

LIVING IN THE HEAVENLY REALM

When he writes to the Ephesians, St. Paul praises God who *“has bestowed on us in Christ every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm”* (Ephesians 1:3). Not only has Christ ascended in glory: *“Both with and in Christ Jesus He raised us up and gave us a place in the heavenly realm”* (Ephesians 2:6). We have become citizens of paradise, fellow heirs with the saints, people who live the divine life and share in the nature of God!

It is the Eastern Churches’ awareness of this truth which has been responsible for the formation of their ‘ethos’ or style of Christian living. Ours is an ‘other-worldly’ Church — stressing the holiness of God, our role as worshippers at His throne, our fellowship with the saints, and the like — because we know we belong, not to this world, but to the heavenly realm. This sense is most felt in our church buildings where we see the Church as heaven on earth and in our belief that our Church’s chief ‘business’ on earth is the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. Some see this as ‘irrelevant’, but if Paul’s teaching is true, our commitment to the heavenly realm is simply a case of knowing where our true home is.

A LIFESTYLE FOR THE KINGDOM

It is not only in our liturgical life that we live in the heavenly realm. It affects our daily life as well. We live in two worlds, as it were. One we share with every other member of the human race. The other, the heavenly realm, is ours because of our union with God in Christ: and our daily life is means to reflect this share we have in God’s kingdom. This is why religious expres-

sion in Eastern Christianity is part and parcel of our everyday behavior.

We look to the heavenly realm in **the standards we are called to live by**, the standards of the gospel, for we believe in and direct our lives by realities unseen in this world:

“Since you have been raised up on company with Christ, set your heart on what pertains to higher realms where Christ is seated at God’s right hand. Be intent on things above rather than on things of earth.”

(Colossians 3:12)

The world around us often cannot understand the standards of the gospel; more often the gospel standards are directly opposed to the wisdom of the world. The society in which we live sees the meaning of life in terms of success, prosperity, possessions and earthly pleasures. The believer cherishes his share in the divine nature far above these other realities, and this affects the way he acts, the decisions he makes, the priorities he sets for his life.

Because God has given us a place in the heavenly realm, we are in continual contact with beings whom the world around us does not even know exist: the Holy Trinity, the Theotokos, the saints and heavenly powers. The communication we call **prayer** is our natural mode of conversation with the Lord whose life we share and with those of every age who are our fellow partakers in this life. Prayer, and continual prayer in particular, are a hallmark of our commitment to the heavenly realm.

PRAYER, FASTING, AND ALMSGIVING

In prayer we rise to the throne of God who has given us access to Himself. We also attempt to take the lifestyle of heaven and bring it ‘down’ to reorient our daily activities. **Fasting** is one such practice. It stands out in contrast to the ways of the world around us, especially in a culture such as ours that endorses continual consumption. When we put aside food, entertainment, pleasure in the spirit of fasting we are saying to the world, *“We are not from here.”* When we fast we recognize that life is not simply to be found in the enjoyment of material creation, but in the relationship we have with its Creator.

Closely linked to fasting is **almsgiving**, another denial of the way of this world. Our society promotes consumerism. It says, *“Build up for yourselves treasures on earth.”* We say, with St. Paul, that material goods are given us not only to satisfy our own needs, but for the doing of good. We say, as Christ did, that our kingdom is not ultimately of this world and imitate His love for mankind by the way we use the resources He has given us.

Finally, while our place is in the heavenly realm, we do not have full possession of it yet. And, so we find ourselves each day engaged in an unseen warfare, *“not against human forces but against the principalities and powers, the rulers of this world of darkness”* (Ephesians 6:12). Many of our Church’s daily prayers are invocations asking for help and protection against the powers of evil. We recognize that there is more to the world in which we live than what is visible on the physical level.

Living, then, as citizens of the heavenly realm, we surround ourselves at all times with means of access to that kingdom. Icons are found in our homes, like churches, and we gather there for prayer. We bring the values of that realm to bear in our domestic affairs as well. There we fast and we extend hospitality in Christ's name, deepening our experience of our true homeland. We try to live every day in an atmosphere of the kingdom, to continually remind ourselves that our baptism has made us actual coheirs with Christ of all that the Father has promised.

"Enter eagerly into the treasure-house that lies within you, and you will see the treasure-house of heaven: for the two are the same, and there is but one single entry to them both. The ladder that leads to the Kingdom is hidden within you, and is found in your own soul. Dive into yourself and in your soul you will discover the rungs by which to ascend."

(St. Isaac the Syrian)

"The fruits of the earth are not brought to perfection immediately, but by time, rain and care; similarly, the fruits of men ripen through ascetic practice, study, time, perseverance, self-control and patience."

(St. Anthony the Great)

CITIZENS OF PARADISE

The choirs of saints have discovered the fountain of life and the gate of Paradise. May I also through repentance find the way to You, O Lord! I am the lost sheep. O Savior call me back to Your fold and save me.

O Lord, who with Your own hand have fashioned me from nothingness and adorned me with Your divine Image and who, when I transgressed Your commandments, did cast me down into the dust whereof I had been made: deign, O Lord, to restore me to Your likeness, that my original beauty may be restored in me.

I am the image of Your ineffable glory, even though I bear the wounds of sin. Look with compassion on Your creature, O Lord, and purify me in Your mercy, and grant me the beloved homeland, making me again a citizen of Paradise.

From the Evlogitaria of the Dead

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