

Is Bible reading Orthodox? Is Bible study Orthodox?

In these days, in some parts of our Archdiocese at least, we are seeing more often that believers gather together to study the Bible. Some of the groups are large, some are of just a few persons. Sometimes the study is used catechistically, to help prepare those converting, sometimes it is for the deepening of the faith of lifelong believers.

It is not a phenomenon to which our Orthodox world is lately accustomed. Sometimes believers fear what is apparently new. Often enough (simply because Protestants are so well known for this exercise), the practice may be accused of not being Orthodox. Some may say that it is dangerous; and that while studying history, theology, Christology, ecclesiology, iconography, Fathers, and so forth, is acceptable under certain circumstances, study of the Bible is not.

Such controversies are often encountered. It is usual enough for us to debate matters in this Sway (we've had two millennia of practice). And of course, there are some comments to be made.

If we look at the state of affairs in modern Church life, two words could be used to describe the state of awareness of Sacred Scripture by the vast majority of Orthodox believers: abysmal ignorance. Most have only the thinnest awareness of the New Testament, and an almost complete lack of awareness about the Old Testament. If this awareness be thin for us, then it is strikingly more the case in the secular world. It used to be that even unbelievers knew a lot about the Bible simply as literature. It is so no more. Our language (and other languages as well) used to be thoroughly laced with proverbial expressions related to the Bible. It is so no more. It is so no more for almost all languages that used to reflect Christian consciousness and mentality. Everywhere there seems to have been a great emptying of language, in both oral and literary use, of any Christian (and by extension, of course Old Testament) references. What is significant is that there is such a great change in just a generation. Less than seventy years ago, many people would daily pepper their ordinary conversations with scriptural quotations, allusions and proverbs. Now it is rare to hear, and where it does happen, the allusions are most often completely lost on the youth. Many comment that they see that the allusions are lost also on many adults who seem now to suffer from scriptural amnesia.

Our immediate and distant Christian ancestors would lament this great loss in any language of scriptural and spiritual awareness. Not long ago, many of our own scripturally well-informed ancestors would compare themselves to the time of the great Fathers, and found themselves wanting. Yet these great Fathers are the very ones whom we, as Orthodox, admire, and whose words we say we love to study and quote. Their speech and their writing was liberally salted with scriptural references, allusions and ancillary proverbs. They "bathed" in Scripture.

Some of us are now deeply concerned about this slippage, even in ourselves. So there is an increasing concern about encouraging the study of the Bible by all the faithful Christian people, and of the daily reading of it. It is vital: an absolute necessity of life. This is so, not only for the

feeding of the hearts and souls of all believers, but also for forming those entering the Body of Christ. After all, if we do not know Christ thoroughly through His words, if we do not encounter Him in the Gospel, and the experience of the apostles, if we do not know about God's saving acts in human history, how can we call ourselves Christians, let alone call ourselves Orthodox Christians?

Our ancestors, from the earliest times up to the very recent past, understood the need for daily reading of the Scriptures, and particularly the New Testament. They did read it daily. Some would simply follow the regular course of prescribed Epistle and Gospel readings for every day. Many memorized some of the passages. Not many years ago, a priest blessing a prairie home at Theophany spoke of his experience of an old couple who still lived in a pioneer-style house in the country. They told him and others with him that reading the Bible was their favourite evening activity. After all work was done, one would sit or recline, and the other would read the Bible aloud, and they said that they enjoyed it greatly. Clearly, they were reading at least chapters at a time, not just a few paragraphs. They had done it all their life together, it seems. In the same area, but in the city, there was a well-known and pious widow who not only read the Scriptures of an evening; she would also read the Fathers, their scriptural comments, and their theological works. It is widely told about our beloved Archimandrite Vasily of blessed memory, of Saint Tikhon's Monastery, that he regularly had the New Testament read to him by his attendant. Once, on coming to the end of the Apocalypse, he is said to have remarked, "That was very good to hear. Now, why not start again?"

Paul Evdokimov, in his worthy book Ages of the Spiritual Life (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1998), devotes a chapter to this matter. He reminds us of the seriousness of this habit. Not only did Evagrius exhort us to awake, Bible in hand; the Council in Trullo also exhorted priests to cultivate in the faithful the greatest intimacy with the Bible. Paul Evdokimov gives us the following extract from Saint John Chrysostom, which reveals that humans are just the same now as 1500 years ago: "'I am not a monk', some of you say.... 'But your mistake is in believing that the reading of the Scriptures concerns only monks, because for you it is even more necessary since you are in the midst of the world. There is something worse than not reading the Scriptures, and that is to believe that this reading is useless ... a satanic practice'". We are told that Saint John encouraged the home-study of the passages of Scripture that are appointed daily to be read in Church, to accustom children to daily reading and discussion of what is the core of their parents' lives. It is this daily exposure that makes the Scriptures an organic part of our whole life, that helps to keep Christ in the front of our consciousness, that helps to keep us aware of His presence, that helps us to remember who we are and to Whom we belong, and to Whom we can turn at all times. It is a saving study, a nourishing study. Evdokimov says that this is because the reading presupposes the state of prayer which is its environment, and which "brings the words to maturity". And so Christ Himself speaks to us as we prayerfully, daily, read and reread the Sacred Scriptures. Before reading, we should customarily and consciously ask Him to reveal Himself to us; and we should ask for His help to lay ourselves open to Him. In this way, like the Fathers, we can come to live the Bible, much as the Bible permeates the words of all our services. The elders among Romanian monks are firm in recommending the daily reading from the Psalter to all who come to them. They remind us that the devil definitely does not appreciate this, and that this is all the greater reason for us to do it.

Evdokimov adds a warning: that making the Scriptures the object of simple speculative knowledge, simply studying it as mere literature, trying to reduce it only to some sort of science, is to profane the Scriptures, and to profane the Word, Himself. That is not to say that there may be no careful analysis of the text. Even the Fathers from the earliest times used such discernment. But this process must always be in the context of prayer, of being nourished in the bosom of the Church, in the tradition of the Fathers, in the heritage passed to us from apostolic times. Evdokimov says that as they did, so we also must see that all of the Scriptures are “a verbal icon of Christ”.

What about group Bible study, then? Well, group study has its own importance, particularly in our unsupportive environment. It certainly has its catechetical application, and many report having seen good results when participants learn about the links between passages, and between the Old and New Testaments. The scriptural texts allow links to patristic comments and even to the Councils, and the whole linkage helps to develop the ecclesial “mind” in a person. This is particularly so, when the study is led by a priest, deacon, or some other person with a theological education. However, such a leader must strongly resist the temptation to lecture and to monopolise the conversation.

Sometimes, however, the faithful people might gather in groups for studying the Scriptures, just for feeding the soul, perhaps even without such leadership. Especially in our environment of personal opinions, variable truths, and so called individuality, there is great danger in personalising stray ideas. But when a group of faithful people gather together, and begin with prayer invoking God’s help and protection, and when all read the complementary literature, and together reflect on the scriptural passages, their honest, mutual reflection on the Bible helps not only to keep someone from drifting away, but it also helps to nourish each participant with the encouragement of the experience of the others. This is particularly so when the passages read lead to talking about how the Lord has blessed each person recently. All of this not only helps to deepen each participant’s understanding of the Bible itself, but it also helps to keep a general consciousness of the presence of the Lord in each one’s life more active and immediate. Group study supplements private study, enriches it, deepens it, broadens it. It helps also to check any misinterpretations that tend to insinuate themselves into anyone’s thinking.

Now follows a little quotation from Dostoevsky’s Brothers Karamazov, from the words about the Bible by the dying Staretz Zosima (no doubt based on an Optina father). The Staretz has just reflected on his love from childhood for the story of Job, and continues: “Oh, what a great book it is and how much we learn from it! What a miraculous book is the Holy Bible and what strength it gives to man! It is like a sculpted model of the world, of mankind, and of the characters of men; everything is there and it contains guidance for us for all ages. How many mysteries are solved in it, how many revealed! Everyday I bless the rising sun and my heart sings to it as it did before; but now I love the sunset even more, and its long, slanting rays bring back to me quiet, touching, tender memories, dear faces, and images from my long and blessed life. Over everything here hovers the Lord’s truth and justice that moves our hearts, reconciles everything, and is all forgiving!”

The elder then exhorts parish priests (no matter how poor they might be), to spend an hour a week reading Bible passages to children, and from the pastor’s heart to explain these

passages. He rightly says, moreover, that when a priest shares from the depths of his heart, with tears even, the stories from the Old and New Testaments, the faithful people (and especially children) will readily understand and will receive it all with the same love. What he says is simple and straightforward, and correct. He emphasises the need for this loving sharing of the love of Christ, for, “Only the masses of simple, humble people and their growing spiritual power will be able to convert the atheists, who have been uprooted from our native soil. And what good is the Word of Christ without an example? A nation is lost without the Word of God, for every human soul thirsts for His Word and for the good and the beautiful”.

Joining these thoughts with his biblical awareness that God’s love permeates all creation, the elder relates an example he once shared with a youth, an example about Saint Seraphim of Sarov: ‘Take, for instance, the fierce, formidable, frightening bear, roaming through the forest’. ... And I went on to tell him about the bear which once came to the hut of a great saint who was seeking salvation in the forest. The saint, feeling great tenderness for the beast, came out fearlessly, gave it a loaf of bread, and said: ‘There, go along now, and may Christ be with you’. And the fierce bear went off obediently and meekly without hurting the saint. The boy was deeply moved by the story, because the beast had not hurt the saint and because Christ was with him, too. ‘Ah’, he said: ‘how wonderful it is, how everything of God’s is good and beautiful!’

This is the result of such an immersion in Scripture. Our country, our nations, are lost without it.

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