



039. April 21/May 4, 1970. Monday of St. Thomas Week

Categories : [Letters](#)

Date : May 3, 2016

Beloved in Christ, Catechumens Craig and Susan [Young],

Christ is Risen! We were glad to hear of your joyous Pascha as well as to receive such a frank and open letter from you. To set your minds at ease at once, I (and Gleb as well) see no great obstacle on your path to Orthodoxy from anything you wrote. Often the devil uses the most petty tricks — misunderstandings, etc. — to weaken our resolve especially over such a God-pleasing action as you are about to take. A brief explanation is generally enough to clarify the matter and dissolve the misunderstanding. I note also that, like some other new converts and those approaching Orthodoxy, you have experienced some particularly striking spiritual feelings. But these also — although without doubt they are given you by God's grace — you should be somewhat cautious about. They should be considered rather like honey spread around the edge of a cup by which God attracts you to the strong drink of Holy Orthodoxy; but they have no particular significance in themselves, they should by no means be sought or asked for, and later when you have passed from the milk of your first "baby days" in Orthodoxy to the meat of a more solid foundation and experience in the Church, you will find that the Orthodox spiritual life is nourished in other and deeper ways.

I will try to give you whatever advice I can. You will find that in many practical questions involved in leading an Orthodox Christian life, various answers may be given depending on the person and the circumstances. Here also you may find that certain things which you might allow yourself now, you will later find objectionable when you have a more mature experience in Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is very strict concerning doctrine and religious practice; more than this, if one enters into it deeply one will find that it gradually transforms one's whole life so that one has an Orthodox way of approaching some things that might seem outside the religious sphere altogether; but in its approach it is never "authoritarian" or "legalistic" and you will not find in it such a thing as a "holy day of obligation" (for one comes to church not out of obligation but out of love and devotion) nor an "index of forbidden books" (although there is a definite idea of what kind of books Orthodox Christians should be reading.)

Concerning what an Orthodox Christian should or should not read: A spiritual father has the right and duty to advise his spiritual children about any kind of reading they should particularly avoid — this in general applies to those who are immature or not widely read and who might really be harmed by reading something which they were not prepared to digest or understand in the right way. (See for example our latest Orthodox Word, p. 30, where Father Herman says that "a person who may not know the truth solidly should by all means avoid" books like Saint-Simon's.) With your background, you clearly have the experience and judgement to determine your own reading.



As you grow in Orthodoxy, you will doubtless find some changes in the kind of things you read, but that is a matter for you to judge — with the occasional word of advice, perhaps, of those more confirmed in the faith. At the outset I would note only two things: (1) Whatever else you read, there should be regular reading in basic Orthodox sources — Holy Scripture, Lives of Saints, spiritual reading (writings of St. John of Kronstadt, Pilgrim, Philokalia, etc.) — which should be emphasized especially in Great Lent, when movies, worldly music, parties, TV, and frivolous readings and activities of all kinds should be avoided as far as possible. (2) One should avoid by all means eclecticism — putting Catholic saints, Buddhas, or whatever in one's icon corner, or reading Hindu, Buddhist, Catholic or other "spiritual" writings on the same level as Orthodox spiritual writings. To read enough about Hinduism to be informed about it is, of course, another thing. There are two new converts to Orthodoxy in the San Francisco area who come from Hinduism and can tell hair-raising things about its satanism; for it is indeed true, as the Fathers say, that "the gods of pagans are demons."

Which brings us to the question of Kwan-Yin, Buddhist temples, etc. I myself had enough experience in Buddhism and its temples never to want to get near them again, and I threw out the Buddhist idol in front of which I once prayed. But here again your developing Orthodox conscience will have to be your guide. I myself was never interested in Kwan-Yin and don't even recall if there is much religious devotion attached to this image; if your statue had ever been in a temple or used for devotion I would be very nervous about having it around, but if (as is probably the case) it was made as a work of art, that wouldn't be quite the same thing. Be aware, and judge for yourself. As for Buddhist temples, I should by all means avoid being present in them during any kind of service — to the cosmopolitan tourist, such a service would be only "quaint," but for us there are involved "spiritual" presences which are not of God, and they can act upon us in ways we cannot foresee. As for visiting them when there is no service going on — well, if you do, your attitude should be more aware and cautious than the ordinary tourist's. Frankly, to all questions of idols and temples the Fathers replied with a categorical No! But in our day of cosmopolitan indifference the question, while not basically changed, is presented in a less radical way, and a reasonably mature individual should come to this conclusion for himself. You will find, I think, that many things which you now may regard as neutral or indifferent will seem not quite the same in future.

And now I'd like to mention a few things you didn't ask about, with the hope that you will enter the Orthodox Church with as few "residues" from Roman Catholicism as possible. For there are certain Catholic practices which, whatever secondary benefits they may have, are not in accordance with the Orthodox way of life and could interfere with adjusting oneself to it. You mention "meditation." The Catholic practice of calling up images, memories, etc., of a sacred character is considered by our Fathers as unnecessary and improper. To reflect on one's reading is one thing, as is likewise to say the Prayer of Jesus or any other prayer in silence; but "meditation" as such is quite foreign to Orthodoxy and in fact can be the entrance to a refined path of spiritual deception. You are on the right path when you find yourself substituting the Prayer of Jesus for it — if in fact what you mean by "meditation" is the standard Catholic practice. The principle involved here is that one should not trust one's own thoughts and feelings, but fit oneself



to the standard of the Church.

Again, it is fine to have a prayer room, but from what you say I gather that all or most of the icons in it are to be of the Holy Face — which we call “the image not made with hands.” (By the way, we do not accept the legend of “Veronica’s Veil,” but have a different account of its origin, and there is a special feast dedicated to it on the day after the Dormition, Aug. 16.) A prayer room with this icon in a central place, but with other icons also of our Saviour, His Most Holy Mother, and the saints — would be normal, as is a particular devotion to an icon or saint. But in Catholicism, I believe, there is a special connotation to the word “devotion” — a special concentration on one aspect of our Saviour’s Life, etc. — which is again, foreign to Orthodoxy. We have no special “devotion” to the exposed Sacrament, because for us the Holy Gifts have their proper place in the Liturgy and in the life of the faithful without needing any “special” or “extra” devotion. And of course we do not accept at all such later “devotions” as the Sacred Heart, which seem to us immoderate or out of balance and context with the rest of our Holy Faith.

Again, a minor point — I get the impression that you have a vigil-lamp burning before the image of Archbishop John. While it is an accepted practice to pray privately to [a] saint not yet canonized, it is best to place their image (there can be no official icon before the Church’s canonization) a little to the side of the usual icons, so that the vigil-lamp burns before an icon of our Saviour and those saints whom the Church as a whole has acknowledged as such. The Church, while not interfering with anyone’s private devotion, tries to guard us against placing too great a reliance on our private judgement and feelings.

Well, that is enough for now. We saw Archbishop Anthony on Tuesday, and he approves May 31 (Sunday) as the date of your reception into the Church. By Church “economy” your baptism and confirmation will be accepted and you will be received by confession of faith (as were Vladimir and Sylvia) before the Liturgy on Sunday. This will involve reciting the Creed, probably renouncing the errors of Catholicism in general (there is a specific formula of renouncing each of several heresies in the Hapgood Service Book, but it is generally not followed in full), and confession of sins. No specific godparents are required when one is received into the Church in this manner. If you have not yet contacted or chosen the priest who will perform this ceremony, I would advise you to write to: V. Rev. John Shachnoff, 525 36th Ave., S.F. 94121 (he lives about 10 blocks from the Cathedral), sending him a Xerox copy of your Baptismal and Confirmation Certificates (if the latter are not available, your word will be accepted if you are quite certain you were confirmed; in this case simply give as full information as possible on when, where and by whom you were confirmed) and telling him briefly of the Archbishop’s decision, of our speaking to him and to you, etc. He will then speak to the Archbishop and make all preparations. Fr. John (the “plump” priest with bass voice) probably knows English better than the others and is also Secretary in charge of recording such events. (He will give you certificates later). The last week before May 31 you should spend in special preparation and fasting — which for married couples (which is perhaps not clearly set forth in books) includes abstinence from marital relations, which is true also for all fast days.



We may be going to Fort Ross on May 30 (the Archbishop will attend, and it will be a kind of special pilgrimage to our local American Orthodox holy places before the canonization of the first American Saint) and we may see you there. Meanwhile we hope to hear more from you and will try to answer any questions.

With love in Christ our Saviour,