

Minor Words of the Liturgy

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"Wisdom" "Amen" "Remember" "Wisdom, Stand Aright" "Alleluiah" "Holy Things are for the Holy"

"Let us Attend" "Lord Have Mercy" "Let us depart in Peace"

"Wisdom"

"WISDOM!" We hear this word repeated frequently during the services in our churches. In the first place it is intended to remind us and bear witness before us and before the world that everything that takes place in the church has as its foundation the Divine Wisdom. "In wisdom hast thou made [them] all", we hear these words at every vigil during the reading of the 103rd psalm, the so called beginning psalm. In our everyday life we frequently use the words "reason", "mind", "sense", "intellect" when we try to describe the obvious function of the human brain. In doing so we frequently separate this function of the brain from the full manifestation of the human spirit. We are living in the age of reason, the age of man's great scientific, technical, intellectual and artistic achievements. Not infrequently are these achievements deprived of the creative element and are directed towards destructive objectives.

Is this what is meant by the word "wisdom" so often used in the church? In part it is, as man's reason, enlightened by the light of Christ, can be contained within the sphere of the Divine Wisdom representing, at the very best, a mere drop in the ocean of that Wisdom. We could repeat here the dying words of that great scholar: "All I know is that I know nothing."

Divine Wisdom is the basis of all creative endeavor in this world. All that cannot be contained therein, does not draw nourishment therefrom, is not enlightened thereby, consciously or unconsciously, is repelled by true knowledge and becomes a victim of destructive forces. As everything is polarized in the world, the Divine Wisdom can be opposed only by absolute folly, diabolical folly, mindlessness. It is that folly of which King David said: "The fool hath said in his heart: there is no God.

So this is why the Church repeats so often the word 'WISDOM'. In the first place it reminds us that true wisdom is inherent in God alone; that man can approach the Divine Wisdom only in direct proportion of his spiritual enlightenment which he derives through the Church and in the Church; that the approximation of the Divine Wisdom is predicated on humility and recognition of one's own insignificance - intellectual and spiritual - before the greatness of God. Also, through the repetition of this word the Church confirms that it, which as the Body of Christ is one, holy, catholic and apostolic, is the repository and the fountain of the only true wisdom.

"Wisdom, Stand Aright"

"WISDOM, STAND ARIGHT" (PREMUDROST', PROSTI!). We have already reflected on the word "WISDOM" which, minor though it is, is profoundly significant. During liturgy, this word is often followed by the words "STAND ARIGHT". In their basic meaning, these words are a call to, and a reminder for, the supplicants to stand straight, to adopt that physical attitude which is conducive to the attentiveness and testifies to the reverence of those who pray to God. Sometimes it is not easy, it can be even tiring, to stand straight for a long time. That very fatigue, however, is a sacrifice we offer to God during the divine service and during prayers. That is why this fatigue is blessed and beneficial. However, the reminder to stand straight is not limited to its physical meaning. Undoubtedly, this Slavonic word prosti is derived

from the word prostoi meaning "simple". This word, then, urges upon us inner "straightness", simplicity, collectedness. The words of the Cherubic Hymn call upon us to "put away all worldly care." For the duration of the service, we must free ourselves from all external, worldly superfluous baggage which frequently and very successfully distracts our minds from the greatness of the religious rite. This "worldly care", our vanity, our distraction must be left outside the doors of the church; inside the church everything must be directed towards one goal only: the glorification of the Lord and our immersion in the fullness of our communion with Him.

In general, simplicity is one of the basic assumptions of spiritual life. It is not without reason that an Optino elder used to take pleasure in saying: 'Where there is simplicity there are angels aplenty.' So here also, in the church, where we stand face to face with the ineffable Wisdom of God, which is revealed to us during the divine service, it is good that our hearts, our minds and even our flesh be clothed in SIMPLICITY, holy simplicity, in which there are no barriers, no walls between us and God.

This is also the reason why the original meaning of the words "STAND ARIGHT" - stand straight, stand attentively, stand meekly - is so significant and important. They call us to subject our behavior in the church to a specific spiritual and physical order. Every divine service is a movement - our movement and the movement of the entire Church - towards God. In this movement we are like a spiritual army. In the words of the hymn we "mystically represent the Cherubim", and Cherubims and Seraphims are called by the Church "the heavenly host." An army requires an order and a system. In this particular case, it is an order which unites our spiritual being with our physical being.

For this reason, as we participate in the divine service we shall stand sober, we shall stand tall," we shall attain that state of physical collectedness which will reveal the way to the collectedness and the sobriety of the spirit. "Wisdom, stand aright!"

"Let us Attend"

From time to time during our church services we hear the words "LET US ATTEND!" This is the imperative form of the verb "to attend". In ordinary language we might say "let us pay attention", "let us be attentive." These are again 'minor words' which are often repeated during our services but which can easily escape our attention. Strange, is it not, that the very words which urge us to be attentive should escape our attention. These are minor words but words of great meaning and responsibility.

Attentiveness is one of the important qualities even in our everyday life. From childhood we have been taught to pay attention - by parents, by teachers, by superiors. Yet it is not always easy to pay attention. Our minds tend to wander, to be forgetful. It is difficult to force oneself to be attentive. Church recognizes this weakness and so tells us every now and again "LET US ATTEND", let us pay attention, be attentive.

To be attentive means to make our minds and memories concentrate on and be in harmony with what we hear. And more importantly, to attune our hearts so that nothing that happens in the church can slip by them. To pay attention means to listen and to hear, to look and to see. To pay attention means to free oneself from all thoughts and considerations, "all worldly cares." To pay attention means to open one's mind, one's soul and one's heart to all those rays of wisdom which flow to us from the Light of Reason, from the Sun of Truth, from Christ.

It also means to pay attention to everything in which the Church lovingly submerges us, but also to each other, to our neighbors, to their needs, so that we may indeed "with one mouth and one heart" glorify God in Holy Trinity. Christ has said "wherever two or three gather together in My name, I am among them." But He can be among them only if these "two or three" and the entire Church are linked by the Union of Love the very basis of which is the union of ATTENTION.

It is good to remember these words "LET US ATTEND" and to repeat them in one's spirit as we journey through life. As we look at the beauty of God's world, God's creation, it is good to tell oneself "LET US ATTEND." How much evil, pain, irritation, hostility, untruth would begin to disappear from our lives, from our relations with others, if we carry these words beyond the walls of our churches and used them as a lantern as a torch, to shed light on each step we take, each movement we make, each person we meet.

"Amen"

A very minor word, "Amen", is so often repeated during our services and in our private prayers. Usually, it marks the end of prayers or important texts of religious content and it is like a seal placed on everything of particular importance. And that is exactly what it is. One of the earliest meanings of the ancient Hebrew word 'amen' was "to be worthy of trust". Other meanings are: "it is verily so", "let it be so", 'let it be accordingly'. In the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy, Moses instructs the people of Israel to build an altar, gives them the order of sacrificial offerings and commands them to obey God and submit to him: "This day thou art become the people of the Lord thy God." In response to the loudly proclaimed words of the prophet, words which reject every impiety and every untruth, the people exclaim repeatedly "Amen.- And the last lines of the last book of the New Testament, the Apocalypse or the Revelation of Saint John the Theologian read: "He which testifieth these things saith, Yea: I come quickly! Amen."

Thus the word "Amen" is used in the Old Testament to signify the concurrence with the pledge given and, by the same token, the acceptance of all consequences arising therefrom. Furthermore, in order to bear witness to this concurrence and at the same time praise the Lord, this word is repeated twice: "Amen, Amen" In the New Testament this word is used even more frequently. In the Christian Church, the believers, even Greek speaking believers, started using this ancient Hebrew word at the end of each eucharistic prayer spoken by the priest. But even private prayers and hymns of praise of early as well as present day Christians end with this word. Christ used this word at the beginning of particularly important words of witness: "verily, verily I say unto you," or "amen, amen I say unto you.' He invested this word with a new, special meaning which had been unknown in the old rabbinical literature by using it to confirm the absolute truth and veracity of His words lending them the weight of His Divine authority. In the New Testament (in Slavonic) even Christ Himself is called "Amen", the True One. As Apostle Paul says in his epistle to the Corinthians: ".. all promises of God are in Him (Christ), and Amen is in Him - to the glory of God and through us."

And so, as we utter the word "Amen" we give ourselves to God, we submit to His will. As He has signed the New Testament, His Testament, with His Blood which He has shed upon the Cross so we receive from Him this New Testament, this new covenant of God with man and we confirm our faithfulness and devotion to Him by this burning word of faith -- Amen!

"Alleluiah"

In the Psalms of King David we frequently find the word of praise -- "Alleluiah". Apart from the Psalms, this word appears only twice in the Bible. Once, in the Old Testament, in the prophetic vision of the New Jerusalem in the Book of Tobit it is said that its streets will echo with alleluias. Then in his Revelation St. John says: "... I heard a great voice of much people in heaven, saying, Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power unto the Lord our God." And alleluias continue to issue forth from the mouths of those who are holy and just and bow down before the Throne of the Almighty.

The word "Alleluiah", which appears with such frequency in the hymns and prayers of our Liturgy, is of Hebrew origin. The last syllable "iah" is an abbreviated form of "Jahveh" or "Jehovah", the Old Testament name for God. The preceding syllables mean praise. The whole word, then, means PRAISE GOD, PRAISE THE LORD. The Christian Church began early using this word of praise in the liturgical texts. The word became an expression of joy and triumph, a hymn to triumphant faith. In our Church, it is a part of all services, including the services of repentance during Great Lent and the services for the dead. The entire life of the Church is built on the unwavering faith in Christ's Resurrection. The attitude of the Church even to death is permeated with the joyous expectation of the forthcoming meeting with Christ and the life everlasting in the Kingdom of God.

During the Divine Liturgy, the word "Alleluiah" is sung before the reading of the Gospel; at the end of the Cherubim hymn, it marks the translation of the Sacraments from the table of ablations to the Holy Throne; it is sung after the Communion and at the end of the liturgy. It is heard on many occasions during the vigil. So it is present throughout our church services and, for all its brevity, it expresses that to which all divine services are dedicated -- the praise of God.

So there we have yet another minor word which does not always hold our attention. And yet, its content is so inexhaustible that the just will use it to express the praise of God in the New Heaven and the New Earth, in the everlasting Kingdom of God. For there is no better way of proclaiming the Divine dominion over the world and over mankind than by praising and glorifying Him, by singing praises to Him -- the King and the Lord.

"Lord Have Mercy"

"LORD HAVE MERCY." How frequently these three words are repeated in our churches and in our personal prayers. They are repeated in litanies which consist of short petitions, each of which ends with the words "Lord have mercy." At evening services and during the reading of the Hours we repeat these words sometimes 3, sometimes 12 and sometimes even 40 times. How marvelous is the score of the Russian composer Lvovsky for the multiple "Lord have mercy" sung at the Elevation of the Cross. And there are many other services during which "Lord have mercy" is repeated many times, insistently, repentantly...

Let us not be disturbed by such frequent repetition of some of our short prayers, in particular the prayer "Lord have mercy." The object of such repetition is to imbue our hearts, our minds, our entire souls with the prayer. The aim is to focus our attention on the topic of the prayer which the Church considers of particular importance for our spiritual growth. This repetition, as leitmotif in music, penetrates our consciousness and remains long in our memory, staying with us even as we leave the church for our everyday existences.

"Lord have mercy." Three words, but what depth of meaning do they hold. First, by calling God "Lord", we confirm His rule over the world, the mankind and, most importantly, over ourselves, over those who speak these words. 'Lord" means master, ruler. This is why we call ourselves the "servants" of God. This appellation has nothing offensive about it, as is readily suspected by some of those who would fight the Lord. Servitude by itself is negative as it deprives the human being of the original gift - the gift of freedom. But as this gift was given to man by God, only in God can man find the plenitude of freedom. It follows, therefore, that service to God is in fact the perfect freedom in God.

Our service to God is far from perfect. Every day, every hour we flee from that blessed Servitude. We flee to where there is neither light, nor love, nor joy, nor life-which we can only find in God. We flee from perfect joy to the bottomless pit of sorrow. Then, we awake spiritually, we return to our senses, we begin to understand that we have nowhere to go, when we flee God, except to death. As King David said: "Whither shall I go from Thy spirit and from Thy countenance whither shall I flee?" We return to God -- some of us after a momentary absence, some after many years of alienation. And, in order to reestablish our filial servitude to Him, the servitude which we are constantly fleeing, we beg for forgiveness and repeat: have mercy, have mercy.

So there they are, these minor words, these few words of prayer with which we can pray in all places and at all times: "Lord have mercy." It is good to value them, cherish and nurture them. They are our praying beads made up of words and they link our hand with the right hand of the Lord.

"Remember"

During the Divine Liturgy, after the transubstantiation of the Sacraments, the Church asks God to "remember", to include in His Divine Memory of the world and man, "all who have died in the hope of resurrection to life eternal", "all bishops," priests, Your Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, all those "who lead a pure and honorable life," this country and its government, the ruling bishop and, as the choir sings in the conclusion of the eucharistic prayer of remembrance, .. everyone and everything."

This expression "everyone and everything" is among those "minor words" which we listen to but do not hear as they elude the fullness of our attention. Yet they are full of profound meaning, particularly in the context of the Bloodless Eucharistic Sacrifice of the Body and the Blood of Christ just offered by the Church.

As we offer our Eucharistic Sacrifice to God, the Church, through the mouth of the priest, says: "Thine own, of Thine own, we offer to Thee, for everyone and for everything." The Bloodless Sacrifice is offered not for individual salvation, albeit spiritual salvation, but for the whole world, for the universe, for the entire mankind. The Bloodless Sacrifice is cosmic in the fullness of its meaning, for the Holy Ghost, descending upon our gifts to God transforms them into God's Holy Gifts to us. And this act, which is a true miracle, embraces God's entire creation, the whole world, the entire mankind with all its generations, past, present and future.

Great power and grace vouchsafed by God to the Church reside in this act. The Church is active, dynamic, actual Divine energy, continually penetrating this world in order to transform it, sanctify It, make it God-like, prepare it for the second coming of Christ, for the last, terrible judgment and for the universal resurrection from the dead. This is what it means to be a member of the Church. It means to be an active conduit of this grace, to be God's collaborators in His unquenchable desire to save the world and man. Hence the name of the most central service of our Church: "liturgy" in Greek means the "common cause." This is precisely how we should experience the salvation of every man. We are all

linked by the "guarantee of the power of good" in this world, the world in which, as Dostoevsky says everyone is guilty of everything and for everything before everyone - which means responsible. What promise, what truly "all-embracing guarantee of the power of good" lies in this thought. Because, if I am responsible for everyone, then ALL are responsible for me. And we no longer need fear the popular wisdom of the saying "man alone in the field is no soldier."

So then, this is the reason for "and everyone and everything." Because by the power of our prayer also, especially the eucharistic prayer, .. everyone" and "everything" are included in the flood of God's grace, rushing, striving, flowing to the eternal Kingdom of God.

"Holy Things are for the Holy"

Just before the Communion of the Holy Mysteries of the Body and Blood of Christ, standing in the sanctuary facing the altar table, the priest raises the Holy Lamb, the Bread of the Bloodless Sacrifice, which has become the body of Christ, and says these words: "the holy things are for the holy." These words have the sound of a mystery which is, indeed, contained therein. But no mystery should be deprived of an inner meaning with which these words, these minor words", are also imbued.

Apostle Peter, in his First Epistle General speaks to the still young Christian Church: "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, ... the people of God." This is how Apostle Peter describes the members of the early Church and all of us together with them. There is no doubt that the early Christians consisted of sinners as well as saints. There are quite a few sinners in today's Church, starting with ourselves. And yet the apostle calls all of them and all of us the chosen nation, the royal priesthood, the holy people, the people of God. This sets the standard for the attitude of God and the Church towards man, towards the people of the Church. Through the mystery of baptism, every person receives the absolute guarantee of holiness. From the font, the baptized individual arises holy, washed clean of all sin, all untruth, all defilement. This holiness is sealed with chrismation. Thus all newly baptized are given the fullest potential of holiness which the Church recognizes in them through their entire life.

The onus of responsibility for the preservation of this gift lies no longer on the Church but on the conscience of the individual, on his or her treatment of the gift of free will, freedom of choice between good and evil. The holiness is lost, it is dissipated on the roads and crossroads of life, but it is also restored through the mysteries of confession and communion. And the Church continues to stand by her original estimation: she continues to believe in us, in "the chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, the people of God." And the Church invests not only her priests but all her members with the great gift of officiation. According to the Orthodox teaching, the great mystery of the Eucharist is performed not by the priest alone, but by the entire Church, the entire "royal priesthood," the entire "people of God."

Therefore, as he raises the Holy Lamb, the Body of Christ, presenting it to the entire Church, the priest says: "The holy things are for the holy." "The holy things" are what he holds in his hands at this moment - the Sacraments. "For the holy" means that the Sacraments are intended for all of us, all members of the Church in whose eyes we are all holy, we are the people of God. And we, in full and humble recognition of our sinfulness and unworthiness, respond: "One is Holy, One is the Lord: Jesus Christ."

"Let us depart in Peace"

At the end of the Divine Liturgy, after the Communion and the Thanksgiving for the Sacraments, the priest turns towards the people and, coming out of the sanctuary, says: "Let us depart in peace." We must remember that in early days these words marked the end of the Liturgy, and the faithful were asked to return to their homes "in peace."

The word "peace" appears often in the prayers of the Church. The Church is the great champion of peace. It was peace which the angels proclaimed on the night of the Nativity as they sang: 'Glory to God on high and peace on earth.' Christ frequently spoke of peace: "I leave you peace, My peace I give to you: I give it to you not the way the world gives." The Church calls for peace as it begins the Liturgy and other services with the Litany of Peace: "In peace let us pray to the Lord." In his War and Peace, Leo Tolstoy misinterprets these words when he takes the word peace to mean the community of men. The actual meaning of these words is the invitation to pray to the Lord in peace, with the tranquility of mind. "For the peace from above" is not peace given to us by the world, peace achieved through peace negotiations and treaties; it is the peace given to us by Christ. But we also pray "for peace in the whole world", because nothing so dims the rejoicing of the Church as raging enmity in the world.

This peace is not the peace which is simply the opposite of war. Politicians, who so readily use the word "peace" and who so frequently abuse it do not recognize that the most peaceful places in the world are cemeteries, not conference tables at which the word 'peace' appears in all shapes and forms. The 'peace' of which the Church speaks, with which it sends its congregation into the world after the Liturgy, is a different peace. It cannot be taken away by anyone; it is capable of filling the hearts and minds of men even on battle- fields, in wars, revolutions, catastrophes. It is an inner peace. It is certainly not individual or personal; it is the peace of which St. Seraphim spoke when he said: "keep the spirit of peace within yourself and a thousand around you will be saved." So it is the peace which cannot be concentrated upon, or contained within, one but which uses one as a conduit through which to reach 'a thousand' other hearts as affirmed by St. Seraphim.

So it is the peace to which the priest calls the worshippers as he sends them off on their worldly business after the Divine Service. In the early days of the Church, there no doubt existed a kind of spiritual insatiability. People were loath to leave this "heaven on earth." And so the priest's words 'let us depart in per are answered by the people "in the name of the Lord' - limit God's name, in the name of God. And the priest responds to this request by ending his dialogue with the people with the words "let us pray to the Lord" and by reading the last prayer for the Church, the people, for peace...

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