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VIII. Saint Ignaty and Daniel Clendenin

By way of closing out our study we deemed it beneficial to examine two pieces of writing that deal especially with the eternal ramifications of Orthodox ecclesiology—one recent and one from the past century. We will begin with the latter.

Saint Ignaty's Letter to an Orthodox Layman

At least one Saint of recent times, Bishop Ignaty (Brianchaninov)—a man of no little intelligence and Patristic insight, as well as considerable experience in confronting the heterodoxy of his day—appears to have argued forcefully for the impossibility of salvation for the heterodox.¹⁰⁵ For many people, Saint Ignaty's views are a good example of what might loosely be called a "rigorist" view. Nonetheless, careful reflection upon his words indicate that they provide only superficial support for such a claim.

When considering his letter we must first keep the historical circumstances in mind. As the introductory note to the version in *The Orthodox Word* points out, Saint Ignaty lived during a time when the Russian intelligentsia "had departed so far from Christian truth as to be incapable of distinguishing it from error and heresy." That being the case, it is entirely understandable that Saint Ignaty would write with such bluntness and urgency. His letter indicates that there was much confusion in his day, confusion that was clearly visible in the letter from the layman that evoked this response:

I will answer the question you have raised point by point, in as few words as possible. "Why," you write, "cannot pagans, Moslems, and so-called heretics be saved? There are excellent people among them. To condemn these good people would be contrary to the Divine mercy! . . . Indeed, it is even contrary to sound human reason.—Heretics, after all, are Christians just the same. To consider oneself saved, and the members of other faiths damned, is both foolish and extremely proud!"¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ "Christians! You Must Know Christ!," *The Orthodox Word*, Vol. I, 66-72. Another version of the letter was published in *Orthodox Life*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (January 1991) entitled "Concerning the Impossibility of Salvation for the Heterodox and Heretics." The title is not part of the original letter. As our remarks concerning this letter will indicate, the latter title implies certain conclusions by Saint Ignaty that are not borne out by a careful reading of the text.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

Saint Ignaty proceeds to rebuke him and all those who are like-minded for their failure to understand even the basic Christian truths regarding salvation.

His letter can be divided into two parts. The first half addresses the error held widely at the time, that those who consciously deny Christ, yet do “good works,” can be saved. He writes:

Christians! You must know Christ! You must realize that you do not know Him if you acknowledge salvation possible without Him for any kind of good works! He who acknowledges salvation to be possible without Christ denies Christ, and, perhaps without knowing it, falls into the grave sin of blasphemy.¹⁰⁷

Communion with God the Father is through Christ alone.¹⁰⁸ Saint Ignaty was rightly alarmed at the fact that many Orthodox Christians in his day did not understand this most basic teaching. The purpose of the first half of his response is thus clearly to instruct his inquirer, an Orthodox layman, in sound doctrine as well as to warn him not to become infected with the *bacterium* of wrong belief that was so prevalent. It is one thing for a person who has never been presented with the opportunity to enter into the Orthodox Faith to remain outside—we have shown that there is ample warrant for hope in this case; but it is quite another thing when those who have been illumined in Holy Baptism and have tasted the fullness of Christianity, to continue in sin or fall away from right belief. As the Orthodox *Catechism* of Metropolitan Peter (Moghila) states:

Question #63. How must one consider those who die in the wrath of God?

Answer. One must consider them in the same fashion, that some will suffer less punishment and some greater after the last judgment, as it is said: “And that servant who knew the will of his lord, and prepared not himself, and did not according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes; but he that knew not, and did things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes.” (Luke 12:47-48)¹⁰⁹

Metropolitan Philaret underscores this truth by quoting from a letter from Saint Theophan the Recluse:

With reference to the above question, it is particularly instructive to recall the answer once given to an “inquirer” by the Blessed Theophan the Recluse. The blessed one replied more or less thus: “You ask, will the heterodox be saved. . . . Why do you worry about them? They have a Saviour Who desires the salvation of every human being. He will take care of them. You and I should not be burdened with such a concern. Study

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁰⁸ “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me” (St. John 14:16).

¹⁰⁹ Cf. St. Luke 12:48; 2 Peter 2:20-22; Heb. 6:4-6.

yourself and your own sins. . . . I will tell you one thing, however: should you, being Orthodox and possessing the Truth in its fullness, betray Orthodoxy, and enter a different faith, you will lose your soul forever.” We believe the foregoing answer by the saintly ascetic to be the best that can be given in this matter.¹¹⁰

Parenthetically we should note that Saint Theophan gives some very wise admonitions to prevent a person from engaging in unnecessary speculation about and preoccupation with the eternal destiny of those outside the Church. It is enough to be concerned about one’s own soul and, hearkening to the words of Saint Seraphim of Sarov,¹¹¹ in this quiet witness and struggle to acquire the Holy Spirit to ever greater measures. Perhaps many will be saved as a result.

As the theme of the first half of the letter is not the focus of our discussion, however, we will proceed straightway to the second half of his letter, which begins with the following series of statements:

You say, “heretics are Christians just the same.” Where did you take that from? Perhaps someone or other, calling himself a Christian but knowing nothing of Christ, may in his extreme ignorance decide to acknowledge himself as the same kind of Christian as heretics, and fail to distinguish the holy Christian faith from those offspring of the curse, blasphemous heresies. Quite otherwise, however, due true [Orthodox] Christians reason about this.¹¹²

Careful examination of the remainder of his letter indicates that Saint Ignaty had only one kind of heretic in mind, what Roman Catholics would call “formal heretics” (see Chapter Four). He does not seem to have in mind people who are heretics in a material, unconscious sense. We would be remiss in our presentation if we did not at this time remind the reader that the convenient division of heretics into “formal” and “material” does not fall out along neatly definable lines. Nor are these lines easily discernible in any given person. With this in mind we cannot find any fault with these remarks made near the end of his letter:

The more modern heresies above all strive to reject the action of the Holy Spirit: with terrible blasphemies they have rejected the Divine Liturgy, all the sacraments, everything, everything in which the Ecumenical Church has always acknowledged the action of the Holy Spirit. They call all this human ordinances—even bolder: superstition, error!¹¹³

¹¹⁰ “Will the Heterodox Be Saved?”

¹¹¹ “Acquire the spirit of peace and thousands around you will be saved.”

¹¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 70.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

Whether any given heterodox Christian is found guilty of such infractions at the Particular and Final Judgment,¹¹⁴ such that he or she is ultimately cast into Hell, is known only to God. Saint Ignaty is speaking here about those persons known by God to be conscious, willful blasphemers of the Holy Spirit. It would be imprudent to apply his words to all heterodox Christians, as some have done in the past. Once again we present the wise words of Metropolitan Philaret:

The question: Can the heterodox, *i.e.* those who do, not belong to Orthodoxy—the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church—be saved, has become particularly painful and acute in our days.

In attempting to answer this question, it is necessary, first of all, to recall that in His Gospel the Lord Jesus Christ Himself mentions but one state of the human soul which unflinching leads to perdition—*i.e.* blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:1-32). The Holy Spirit is, above all, the Spirit of Truth, as the Saviour loved to refer to Him. Accordingly, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is blasphemy against the Truth, *conscious and persistent opposition to it*. The same text makes it clear that even blasphemy against the Son of Man—*i.e.* the Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God Himself —may be forgiven men, as it may be uttered in error or in ignorance and, subsequently may be covered by conversion and repentance (an example of such a converted and repentant blasphemer is the Apostle Paul. (See Acts 26:11 and I Tim. 1:13.)....

The Holy Orthodox Church is the repository of the divinely revealed Truth in all its fullness and fidelity to apostolic Tradition. Hence, he who leaves the Church, who intentionally and consciously falls away from it, joins the ranks of its opponents and becomes a renegade as regards apostolic Tradition. The Church dreadfully anathematized such renegades, in accordance with the words of the Saviour Himself (Matt. 18:17) and of the Apostle Paul (Gal. 1:8-9), threatening them with eternal damnation and calling them to return to the Orthodox fold. It is self-evident, however, that sincere Christians who are Roman Catholics, or Lutherans, or members, of other non-Orthodox confessions, *cannot be termed renegades or heretics—i.e. those who knowingly pervert the truth.*¹¹⁵

Therefore, the following closing statements by Saint Ignaty should not be applied to every heterodox Christian, as some are inclined to do, but rather to *Orthodox* Christians who are so ignorant of their own Faith that they stand to lose their soul if they become infected with the *bacterium* of false doctrine:

Do not think that such ignorance [of true Christianity] is a defect of small importance. It is not! Its consequences can be fatal, especially now when any number of books with a satanic teaching are circulating under a Christian title. In ignorance of true Christian teaching, just like that you can take a false, blasphemous idea for a true one, appropriate it for yourself, and together with it appropriate eternal damnation as well. The

¹¹⁴ On this distinction see the numerous articles on the “Death and the Future Life” page (OCIC).

¹¹⁵ “Will the Heterodox Be Saved?” emphases ours.

blasphemer will not be saved! And the perplexities you have expressed in your letter are already terrible omens regarding your salvation; their essence is rejection of Christ! Do not play with your salvation! Do not play with it, or you will weep forever.¹¹⁶

The life-and-death urgency of his words echo those of Saint Paisius to the Uniate priest and those of many other Holy Fathers.¹¹⁷ They indicate that Saint Ignaty's primary concern was the spiritual protection of his flock. We see here an attitude that strikes modern sensibilities as rather extreme—so steeped as they are in casual indifference regarding truth. But it should be a warning to us that right belief is no trifling matter.

Firm conclusions as to how Saint Ignaty would view the heterodox of, say, America—a largely Baptist culture where Orthodoxy still has yet to make extensive inroads—are difficult to draw from a single pastoral letter. What one *can* say is that to align oneself with error is to put one's soul in grave danger. For those who were once illumined and then reject the fullness of Christianity—Orthodoxy—, one can be quite certain of their eternal destiny.

Daniel Clendenin's Remarks

Mr. Clendenin is the author of numerous sympathetic books and articles on Orthodoxy from a Protestant perspective. However, his commendable knowledge of the Orthodox faith has apparently not given him sufficient understanding of our ecclesiology. Given the reasons for the widespread confusion over this subject, this is understandable. Here we will examine some of his relevant remarks in the January 6, 1997 issue of *Christianity Today*. The article, which has apparently received wide circulation among Evangelical Protestants, is entitled "Why I'm Not Orthodox."

But whether a non-Orthodox person can even be saved is an open question in Orthodox ecclesiology. Over coffee one day I asked an Orthodox priest whether I, as a Protestant theologian, might be considered a true Christian. His response: "I don't know."

Clendenin misunderstands this Priest's response. One might first observe that the Priest did not say, "No," but rather "I don't know." (This is undoubtedly also a very condensed version of what was said. It is quite reasonable to think that the Priest said more in his reply than this.) He confuses the situation by saying "It's an open question whether a non-Orthodox person can even be saved," putting the issue of eternal destiny

¹¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 72. That these words could also be applied to *true* heterodox blasphemers goes without saying. But again, it is not for *us* to judge who these people are.

¹¹⁷ For example, St. John of Damascus writes: "Truth must be preferred to absolutely anything else, even life itself. It is desired for living with it, and preferable to die for it than to live without it." Cited in Constantine N. Tsirpanlis, *Introduction to Eastern Patristic Thought and Orthodox Theology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 95.

in the same context with the confusing phrase “true Christian.” When reading the Priest’s response one should keep in mind how an Orthodox Christian who knows his Faith would be thinking.

The use of the term “true Christian.” The Priest could not know whether Clendenin was indeed a “true Christian.” Though Orthodox Christians certainly acknowledge the Scriptural distinction between the “wheat and the tares” (Saint Matt. 13:25), who falls into what category is known only to God. Furthermore, which category a person ends up in is ultimately a function of his free will, as previously illustrated by Saint John Chrysostom’s commentary on Saint John 1:9. Orthodoxy does not accept an Augustinian concept of predestination or election. If Clendenin had used the word “Christian” (without the modifier “true”) then it is a fair assumption that this Priest would have responded with either “yes” or “no,” depending on whether he was using the term according to *akribeia* or *oikonomia*.

With respect to Clendenin’s ultimate destiny. Again, the Priest had to say “I don’t know,” the same thing that he would say about anyone, Orthodox or not, including himself. Orthodox Christians never use the phrase “I’m saved” as many Protestants do. Rather, when a “born-again Christian” asks an Orthodox “Are you saved?,” a typical response is “I trust that I am on the right path, but know that I must persevere to the end” (Saint Matt. 10:22; 24:13). To put this in perspective, consider these humble words of Saint Paisius (Velichkovsky) in a letter to the Priest Demetrius in May of 1766:

Concerning myself, I may say that, finding myself by God’s mercies still in this life, even if in bodily infirmity, I have ceaseless grief and pain of soul at the thought of with what face I shall appear before the Terrible Judge at His Terrible Judgment, where there is no respect of persons... I have undoubting hope for my salvation only, after God and the Mother of God, in the prayers of the brethren who live with me, even if I am unworthy. And I do not despair that the unutterable and unattainable mercy of God will be poured out even on my sinful soul; but if not, and if for my evil deeds I shall be rightly condemned by God’s justice to eternal torment, then blessed be God: for I am worthy of this for my negligence of His Divine Commandments...; but still, for the sake of their holy prayers, I the wretched one hope also to be saved: for which I entreat your holiness to entreat God for me, remaining in all humility your true friend, desiring your salvation.¹¹⁸

The Protestant emphasis on “assurance of salvation” is something that appears presumptuous to most Orthodox. One can be assured that Christ objectively secured salvation for all of mankind; but this salvation must be personally appropriated by each and every person. Thus, *personally* one should have no warrant for such “assurance,” as a Christian must persevere until the end, being ever watchful. Saint Paul did not rest in

¹¹⁸ Schema-monk Metrophanes, trans. Father Seraphim (Rose), *Blessed Paisius Velichkovsky* (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Press, 1994 [1976]), pp. 151-152.

some sort of “assurance,” and neither should anyone else (1 Cor. 9:27). To some, this will be merely an issue of semantics; but for many Protestants, especially those who set Grace and works in opposition to one another, this clarification is very important. “Let us imitate Abba Sisoës. When asked ‘Are you saved?’, the humble person can easily answer: ‘I do not know whether I have even begun to repent.’”¹¹⁹

The requirement of true repentance for salvation is a concept worth underscoring for our Protestant readers. While it is true that “Christianity” is inseparable from the Church, and *vice versa*,¹²⁰ it does not follow that membership in the Church guarantees that one will inherit the Kingdom of God. Indeed, it makes it more likely that there will be a greater penalty on the Day of Judgment for those who did not live up to, or “actualize,” all that they had been given. “For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required...” (Saint Luke 12:48).¹²¹ Membership in the Orthodox Church and a regular partaking of Her Mysteries do not “magically” confer salvation.

Participation in the sacraments must be combined with the practice of the ascetic life of the Church. Otherwise, the grace transmitted through the sacraments does not contribute to one’s salvation or cure but rather to one’s punishment. . . . Baptism and the other sacraments will not deliver [Christians] from eternal damnation, if they live without repenting and do not observe the divine commandments.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Bishop Kallistos Ware, *How Are We Saved?: The Understanding of Salvation in the Orthodox Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing, 1996), p. 88.

¹²⁰ *Christianity or the Church?*.

¹²¹ The sin of a Christian offends God incomparably more, since the Christian has received a clearer and fuller knowledge of the commandments, and has received grace to strengthen him in the fulfillment of these commandments. And a Christian, who has received in himself Christ the Lord—which is the highest degree of Christian perfection—in sinning offends God immeasurably. (“Is it Sufficient to Believe in Christ in Order to Be Saved?,” compiled from the works of St. Theophan the Recluse, *Orthodox Life*, Vol. 37, No. 5, 14).

¹²² [Metropolitan] Hierotheos Vlachos, *Orthodox Spirituality: An Introduction* (Levadia, Greece: Birth of the Theotokos Monastery, 1994), p. 71.