

LIGHT FROM THE EAST
by HIEROMONK JAMES DESCHENE

As the long night of official atheism wanes in the former Soviet Union, we who live in the West cannot help but wonder what will stand revealed in the new dawn of freedom for the Orthodox Faith. Our hopes, great as they may be, will surely pale before the gracious reality God will work out, if the phoenix of the persecuted Church rises, renewed by grace and repentance. However interesting it may be to speculate about the future of the Church in the former Soviet Union, we in the West must also look at ourselves in this new light.

What stands revealed most clearly in this light is the West's own dark secret - its own brand of godlessness. The atheism of the West is less dramatic than the atheism of the Soviet state, but it is no less violent. We do not see - and this is our tragedy - a godlessness so insidious that, unlike that of the former Soviet Union, it needs no external force to spread its evil. The godlessness of the West has its source within the human heart - in its ancient yearning for autonomy, its passion to be a law unto itself, its refusal to serve God and obey His laws. In the heart of Western man the sanctuary is often as empty and ruined as any church razed by communist authorities. Where the image of the Holy Trinity should have its throne within us, sweetly and rightly ordering and directing our hearts and our lives, there stands more often the image of our preferred god, the god of our true idolatry - the monarchical self, autocratic, imperial, totalitarian in its demand for satisfaction, for having its own way, always and at any cost. Listen, for example, to the rallying cry for unbridled "rights", whether these be the "right" of a mother to abort an unwanted child, or the "right" to a sexual life free of moral or even social restraints, or the "right" to end one's life. The exercise of these "rights" - each of them directed against life and the Creator of life - is as militant and violent and godless as any Soviet purge.

And what of the media - television, books, movies - which support and encourage such autonomous behavior, such moral lawlessness? Is not such support of godlessness as effective as any Soviet censorship? There is a ready acceptance by the Western media for any ideology other than that of traditional Christian teaching. Only look at the extraordinary success of New Age teaching and the readiness of the media not merely to air such teachings but to glamorize them.

What need have we for an external authority to empty churches and close monasteries when Western man, on his own initiative, abandons the churches and spurns the monastic life as foolish or meaningless? The enormous exodus of priests, monks and nuns from the clerical and religious life within the Roman Catholic Church - an exodus curiously, perhaps studiously, ignored by its hierarchy - has occurred without any open persecution of the Church. What stands revealed in the West is the success of Kierkegaard's formula for undermining the moral life of mankind - to maintain the facade of religious institutions while emptying them of inner meaning. We can see some Western Churches, in their passion for relevance, adapting themselves to the spirit of the age as effectively as any churchman in the Soviet Union who may have sacrificed fidelity to the true Faith for the sake of easier relations with the atheistic state.

This is indeed a bleak picture, but it is, in God's good providence, not the whole picture. For what the West can now begin to see more clearly is the miracle of Orthodoxy - its divinely-given power to endure in the face of militant godlessness, and to endure without the aid of all those things in which the West puts its trust: money, power, bureaucracy, buildings, programs, and the like. In the great crucible of suffering, the Orthodox faith of the Russian people has endured without the material supports the West considers essential. In the West we need this vision of the Orthodox faith rising phoenix-like from the fires of atheism, so that we might turn to the one thing which endures in the violent winds of change - the unchanging Orthodox Catholic Faith of the Holy Fathers.

As the West declines, what can deliver us from the despair of discovering our empty heart? Only the light of the true Orthodox Faith - burning brighter than any persecutor's fire - can lead us out of the darkness of this way of life.

By our faithfulness to the precious gift of Orthodoxy, by our obedience in joy to holy Tradition, our hearts must become what they were meant to be - living and visible temples of the Holy Trinity, living icons of God's loving and gracious rule over His creation.

In his Nativity Epistle, Metropolitan Vitaly wrote: "The heart of man is a throne, whereon the Lord desires to sit." If each Orthodox Christian humbly prepares his heart to be God's throne, the heart of Western man, grown weary of his self-idolatry, may begin to see the true light from the East. God, in His good providence, has sent holy Orthodoxy into the Western world in these last days not to be a curiosity, a museum-piece, a relic of the old world. He has sent the light of Orthodoxy throughout the world to be a light unto the nations in their time of greatest darkness. Like the sun, Orthodoxy may have its dawning in the East, but its destiny is to illumine the whole world, to scatter the shades of night and the darkness of death, and to reveal to a dark and weary world the living presence of the Risen Christ. Each of us, transfigured by grace and by joyful obedience to His rule, must become a living icon of this true Light that has come into the world.

It is the folly of the West to have believed in the transformation of the world by economics, politics and social agendas. It is the folly of the Soviet authorities to have believed that such forces could destroy the true Faith. War, revolution, social, political and economic upheaval are the tools the world trusts to bring about change. Against all of these, the Orthodox Christian must proclaim by his life the one power that can heal and change the world - transfiguration through love and grace. This happens in secret, in silence, in prayer - in the depths where man meets God in love. Only then and there is the wounded human heart filled with healing, joy and peace - our gifts to suffering humanity. And these gifts may be had only by a total surrender to Christ's love, by a death to all things that would separate one from His love. We must become obedient unto death by entering into the mystery of the suffering of Christ whereby the whole world is made a new creation.

We must be "signs" of the end, of the Kingdom - a kingdom that is the end of all our petty securities, selfishness, our false ideals and comfortable habits. Yet we must show that the end, though it will be an utter catastrophe for our old ways, will be finally a deep and gracious blessing, filling our emptiness with God, feeding our eternally hungry hearts with His unfathomable love. We must show the world, even as its ways and institutions crumble into dust, that Christ has already overcome the world: Christ is risen and the power of death has been vanquished. The world needs to see us - living icons of Christ - undaunted by the world's last days; we must be, as Saint Paul tells us, *as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing all things* (II Cor. 6:9-10).

In our quiet, obedient observance of the Holy Orthodox Faith, our life must radiate the light of Christ in the darkness of our days. The end draws near, but it will be the end not of life, but of darkness and death. And in that dawn made bright with the risen Christ - the true Light from the East, the unsetting Sun, that final, perfect dawn, we shall sing with the psalmist:

Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing:
Thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness;
O Lord my God, I will give thanks unto Thee for ever.

This is an article by Dom James Deschene, hieromonk of Christminster Monastery, a traditional Benedictine monastery currently located in Niagara Falls, NY and under the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. It originally appeared in the ROCOR's newspaper, *Orthodox America* (about 20 years ago) and later posted on *Western Orthodoxy* on Tuesday, February 21, 2006.