

## Vladimir Moss: Orthodox Veneration of the Saints

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### TRUE ORTHODOXY AND THE VENERATION OF THE SAINTS

Written by Vladimir Moss

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It is often said that the glorification of saints in Orthodoxy is different from the canonizations of the Roman Catholics in that Orthodoxy makes no claim to “make” saints. It is God, not man, Who sanctifies and glorifies those who have pleased Him. The Church simply recognizes the God-pleasers in an unofficial, unbureaucratic manner, without the official process of Roman Catholic canonization requiring the papal seal on each of several different stages. In support of this thesis, the story is often quoted of St. Symeon the New Theologian’s open veneration of his elder, Symeon the Pious, without any official synodal approval. So the veneration of saints, it is argued, is an elemental, grass-roots phenomenon requiring no official approval on the part of the Church hierarchy.

This is true – up to a point. The holiness of the saints is certainly given them by God, not by man. No “act” of the Church hierarchy confers that holiness upon them. However, everything in the Church, as St. Paul says, must be done “in order”. And there is no part of Church life that is invulnerable to disorder and abuse, and therefore does not require regulation by the shepherds of the

Church at some time or other.

There is one obvious reason why the Church hierarchy must be involved in the veneration of saints - if not in the complex and bureaucratic manner of the Roman Catholics, at any rate in giving a simple “yes” or “no” to their public veneration. There are several criteria or signs of sanctity, but the first and most essential, without which no man can be counted a saint, is Orthodoxy of faith. Whatever other signs of holiness he may have – piety of life, miracles, incorruption of relics – these count for nothing if he died in obdurate heresy or schism. Thus, speaking of false prophets, the Lord said: “Many will say unto Me in that Day: Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name, and cast out demons in Thy name, and done many miracles in Thy name? And then I will say unto them: I never knew you, depart from Me, ye workers of iniquity” (Matthew 7.22-23).

Now if a false prophet begins to be commonly venerated, the Church hierarchy clearly has a duty to step in and point out that this veneration is harmful because its object is alien to God. It is not simply that prayers to this so-called saint will not bring the desired results: they may well bring the undesired – nay, disastrous - result of being lured into the ‘prelest’ or spiritual deception that he suffered from, or into the heretical or schismatic society he belonged to. Hence the need for official glorification or canonization – whatever we like to call it – as a safeguard against deception.

It is vitally important that we should get to know the true saints, imitate their example and pray to them. For, as St. Seraphim of Sarov put it with a touch of humour: we will feel pretty lonely if we come into the Kingdom of heaven and don’t know anybody there... Or, as Alexis Khomyakov put it more ominously: we fall away from salvation alone, but we are saved only together – that is, in full communion with all the saints who have been saved before us. Nor is this communion simply a byproduct of our salvation, as it were. As Khomyakov says, it is like the lifeblood circulating round the body – and when the circulation stops, the body dies.

St. Symeon the New Theologian compares the communion of the saints to a golden chain stretching back down the ages: “Those who have become saints

from one generation to the next through the fulfilment of the commandments take the place of the previous saints and are united to them. They are illumined and become like them through communion with the Grace of God, and they all become a golden chain, each individual being connected with the previous one through, faith, works and love.”<sup>[1]</sup> This golden chain is not simply an image of the state of being saved. It is the engine or mechanism, as it were, of our salvation. For if the purpose of our life is to become holy as God is holy, how can we achieve this end if we do not attach ourselves to the golden chain, to those who have been holy before us and who can drag us into the Kingdom of the holy through their prayers?

The early Church did not canonize her saints in a formal manner. But from the earliest times every Autocephalous Church had lists of bishops, living and reposed, who were recognized by that Church as having died in the True Faith. These lists are known as diptychs, and constitute another way of confessing the faith; for here, instead of confessing the faith by defining it, the Church confesses it by listing those bishops who “rightly divide the word of truth”. By looking at these lists, and seeing which bishops are included in them and which are excluded from them, we can immediately determine what the faith of that Church is.

The question of who is to be excluded in the diptychs becomes especially important in times of dogmatic controversy. Thus during the Arian controversy the Orthodox were those who commemorated St. Athanasius the Great in the diptychs, while the Arians did not. Again, after the death of St. John Chrysostom, the Church of Alexandria refused to place his name in the diptychs because of his opposition to the actions of Patriarch Theophilus. And although Theophilus’ nephew and successor in the see, St. Cyril, was more Orthodox than his uncle, he continued to reject St. John. It was only when the Mother of God appeared to him together with St. John that he recognized his error and restored St. John’s name to the diptychs...

In 1009 the Church of Constantinople dropped the name of Pope Sergius IV from the diptychs, thereby indicating that they did not accept that he was Orthodox (because he included the heretical Filioque in the Creed)... Again, in 1368, only nine years after his death, St. Gregory Palamas was canonized by Patriarch Philotheus of Constantinople, who also wrote his Life and composed

the service in his honour. This canonization marked the final triumph of the Palamite teaching over the Barlaamite heresy in the Greek Orthodox Church, and incidentally showed that the practice of canonization – shorn, of course, of any hint of Roman Catholicism – is by no means alien to the Greek tradition. Even many centuries after the death of a controversial bishop, the question whether he is truly a saint or not can be important. Thus when the Local Orthodox Churches came to an agreement with the Monophysite heretics at Chambésy in 1992, there was general agreement on doctrines, but not on whether the fifth-century Pope St. Leo the Great, on the Orthodox side, and Patriarch Dioscuros of Alexandria, on the Monophysite side, were truly saints or not. This shows that true communion in the faith is not possible without a simultaneous communion in the saints...

Sometimes the Orthodoxy or otherwise of individuals or groups could be determined simply from their attitude to a single prominent confessor. Such was St. Mark of Ephesus in the dying years of the Byzantine Empire, and St. John of Kronstadt in the dying years of the Russian Empire. Different attitudes to St. John continued to distinguish Russian Church jurisdictions until recent times. Thus St. Philaret of New York wrote in 1965: “Of course, our Church Abroad and the so-called American Metropolia cannot be simultaneously the true Church – especially after the latter refused to recognize Fr. John of Kronstadt as a saint. The Church is a single spiritual organism, and it is unthinkable that in it there should be such a phenomenon as that one part of it should recognize that which another part does not recognize – even a child can understand this. Consequently, if one of these churches is the True Church, then the other is not.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Although the early Church did not have a formal process of canonization, she did have rules, kanones in Greek, that urged the veneration of true saints and punished the veneration of false saints. Thus the 20<sup>th</sup> canon of the Local Council of Gangra declares: “If anyone shall, from a presumptuous disposition, condemn and abhor the assembly [in honour of] the martyrs, or the services performed there, and the commemoration of them, let them be anathema....” Again, Canon 34 of the Council of Laodicea decrees: “No Christian shall forsake the martyrs of Christ, and turn to false martyrs, that is, to those of the heretics, or those who formerly were heretics; for they are aliens from God. Let those, therefore, who go after them, be anathema.” These canons show

that the question of who is a true martyr is important, and getting the answer wrong carries the most severe penalty.

However, in our age of ecumenism, indifference to the truth of doctrine is usually accompanied by indifference to the question which saints or martyrs are true or false. Thus in 2000 the Moscow Patriarchate “canonized” a long list of true martyrs and false ones. It canonised the true ones because their holiness in many cases could not be concealed even though they condemned the patriarchate and died outside it. For example, Hieromartyr Victor of Glazov, whose relics are incorrupt and wonderworking, and who said that Metropolitan Sergius’ betrayal was “worse than heresy”... And it canonized the false ones because it had to pretend that you could be a Sergianist and a martyr. In this way the MP fulfilled a prophecy made several years ago by the ROCOR priest Fr. Oleg Oreshkin: "I think that some of those glorified will be from the sergianists so as to deceive the believers. 'Look,' they will say, 'he is a saint, a martyr, in the Heavenly Kingdom, and he recognized the declaration of Metropolitan Sergius, so you must be reconciled with it and its fruits.' This will be done not in order to glorify martyrdom for Christ's sake, but in order to confirm the sergianist politics."[\[3\]](#)

Of course, canonising true and false martyrs together has absurd consequences. For example, the KGB Patriarch Alexis of Moscow wrote: “I believe that our martyrs and righteous ones, regardless of whether they followed Metropolitan Sergius or did not agree with his position, pray together for us.” So a martyr can be a martyr, and pray together with us, even if he died outside the truth! Then in another publication the same Patriarch Alexis stated that the Russian Church Abroad was a schismatic church, and added: “Equally uncanonical is the so-called ‘Catacomb Church’.” In other words, while rejecting the Catacomb Church, he recognized the martyrs of the Catacomb Church as true saints![\[4\]](#)

However, St. Paul said: “If a man strive for mastery, yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully” ([II Timothy 2.5](#)). And “striving lawfully” means striving for the truth within the True Church. Otherwise, the very concept of martyrdom, which means “witnessing to the truth”, would be meaningless. However, that is precisely what the “canonizations” carried out by the Local

Churches of World Orthodoxy have become – meaningless. They have become meaningless, not only because those who carry them out do not confess the truth, or because those whom they canonize very often did not confess the truth, but because the very concept of true sanctity and martyrdom as confessing the truth as against falsehood has been lost.

However, there is a precious boon for the True Orthodox in all this rigmarole. For here we see one more important criterion distinguishing True Orthodoxy from heretical World Orthodoxy: their attitude to the saints and their canonization or glorification. While the True Orthodox canonize only those whose confession is the same as theirs, the World Orthodox canonize not only their own false-believing heretics, but also those who confessed the truth against them in their lives and in their death, thereby witnessing against themselves that the witness of these truly Orthodox martyrs against them was correct and pleasing to God...In this they imitate the Scribes and Pharisees, of whom the Lord said: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, that build the sepulchres of the prophets, and adorn the monuments of the just, and say: if we had been in the days of our Fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. Wherefore ye are witnesses against yourselves, that you are the sons of those who killed the prophets..." (Matthew 23.29-31)

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SS. Athanasius the Great and Cyril, Archbishops of Alexandria.

[1] St. Symeon, Chapters 3, 3-4.

[2] St. Philaret, in Nun Cassia (Tatiana Senina), Stolp Ognennij: Mitropolit N'iu-Yorskij i Vostochno-Amerikanskij Filaret (Voznesensky) (A Fiery Pillar: Metropolitan Philaret (Voznesensky) of New York and Eastern America), St. Petersburg, 2007, p. 157.

[3] "Ierei o. Oleg otvechajet na voprosy redaktsii", Pravoslavnaia Rus', № 23 (1452), December 1/14, 1991, p. 7.

[4] Perekrestov, "Why Now?" Orthodox Life, vol. 44, № 6, November-December, 1994, p. 44.

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