



298. Nov. 14/27, 1980 Apostle Philip

Categories : [Letters](#)

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(Thanksgiving Day)

Dear Anna, Catechumen,

May the blessing of the Lord be with you!

I was happy to receive your letter—happy not because you are confused about the question that troubles you, but because your attitude reveals that in the truth of Orthodoxy to which you are drawn you wish to find room also for a loving, compassionate attitude to those outside the Orthodox faith.

I firmly believe that this is indeed what Orthodoxy teaches.

I agree with you that the Greeks in our Synod (who are only a small, but a noisy minority in our Church) express themselves sometimes with unnecessary harshness towards the non-Orthodox, and even (in some cases) towards the Orthodox! The article on Father Dimitry Dudko in our latest Orthodox Word is an attempt to give an Orthodox answer to this harsh attitude—especially the section “Is Fr. Dimitry an Ecumenist and a Heretic?”

I will set forth briefly what I believe to be the Orthodox attitude towards non-Orthodox Christians.

1. Orthodoxy is the Church founded by Christ for the salvation of mankind, and therefore we should guard with our life the purity of its teaching and our own faithfulness to it. In the Orthodox Church alone is grace given through the sacraments (most other churches don't even claim [to] have sacraments in any serious sense). The Orthodox Church alone is the Body of Christ, and if salvation is difficult enough within the Orthodox Church, how much more difficult must it be outside the Church!

2. However, it is not for us to define the state of those who are outside the Orthodox Church. If God wishes to grant salvation to some who are Christians in the best way they know, but without ever knowing the Orthodox Church—that is up to Him, not us. But when He does this, it is outside the normal way that He established for salvation—which is in the Church, as a part of the Body of Christ. I myself can accept the experience of Protestants being “born again” in Christ; I have met people who have changed their lives entirely through meeting Christ, and I cannot deny their experience just because they are not Orthodox. I call these people “subjective” or “beginning” Christians. But until they are united to the Orthodox Church they cannot have the fullness of



Christianity, they cannot be objectively Christian as belonging to the Body of Christ and receiving the grace of the sacraments. I think this is why there are so many sects among them—they begin the Christian life with a genuine experience of conversion to Christ, but they cannot continue the Christian life in the right way until they are united to the Orthodox Church, and they therefore substitute their own opinions and subjective experiences for the Church’s teaching and sacraments.

About those Christians who are outside the Orthodox Church, therefore, I would say: they do not yet have the full truth—perhaps it just hasn’t been revealed to them yet, or perhaps it is our fault for not living and teaching the Orthodox Faith in a way they can understand. With such people we cannot be one in the faith, but there is no reason why we should regard them as totally estranged or as equal to pagans (although we should not be hostile to pagans either—they also haven’t yet seen the truth!). It is true that many of the non-Orthodox hymns contain a teaching or at least an emphasis that is wrong—especially the idea that when one is “saved” he does not need to do anything more because Christ has done it all. This idea prevents people from seeing the truth of Orthodoxy which emphasizes the idea of struggling for one’s salvation even after Christ has given it to us, as St. Paul says: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” But almost all of the religious Christmas carols are all right, and they are sung by Orthodox Christians in America (some of them even in the strictest monasteries!).

The word “heretic” (as we say in our article on Father Dimitry Dudko) is indeed used too frequently nowadays. It has a definite meaning and function, to distinguish new teachings from the Orthodox teaching; but few of the non-Orthodox Christians today are consciously “heretics,” and it really does no good to call them that.

In the end, I think, Fr. Dimitry Dudko’s attitude is the correct one: We should view the non-Orthodox as people to whom Orthodoxy has not yet been revealed, as people who are potentially Orthodox (if only we ourselves would give them a better example!). There is no reason why we cannot call them Christians and be on good terms with them, recognize that we have at least our faith in Christ in common, and live in peace especially with our own families. St. Innocent’s attitude to the Roman Catholics in California is a good example for us. A harsh, polemical attitude is called for only when the non-Orthodox are trying to take away our flocks or change our teaching—as the Roman Catholics tried to do in western Russia in past centuries. This explains why some people even today continue this harsh tone.

As for prejudices—these belong to people, not the Church. Orthodoxy does not require you to accept any prejudices or opinions about other races, nations, etc.

As for your future spouse: the Church does allow marriage to non-Orthodox Christians who keep the basic Orthodox teachings (Catholics, Anglicans, etc.); but as a practical question, you should convert him! Otherwise there are inevitably conflicts, even under the best circumstances; but when both parents are Orthodox and the children see their parents agreed on the Faith, it is the best



possible atmosphere for raising good Christian children.

I hope this has answer your questions; if you have any more, or need more explanation of these questions, please write. I think Fr. Dimitry Dudko s book Our Hope sets forth these questions very well, and perhaps even your family and friends would benefit by reading it.

With love in Christ,
Unworthy Hieromonk Seraphim

P.s. Will we be seeing you at our winter Pilgrimage in Redding (Feb. 14-15?).