrath. During the first centuries the heathen recognized the Christians by their meekness. All the saints were very meek. Proud men who love themselves and appreciate their personality very highly cannot be humble when they see that not all pay due attention to them. Angry people hurt both themselves and others as through their anger they sin against their own soul and inflict deep wounds on others. There is, however, a useful anger against our own weakness and our own anger and against the devil.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness. Righteousness is the fulfilling of God's commandments. Man can hunger and be thirsting for righteousness but he cannot satisfy this hunger. Without the help of God he cannot obtain justification before God. He can try to free himself from his sins but he cannot redeem them without the help of the Redeemer. Jesus Christ is our justification but we must hunger and thirst in order to be in union with him, to believe in him and to fulfil his commandments. Then this quotation follows: 'Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus' (Romans 3: 24). This justification through faith demands from us that we repent our sins, fulfil

God's commandments and show our faith by our works (James 2: 18). The incarnate righteousness is Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1: 30). With the effort of our will we shall walk on the way of virtue and live a righteous life in order to become an habitation of God. Living people are dead when they have hardened their hearts to God. Young people are educated by their parents in piety but they get bad friends, cease to pray and to attend the services and are ashamed of religious convictions. When people harden their hearts the memorial services cannot help the deceased. Men must read Holy Scripture, the church fathers, the lives of the saints, attend services, listen to sermons and lectures and pray and fast at home – for the sake of their spiritual revival.

Blessed are the merciful. Works of mercy may concern both the body – and the spirit of our neighbour: i.e. to convert a sinner from his bad way, to teach him to pray and to know the Scripture and the dogmas, to pray for the living and for the dead and to forgive personal offences. Our mercy must include both worthy and unworthy persons. Merciless people forget their own sins and condemn the sins of their neighbours. Through our works of mercy we receive forgiveness of our sins but the condition is that we do not repeat them.

Blessed are the pure in heart. This purity is the condition of seeing God and of blessedness. It is impossible for man to reach this purity by his own efforts but it is possible with God's help. The saints strove to reach and reached the purity of heart. The saints may sin and sinners may improve.

Blessed are the peacemakers. When man has no peace in himself he cannot live in peace with his neighbour. Humility is the foundation of peaceful relations between men. In some cases conflicts are better than peace on false foundation; Christ said: 'Think not that I am come to send peace on earth, I came not to send peace, but a sword.' A peace which is not founded on God's law and on the demands of conscience is no real peace, but conditioned by temporary interests. Common people are not peacemakers, they love quarrels. Our enemies help us to save our souls as tolerance towards enemies helps us more to be saved than our other good works.

Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. We do not wish reward from this world but must expect sorrows and persecutions from unjust people. Hypocrites wish to be honoured by men for their piety, they want to please men and not God. There exists, however, a sincere kindness which pleases God. It differs from flattery.

Blessed are you, when men shall ... persecute you. When a Christian died for his faith many others became Christians. Science, philosophy and politics have their martyrs but they die proudly conscious that they are heroes. Christian martyrs die in humility conscious that they are nothing in themselves and that God has shown his mercy to them calling them to seal their faith and their love of God with their blood. The unbelieving martyrs die without hope. A Christian martyr never believed in his own strength. Their love of Jesus Christ was their secret power. Our greatest obligation is to keep our faith. Today there are hardly any martyrs for the sake of Christ. The civilized world has guaranteed freedom of conscience and religion. It demands, however, much courage to confess Christ as Saviour in a society which denies him. «Is it not martyrdom to risk worldly interests for the sake of the devotion to Jesus and his Church?» (page 196). The fear of men makes man miserable, the fear of God makes him a fearless hero. The fear of men can only be a just good fear if it is subordinate to the fear of God and derives from this fear.

The volume *Our Love* treats of the Ten Commandments. The sinner does not love God, the love of sins is incompatible with the love of holiness. The essence of Christianity is love. If we fulfil God's commandments we love God and without loving God we cannot fulfil them. Some believers think they can love their neighbours without loving God, but they do not understand the gravity of sin and the necessity of Christ's work. The Ten Commandments are concerned with the love of God and of our neighbours.

The first commandment, dealing with God's revelation through the Bible, had significance for several scientists and writers including Newton and Goethe. Man comprehends God through nature, through the Bible and still more through a holy life. The believers must regularly attend the services and give their children religious instruction and a good example. Man worships God by faith in God, life in God, hope in God and love of God. The faith is not blind but child-like, such a faith is in most cases to be found in the common man, in some cases also among highly educated people. The highest object of our hope is the salvation of our soul. Among the sins against the first commandment are heresy (among others Roman Catholicism and Protestantism), witchcraft, spiritism and superstition. Today many Orthodox Christians do not think much of Orthodoxy and some of them appreciate all confessions at the same level.

The second commandment (thou shalt not make any graven image) does not prohibit the veneration of the saints and icons. Venerating the saints we do not 'darken' the honour of God and asking for the intercession of the saints we do not dishonour the only intercessor Jesus Christ, as the Protestants maintain. Christ differs from the saints, he is intercessor according to his nature, they according to God's grace. God is the ruler, the saints are his ministers. The intercession of the Mother of God is especially important. Christ is the model of all perfection, the saints help us to strive for this perfection. Protestants assert that in venerating the icons we worship idols. But idols are portraits of gods who do not exist whereas icons represent saints who have existed or biblical events. We do not venerate the icon in itself, but God and the saints which they represent. The icons are the word of God, not in a written but in a figurative form. Avarice is directed towards modern idols.

Thou shalt not take the name of God in vain. This is done when you repeat mechanically: God, have mercy upon us, God, have mercy upon us – and do not at all think of God.

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. On Sundays our first obligation is to attend the liturgy with the unbloody sacrifice for our sin and the great miracle of the transubstantiation of the holy gifts. The ancient Christians were very zealous to visit the churches, 'now our churches are often almost empty even on Sundays' (page 101). Jesus Christ kept the Saturday because he had not yet accomplished his work of redemption by which he brought all the ceremonies of the Old Testament to an end. The Sunday is the feast of the resurrection and was kept by the ancient Church, it was not introduced by Constantine the Great or by the Roman pope as the Adventists maintain.

Honour thy father and thy mother. Some sons and daughters leave the villages and move to the towns, then they will often disown their parents and be ashamed of their low origin. Children shall not disown their parents when they become decrepit. As the soul is more valuable than the body the parents shall take more care of the forming of the children's Christian character than of their worldly requirements. Baptism does not help those Christians who do not live after God's law, they are as heathen before God. There is a short section (pages 146–149) on the religious education at home: children shall learn to fear God in order not to become tyrannical and proud egoists.

The sixth commandment deals also with 'suicide which is caused not by social conditions, but by the absence of belief in God' (page 161). There are 'pious suicides' who by prayer only wish to seek God's help and not the doctor's help. In this way they tempt God. Parents may by their life give offence to their children and by this commit spiritual murder. The authors may do the same.

The seventh commandment deals with fornication «which God had punished more terribly than any other sin» (the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, page 184). The marriage is a sacrament by which men receive the grace so that their family life can be a house church where God dwells, where the human souls are saved and the children educated in God's commandments. The explanation of this and the following commandments is a popular form of ethics.

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