

Problem of Superstitions among Parishioners and Way of Overcoming them during Catechesis. Catechist's Reflections from Practical Experience

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Abstract:

The author analyses his long-term personal experience of providing catechetical instruction to the baptised and defines its main and most complex problem, i. e. superstitious beliefs among modern christened people. The article confirms that catechesis of previously baptised people requires the catechist to have a special focus not merely on firmly establishing the Orthodox faith but on standing against specific superstitions.

The article examines the nature of superstitions and the distinction between superstitions and heresies. The focus is on the most common superstitious belief that sacraments are efficacious *ex opere operato*. This superstition encourages a particular kind of pietism characterised by a false hope of salvation. The holders of this superstitious belief have been nicknamed 'zahozhane' ('drop-in Christians'). The author briefly reviews ways of overcoming the power of superstitions through revival of comprehensive patristic catechetical instruction for people prior to their baptism.

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This text is not a scientific paper but indeed reflections on the basis of practice. Over recent years, within catechesis we had and still have to deal mainly

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with people who have years-long parish life background in our real conditions of church life. It stands to reason that such situation is quite specific. Usually, these are complicated cases. Attempting to somehow comprehend this complexity, although not covering it completely, I wrote down these thoughts, which are actually a sum of amplified statements.

Superstitions are one of the most widespread and, in our view, complex problems in the process of catechising baptized people. On the one hand, there must be no superstitions among Orthodox Christians. On the other, their emergence is inevitable like the growing of weeds in the field, as it is shown in the Gospel parable of the wheat and tares (Matthew 13:24-30). This being the case, the solution is to gain immunity and armour against them.

Normally, according to the tradition, the Christian must attain immunity and armour against any lies during *pre*-baptismal catechesis. As we remember, St Cyril of Jerusalem said to those preparing for baptism that his lectures were not only to make them steadfast in their faith but also to be armour against any false doctrine. In the Prologue to his *Catechetical Lectures* he wrote:

“...For you are receiving armour against the adverse power, armour against heresies, against Jews, and Samaritans, and Gentiles. You have many enemies; take to you many darts ... <...> and become invincible against every heretical attempt” [*Cyril of Jerusalem*].

But nowadays we are in a different situation: the majority of church people have not attained such armour and immunity in due time and in this sense can hardly be invincible. At present, therefore, one has to deal with this task during *post*-baptismal catechesis! But it is much more difficult which is understandable: teaching correctly from the very beginning is easier than reteaching.

Unlike *pre*-baptismal catechesis, the catechist engaged in *post*-baptismal catechesis is often faced with the fact that the catechumen considers *all* beliefs and teachings s/he follows to be unambiguously Orthodox. In this sense, the catechumen has no doubt in them. Moreover, s/he has already built up his/her practices of piety on them, though many of these beliefs and teachings may have non-Orthodox or even non-Christian roots.

Therefore, *post*-baptismal catechesis, strange as it may seem, is sometimes more conflicting (of course, an intrapersonal conflict is implied) than that before baptism. During *post*-baptismal catechesis the catechist often has to unravel people's misperceptions very carefully and scrupulously, knowing that some true provisions of the Orthodox doctrine and piety can inflict pain on or even shock some Orthodox believers themselves. This is due to the peculiarities of all superstitions:

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along with the fact that falling into superstitions does not require any effort of heart and is easy to be understood by the religious consciousness for natural (not spiritual) person. Superstitions always produce false assurance of salvation (or sometimes false doubt of salvation). During catechesis this starts to make itself felt. Indeed, one can find this so hard to go through because what one once believed to be sacred ‘of highest order,’ a key point in one’s faith and church life, suddenly turns out not to be so, whereas what is genuinely sacred in Christianity was not observed or even neglected.

Generally, if the catechist dealing with baptized people wants to help victims of superstitions, then, in our view, some extra efforts are needed in at least three directions:

a) fundamental understanding of what superstition actually is, what this experience is about and what its boundaries are; understanding that it is not enough to preach sound faith – one has also to identify and persistently apply an antidote for superstitions;

b) knowing and understanding the ‘pathological anatomy and physiology’ of any given superstition that affects a catechumen; with this in mind, focusing tactfully and within reasonable limits on corresponding issues in catechetical practice;

c) constantly paying attention during catechesis that its overall structure and tenor were rooted in the patristic tradition, not only avoiding to feed any superstitions but also creating conditions in which superstitions would betray themselves to the catechumen’s conscience; one should also know what in this tradition is particularly important for victims of any particular superstitions and take this into account.

What is Superstition

In Russian, the word itself – ‘*sueverie*’ (‘*sue*’ – vain; ‘*verie*’ – belief) – denotes a belief, which is vain and therefore false. But a superstition is not a heresy. Heresy tries to change the dogma of the Church, whereas a superstition does not. It ‘sneaks’ not into dogma but in what can be called ‘faith mentality’ or practical faith. But superstition can be no less harmful: affecting ‘faith mentality’, without changing a single letter in dogma, it learns simply how to take no notice of it, giving false hope and life practice contrary to it. This can be a mass phenomenon. Thus, in cases when in the Church we come across a contradiction between faith, prayer and life or, as Fr Alexander Schmemmann put it, between theology, worship and piety [*Schmemmann, Eucharist*], with dogma remaining safe and secure, we deal with superstition, even when this contradiction is ‘legitimized’ by tens or even hundreds of years of practice.

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Interestingly, some heresies, once officially rejected, may still exist in form of superstitions. An example may be Monophysitism when it is claimed that it is impossible for a common person to imitate Christ, because ‘Christ is God.’ Thus it is said that, even if possible, only saints can imitate Him because they are different by nature. There is also phyletism usually feeding Orthodox nationalists. However, most of superstitions never reached the level of heresies and never defined as such by church councils. In the list of heresies we do not see the so called ‘obsession with miracles’ and ‘obsession with spiritual elders’ (resulting in demand for ‘spiritual elders’ who actually lack experience and wisdom), clericalism, modernism and fundamentalism; belief in the self-sufficiency of ascetic feat; belief in the Satanic origin of bar code and tax reference number allegedly containing ‘666;’ belief in the validity of church sacraments *ex opere operato*, etc.

The popularity of superstitions of one kind or another, in our view, depends on whether it is urban or rural area, a large city or a small town. This is most likely correlated with the level of church education as well as with the standard of culture and schooling.

If referring to Moscow, it also has its specifics. A megalopolis is a place where one can find almost everything but in its peculiar manifestation. For example, in the capital it is felt that Orthodoxy is mostly represented by those whom we call ‘occasional parishioners.’ Their percentage is comparable to the general situation (like anywhere else, there are 93 or 95% of those who consider themselves Orthodox [*Zagvozdina; Zaytsev Andrey*]), but according to the absolute value their number is tremendous. And it is occasional parishioners who make up the majority of those coming to catechesis after baptism.

Hereafter I would like to give special consideration to this issue on ‘occasional parishioners’ and details of the superstition they are guided by.

Superstitions among ‘Occasional Parishioners’

So what can we say about ‘occasional parishioners’? This is a category of people who consider themselves Orthodox and have a specific understanding of piety, which has one constant feature – one must be baptized. Then let things happen as they will: to partake or not, to pray or not, to fast or not, to commit grievous sins or not – let it be today so, tomorrow differently. In other words, one has to be baptized – and then the life goes depending on possibilities and needs. It is about faith without effort. A quarter of ‘occasional parishioners’ never darken a church door. More than a third of them come in a church only to light a candle. Another third take part in christenings, weddings and funerals. ‘Occasional parishioners’ do not align themselves with the Gospel, simply turning a blind eye to it. More

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than 60% of them have never read any part of the Bible. The main thing for them is to have the *intention* of Christian life in a manner they understand it, not to be opposed to it. So it goes for years. In their perception, following Christ is, at most, to take care of their families and to work honestly. ‘Occasional parishioners’ are usually not interested in the meaning of sacraments and worship because they view all these as means of improving their state of mind, of satisfying their religious needs (which should not be confused with faith) and, most importantly, of arranging their everyday life.

Such ‘piety’, as we know, absolutely does not result from the spirit and the meaning of the Gospel and the teachings of the Holy Fathers. Hence, this is rather a quasi-faith and a quasi-doctrine, which we call superstition. Its essence is that ‘occasional parishioners,’ albeit having their ‘piety,’ believe the life they live is quite gracious. They also believe the grace of sacraments, in which they took part, or sometimes do now, inevitably works within them. Therefore, they have the hope of salvation.

What is the origin of this strange belief in the saving effect of sacraments and the hope for them? Is it consistent with the Orthodox sacramentology? In our view, the catechist dealing with baptized people has to clarify this issue.

Indeed, there is an oddity here. As it is known, the orthodox doctrine claims that the aim of the Christian life, theosis, can be achieved through personal and joint efforts in the Church, ‘with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming’ (1 Pet 1:13). According to the teaching of St Gregory Palamas adopted by the Orthodox Church, the grace, being uncreated divine energy, which emanates from the triune God, is God Himself, though not in His nature, reveals itself really, not symbolically and without any intermediation [*Dionysius; Bernatsky*, 8–37]. The revelation of God’s grace is Epiphany, always associated with the revelation of His Person and of His will. Therefore, it is impossible to be filled with grace without a real encounter with God, without having communion with Him and serving Him and His Church, without fidelity to His call. Grace, according to the Orthodox doctrine, is not a thing-in-itself, not an impersonal sanctifying substance that works independently in human being. Rather it is the fruit of a relationship with God and through Him with neighbour in the Church. That is why grace cannot be ‘channelled,’ ‘transferred,’ ‘conveyed,’ ‘accumulated’ (as the idea of supererogation implies). Its source is God Himself, while the Church and the human person in it are those who receive grace. This is not contrasted with the distinction within the Orthodox sacramentology between potential and actual ways of how grace works: in human being it becomes actual and efficient only under the conditions of one’s openness, whole-life determination and effort of heart and mind. If these

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conditions are not fulfilled, grace does not work. This action is potentially possible but there is no 'potential' grace by nature. Therefore, one who is baptized but does not live one's faith has no grace of baptism.

This is what the Orthodox experience of administering sacraments is based upon. Normally, there is not a slightest trace of automatism or magical approach. The Orthodox experience does not reject but, on the contrary, brings to the fore the effort of heart and mind, the attention to the spirit and the meaning, which are to be perceived and implemented throughout one's whole life. In fact, theanthropic life can be achieved only through a real synergy within the experience of encounter and communion with God in the Church through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

In particular, it is the standpoint one can understand the words by the Apostle Paul. As he wrote to the Corinthians, if they take communion without testing themselves and 'discerning the body,' that is, if they do not make effort of heart and mind to embrace through faith the meaning of the sacrament, if they are not determined to implement it in their lives, then they inevitably eat and drink judgement on themselves (1 Corinthians 11:29). St Symeon the New Theologian also wrote:

"If you partake the heavenly bread and wine, that is, the Body and the Blood of Christ, discerning what these are, know then that you partake worthily; If you do not partake this way, then you eat and drink unworthily. <...> So those partaking worthily are united with God – those eating the bread and drinking from the communion cup, knowing and contemplating the power of the sacrament. And those who receive communion unworthily are empty of the grace of the Holy Spirit and feed only their bodies, not their souls. <...> For those who have not raised above the sensual sphere, this heavenly bread remains a simple one" [*Symeon the New Theologian*].

We know quite a lot of similar quotations of the Holy Fathers and Teachers on other sacraments, especially on baptism¹. The Orthodox sacramentology considers them.

¹ See e.g.: 'Even Simon Magus once came to the Laver: he was baptized, but was not enlightened; and though he dipped his body in water, he enlightened not his heart with the Spirit: his body went down and came up, but his soul was not buried with Christ, nor raised with Him. <...> But if you persist in an evil purpose, the speaker is blameless, but you must not look for the grace: for the water will receive, but the Spirit will not accept you' (St Cyril of Jerusalem, *Procatechesis* (Prologue) 2, 4); 'If the baptism has only washed the body, and the life after initiation is identical with that life before, then despite the boldness of my assertion, I will say without shrinking that the baptismal water is merely water, and the gift of the Spirit is nowhere in action' (St Gregory of Nyssa.

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‘Occasional parishioners,’ however, have a different ‘sacramentology’. This is evident by their piety. Judging by the prevalence of this kind of ‘sacramentology,’ the church environment appears not to be enough immune to it.

According to this ‘sacramentology,’ the grace of sacraments is irrevocable and works irresistibly. In this perception, a grace-filled life does not imply communion with God, its symbols are enough. This grace works without personal encounter, fidelity and ministry, beyond the path and the meaning of the Gospel. Thus, grace requires no effort of making choice and decision, of giving promises, all one needs is to have an intention. They say it is only the Lord who can give promises. He promised us salvation, having become prisoner of His own promises. Having established the sacraments, He can no longer deny Himself. Since His love through Christ was shown boundless and unconditional, there is hence no such sin and there are no such conditions of mine that would hinder grace. Sacraments are believed to be irrevocable. The Church has no power over them and is necessary only for the sake of administering sacraments.

In terms of the above mentioned ‘sacramentology,’ grace is not rigidly related with God and does not reveal His Person: God lives by Himself, whereas grace, being ‘transformed’ from energy into substance, lives its own life. By itself grace descends, works, fills in and alights upon. Someone has power over it, being able to send it down, to convey and even to take it away. It can be specialized: every sacrament is believed to have its own peculiar grace; sacraments have one grace, whereas rites have another; a lay person has one kind of grace, while a clergyman has another. Even holy water may differ in grace, depending on whether it is sanctified on Epiphany Eve, on the very day of this feast and on any other day of the year! Examples are multiple. If there is specialization, then the next step is to differentiate functional application of grace to the point that not only sacraments but even each particular saint has his or her ‘applied’ grace.

In the mentality of ‘occasional parishioners’ and those in the church who contribute to this phenomenon, grace does not require burdening synergy and effort of mind and heart. According to their faith, grace itself, descending upon the human being, purifies and depriving him or her of any desire to sin. If this sinful impulse persists, if one cannot give up, make up one’s mind and respond to the call

The Great Catechism, 40); ‘Come, catechumens! Do penance, so that Baptism for the remission of sins will follow. He who stops sinning receives Baptism “for the remission of sins.” For, if anyone comes sinning to the washing, he does not receive forgiveness of sins’ (Origen. Homily 21 on Luke 3, 1-4); ‘Pay attention and listen to what is being said here, you catechumens; prepare yourselves, while you are catechumens, while you are not yet baptized, and you may come to the washing and be washed “unto salvation.” Such a one receives the water but does not receive the Holy Spirit. The one who is washed unto salvation receives water and the Holy Spirit’ (Origen. Homily 6 on Ezekiel).

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from above, the reason is that God has not given such measure of grace. Therefore, this is the mystery of His Providence. Not all are called to be saints, right? So, they say, 'everything is from God,' and 'whatever happens is for the better,' including sin, weakness and betrayal... The creed of 'occasional parishioners' is embedded in this boundless positivity.

One might go on, but, on the other hand, it makes little sense. In our view, the 'faith mentality' 'occasional Christians' one can easily identify the features of the doctrine of grace and sacraments of the church in the West. More precisely, it is about the scholastic teaching of the Western church, finally formed during the Counter-Reformation. At present, this issue is developed quite well. As we know, it was the Western church, which elaborated and canonically adopted the doctrine of the seven sacraments, the distinction between sacraments and sacramental actions, the teaching on the matter and form (formula) of sacraments, on the sacramental power to convey grace, on the efficacy of the sacraments *ex opere operato*, etc. All these are derivatives of the idea, specific to the West, tracing back to St Augustine's view on grace as an irresistible force, having its own created substance, though of supernatural origin [*Zaytsev Alexey*].

Evidently, all these are the tragic consequences of the Great Schism of 1054 till present day. The break of church communion led to the fact that the understanding of the grace-filled life of the entire Church and its members, suggested by St Gregory Palamas, was not accepted by the Western church [*Zaytsev Alexey*].

The tragedy of the situation is that, as we all know, the Western sacramentology in the 17th century penetrates as 'classroom theology' into all schools in the Russian church, having led to the so called 'Western captivity of Russian theology' for about three hundred years [*Schmemmann, Russian Theology*]. This has had a tremendous impact on the 'faith mentality' of Orthodox believers, having triggered the large-scale church' secularization, the same as in the West, manifesting itself in the form of 'occasional parishioners'. And if this 'captivity' is being overcome in theology, its consequences regarding the 'faith mentality' of church people are still far from being outlived. For example, if the catechist says now that there are not seven sacraments in the church not seven but the only one, that is, the Church itself is the sacrament, of course, he or she is not to be anathematized (although in accordance with the canons of the Western church one is to be accursed in this case [*the 1st canon of the Council of Trent on sacraments*]), but it is quite possible baptised catechumens would reproach such catechist for having read much of modernist 'Western' books.

Nevertheless, it is important for the catechist to continue effort in catechising already baptized 'occasional parishioners' carefully, tactfully and humbly, taking into account their previous propensity and beliefs.

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Patristic Tradition

As we said above, among important conditions for healing from superstitions are also the overall structure and tenor of catechesis, its rootedness in the Patristic tradition in its entirety.

In this vein, catechesis is supposed to help ‘occasional parishioners’ to break through all sorts of schemes, conventional wisdoms, comments and the obsessive ‘tradition of the elders’ towards the commandments of God, towards His word (Matthew 15:1-6). In other words, it is necessary to implement one of the basic principles of the patristic catechesis – that of basing oneself on the Holy Scripture. This implies not merely quoting but reading and discussing it.

In returning to this principle, St Philaret of Moscow has been, and remains, an important example to us. St Philaret believed that the objective of spiritually enlightening the Russian people and healing them from any superstitions could be achieved in his time through offering them the access to the word of God and to its meaning. In this regard, he not only translated the Holy Scripture into Russian but also wrote his well-known *Longer Christian Catechism of the Orthodox Catholic Eastern Church*. The uniqueness of this catechism for its time was in that, despite its scholasticity, usual for that age, it started overcoming scholasticity from inside, obviously focusing on quotations of the Scriptures. This is not just a ‘symbolic book.’ One should also take into account the fact that St Philaret wrote his Catechism in Russian in 1824. Quoted passages of the Holy Scripture and the text of the Catechism itself were supposed to be used in living situations – read before Sunday liturgies. ‘For the word of God is living and active’ (Hebrew 4:12). It is only the word of God, cognizable through church communion, can overcome the spirit of superstitions from inside. And if post-baptismal catechesis comprises not abstract and boring lectures but meetings of seeking this word together, everything will go fine.

That is why catechising baptised people is very inspiring. It is a great joy to see a person strengthening in faith and really renewing baptismal vows, when superstitions lose power over him or her.

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