

Chapter X

Modern Trends in the Orthodox Worship

When I received an invitation to talk on the above subject from Rev. Rendall Giles, an American professor who teaches worship in the Gurukul Theological College of Madras, I was having no idea of what to talk about. Because what I hear daily in the sermons of the well wishers of the Orthodox Church are two extremes; those who want some abrupt changes in the Church would complain that “nothing will be changed in this Church”, but those who claim to be the “keepers of real Orthodoxy” would warn that “any change in the Church will distort its faith and tradition”. For a meaningful discussion of the theme let us understand at first what prayer and worship mean for the Orthodox Church.

Orthodox Church is a worshipping Church

The literal meaning of the word *Orthodoxy* is the *right way of worship*. Somebody who wants to understand the Orthodox Church has to participate in its ceremonial worship. It declares the faith of the Church too. This is the reason why there are not many dogmatic books in the Orthodox Churches like those in the western Churches, Catholic as well as Protestant. There is a popular dictum in Latin about the Orthodox Church: *lex orandi lex credandi*. It means, “what we worship is what we believe”. The hymns and prayers used in Orthodox worship are full of dogmatic affirmations.

“Prayer is like breathing. With out breathing we can’t live. When we breathe, air enters our lungs, cleanses the blood in our veins by relieving it of carbon dioxide and supplying it with the oxygen... When I have hard physical work to do I need more air than when I am sleeping or sitting on a chair...where there is no prayer sin accumulates and proper functioning of the spiritual life becomes obstructed. And if you have important spiritual work to do, you need more pray than otherwise. Only those who pray constantly are exercising their spiritual muscles properly.” This is what Paulose Mar Gregorios taught us about prayer.

Many people identify petition as prayer. Actually it is not. Prayer is our communion or communication with God the Almighty. It is not just to list out our needs. We can ask God for our daily needs while praying. But prayer is more than that. In the Lord’s Prayer Jesus taught his disciples to praise God for His name, His kingdom and His will at first and then to ask for the needs. That too will not be in the individualistic terms; but in terms of one who represents others. Following are some basic principles, which we have to keep, if we want to be a man of prayer.

I agree with Robin Sharma, who wrote the best seller *The Monk who sold the Ferrari*, in his description about the four stages in the way of acquiring a skill. The first stage is *unconscious incompetence*. Elderly people may be unaware of the possibilities of internet. Since they are unconsciously incompetent they don't find the need to acquire computer literacy. As far as prayer is concerned some people are ignorant about its power. The second stage in Sharma's analysis of a skill is *conscious incompetence*. Some people may know the advantages of swimming; but they are still incompetent. For many, prayer and fasting are strenuous exercises. *Conscious competence* is the third stage of learning a skill. Those who learn to drive a car have to apply the clutch, gear, accelerator and break with utmost care and consciousness. In prayer also one has to be very conscious of what he is doing. However, so long as we become experts of driving we may be in the fourth stage, that is, *unconscious competence*. We may apply all the pedals automatically and we may even attend a mobile phone while driving. Our spiritual fathers are in this stage. For them prayer, Bible reading fasting etc. are like breathing. They can not live without them.

Those who want to become a real *Orthodox*, one who worships God in the right manner, like the above spiritual fathers should take care of the following things: Firstly, prayer should become a skill or a habit. Even "eating" is something, which we have learned in our childhood. Our parents taught us how to eat properly with out spilling. Hindus make celebrations when a child begins to eat solid food. Thus we have acquired a lot of skills and habits, which are important in our life. The list may include reading, writing, swimming, cycling or driving. Later on we find all these very important in our life.

Secondly, we should learn how to pray properly by doing it repeatedly. One who learns cycling needs to look in a straight direction, hold the handle of the cycle firmly and to use his feet to use the pedals. Our whole self should be involved in prayer also. Orthodox tradition teaches us how to involve all our senses while praying. Our posture and gestures are also important during a prayer.

Thirdly, every skill is learned under the supervision of an expert. Therefore we have to depend more on the written prayers than on extemporary prayers. It is accepted that everybody should learn how to present their needs before God. But in the prayer books we meet people who lived only for praying. Their prayers are neither self-centered nor oriented towards this material world only. Prayer should also be accompanied by reading Bible and other devotional books. They cleanse our consciousness and give us an atmosphere for praying. We should set apart at least half an hour in the morning and evening for prayer and devotion. That will help us have a peaceful day.

Fourthly, fasting and self-control are to be parts of our prayer life. We learn to live a good life by becoming a man of prayer. "Prayer is a way of training the will to desire the good as well as of turning our will towards the highest concentration of all good, namely God", says Paulose Mar Gregorios.

Fifthly, prayer is to be reflected in our daily life. A good moral code of conduct and a habit of helping others are outcomes of our prayer life. One who prays properly can't become an individualistic or a fanatic.

However, my main task at Gurukul was to take a lecture on the modern trends in Orthodox worship. Is there something like that? There are of course a some people are afraid of making timely changes in spiritual matters; they think this would lead to the loss of tradition. Actually it is on the other way round: those who are reluctant to modernise the Church will lose not only the incredible traditions but also vibrant believers. When we go through the history of Christian Church we see that this was the main reason for the reformation of the Catholic Church under Martin Luther. The theology of the Middle Ages was unintelligible to the common man, because everything was in Latin. People were exploited in the name of God and things like sale of indulgences and the inquisition were practised. But once the opposition broke out the Church could not contain it; it was so massive.

Recent Changes within Orthodox Worship

I started asking myself: Is the Orthodox worship so fixed that no changes happen in it? Is the interpretation of the word "orthodox" as "fundamental" and "adamant" suitable to our Church? Were there no changes in Church in modern times? The following are some of the changes that happened within the Orthodox Church of India in the last century.

1. Translation of the Liturgy in to vernacular languages

The availability of Bible and the worship texts in local languages is very important for a Church. Wherever it is not made, people begin to tend towards false beliefs on the one side and on the other side exploitation in terms of spirituality may flourish. Earlier all the worship texts of the Indian Orthodox Church were available in Syriac only, because of the Church's historical relationship with the Syrian Church. But our Fathers Pathrose Mar Osthathios had the vision to translate everything into Malayalam so that ordinary people could understand the Holy Qurbana. We may have to salute him when we come to realize that he did this amidst great opposition from responsible leaders of the Church. Some people called him even a "traitor" who wanted to dilute the faith. Whatever except Syriac was unacceptable to many. But he was relentless in his pursuit and his commitment to the ordinary believers was so high.

Today, if we read anything in Syriac, that would be criticised vehemently. See the change of mind of the Church within half of a century. Later on everything was translated into Malayalam; the Sunday worship, sacraments, daily worships etc. Meanwhile our *Holy Qurbana Thaksa* has been translated into English, German, Hindi, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu etc. The need of the hour, however, is to make all worship texts available in vernacular languages and to use them regularly. Whoever has got a doubt about "losing the tradition" by translating should read the history of Malayalam translation of the Holy Qurbana.

2. Sermon in the middle of every Orthodox worship

The exposition of the Bible as such was not a part of Orthodox worship, because all the prayers of it, especially the *Promion-Sedera*, were as good as a sermon. Some people had interpreted the sermons as protestant tradition. However, today sermons are essential parts of our worship services. We have to thank our spiritual fathers like Parumala Thirumeni and later on Puthenkavil Thirumeni for emphasising the need of sermons in the middle of a service. H.G. Mar Osthathios and Fr. T.J. Joshua had worked a lot to train our priests as good preachers.

3. Additional Prayers/ Change of Prayers

Those who are impatient to wait till the Church changes the prayers as per the timely needs have begun either to edit some prayers verbally or to add some prayers at the end of the liturgy. Now a day the appendices to a liturgy will include birth day prayers, wedding day prayers, prayers for the sick, prayers for communal harmony etc. Actually, this is an unhealthy development within the Orthodox Church. Because the prayers of the Holy Qurbana includes everything; prayer for the sick, poor, suffering and that for those who want special blessings (on Birthdays) can be included within the parameters of the Eucharistic service. The six Diptychs (Thubden) and the Litanies there after have got prayers for all the needy. But these are not conducted properly and we add new prayers. The problem which we find today is: the more we add prayers the more people go away from the Holy Qurbana.

4. Extemporary Prayers

Orthodox Church didn't appreciate extemporary prayers in the beginning because of various reasons: First and foremost, it was considered a protestant habit to make instant prayers. A more important reason for this was that Orthodox prayers were outstanding in their structure and theology, whereas the former was a list of petitions only. Thirdly, the question was about the authorship of prayers. In the Orthodox understanding only highly spiritual people could write down prayers. It is not something which one can do by sitting on an arm chair or in a library. However, gradually things have changed due to the ecumenical relationships. Today the Orthodox people are used to make extemporary prayers.

5. Studies about the Liturgy

Many people would like to know and understand what is going on during the Holy Qurbana. In the earlier days it was a taboo to question certain things of a liturgy. But now people know more and more about the symbols and signs of a liturgy. Explanations to provoking questions about the worship were unthinkable before. But today Orthodox theologians not only address those queries but also give scientific and logical answers, which are well appreciated by the new generation. But books have been published with this intention; Biblical foundations of each occasion of the liturgy are being discussed. This is a new development within Orthodoxy.

6. Evening Liturgy

The timing of the liturgy has become a topic of discussion for many in the Orthodox Church. The priests are conscious about the economy of time and they make the sermons and announcements as precise as possible so that the Sunday worship will be over by 10 AM. The possibilities to abridge the existing liturgy are discussed at every student and youth conferences. However, evening services has become more common now in the Diaspora. Even though many people of Kerala also would like it, the leadership is not yet convinced about the need. The special services on Christmas and Easter are better attended if they are conducted in the evening.

7. Communion by masses

The older people may remember that the Holy Qurbana was more “watched” than “accepted” by the believers in their childhood days. Those who received it were the ones who had undergone the sacrament of confession. But today the mystery of Confession is not a necessity for receiving the communion. Anybody can receive the Body and Blood of Christ if he is blessed with the absolution prayer (Hoosoyo). Even the ladies would not take their menstruation period as an obstacle for receiving communion. They have got theological affirmations in this regard from Orthodox bishops themselves. These are marvellous changes. At least in certain parishes outside India, which maintain ecumenical more contacts, the people who belong to other Christian confessions receive communion.

8. Musical instruments/ microphone

Who knows the fact that there were no choirs in our Churches until recently? Later on it was permitted, but the accompaniment of the harmonium only was accepted. Today a liturgy becomes colourful if it is accompanied by the most modern musical instruments. There is even an organization for the Church choirs only in the Church. It gives not only guide lines to existing choirs but also helps the Churches which don't have a choir to start one. See how things are changing! Let us appreciate the contribution of *Sruthi* in this regard.

9. Liturgy for the market

Now a day it is not a problem, if somebody wants to attend a Qurbana at home or in his automobile. Audio-visual production of the worship is available in different forms as per the thickness of your purse. These are good for people who can not attend a Church for various reasons. These would also help people study different parts of the worship. The Church can not survive with out the modern means of communication as far as it exists in the digital age. However, some of the worship is made only for the purpose of recording, which means, while sitting in a modern recording studio. This is to be rechecked, because it can distort the sanctity, which the Orthodox Liturgy still possesses. If the Church was the place where the celebrant and the believers met in the yester years, today it is the studio which brings them together. Christian TV channels air Holy Qurbana at any time of the day, provided it appeals the audience. That means, it is not a must either for the

celebrant or for the faithful to visit a Church for the purpose of “communicating” through a liturgy.

10. Participation of the Women

Women and children had no role in the Orthodox worship of a century back. But today women come forward and read the Bible. Yes, it is the result of a decision of the Holy Episcopal Synod two decades ago. They can even preach if the priest finds one eligible for that. Earlier, when children were baptized only boys were brought to the Holy Altar. But today the female infants also get this privilege. Women will be admitted in our Seminaries and the Church waits eagerly for their active role in the ministry.

Thus we can say that *the Orthodox Church changes!* Even though the pace is slow, it is not an unchanging Church. Variety and flexibility are there in Orthodox worship. Many people may not know that there are tens of different *Thaksas* for the Holy Qurbana. The prayers of each day and each hour of a day are different. Each song can be sung in eight different tunes. Should we need more examples for proving the variety within Orthodoxy. Yes it changes and moves forward, because it is a living Church guided by the living and life giving Holy Spirit.
