

## *O Lord, build Thou the walls of Jerusalem*

(Ps. 50:20)

### A Monastic Contribution to Christian Unity

#### *1. The Inner 'Jerusalem'*

The place where, it seems to me, the monk begins his work for Christian unity is his very inner man, his personal 'Jerusalem': his heart and mind. The primary battle that he needs to wage is with the thoughts that enter this inner 'Jerusalem'. I say this on the basis that the original source of division is the common spiritual enemy of humankind, the evil one. It is for this reason that the apostle Paul says so very clearly, *our struggle is ... against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places* (Eph. 6:12); and these spiritual forces fight against us particularly through thoughts and emotions. Being spiritual they affect our spirit. They inspire, induce or introduce negative thoughts into our minds and cause disturbance in the inner 'Jerusalem'.

The age-old experience of the monastic tradition teaches the monk first of all to ignore these negative thoughts, not to give them attention or even to despise them; to confess the presence of very persistent thoughts; to occupy one's mind with other more positive thoughts; and finally to resist their overpowering effect with humility, brotherly love, obedience, work, prayer, spiritual study and sacramental life.

#### *2. The Community*

If, now, this helps the monk to build the walls of his own inner 'Jerusalem', and thus to gain unity within, then the question of thoughts is clearly significant also with respect to the unity of the monastic community. As one of our contemporary monastic guides in the Orthodox Christian tradition teaches: every negative thought against a brother or a sister causes a crack on the wall of the monastery. Envy, hatred, jealousy, division etc. sprout from such seeds.

St Maximus the Confessor, a seventh-century monk from Constantinople, writes about this in his *Centuries on Charity*. Among many other things he says, for example, this (here in the excellent translation of the great Benedictine scholar, the late Fr Polycarp

Sherwood): ‘Do not take the reasons that bring grief to you and work hate towards your brother as favourable thoughts, though they seem to be quite true. Turn from such as from deadly serpents [IV31].’ Or: ‘A rational soul that nourishes hate for a man cannot be at peace with God, who gave the commandments. *For*, He says, *if you will not forgive men their offences, neither will our Heavenly Father forgive you your offences*. And if your brother will not have peace do you keep yourself from hate, praying sincerely for him and not abusing him to anyone [IV35].’ These and similar issues are not always so easy to deal with, but they are of primary importance for the unity of the community’s ‘Jerusalem’. It is, therefore, essential to the monk or the nun to struggle first of all at this level in order to increase unity within himself and within the community.

The name ‘Jerusalem’ has been interpreted in the Patristic tradition as ‘vision of peace’ [St Maximus, *Qu. Thal.* 48]. And indeed this is what a monastic community should aspire to be and to transmit to others, too. The monastery not only lives in peace but also inspires and radiates the peace of the risen Lord. It extends the peace of God to the people. Forgiveness and reconciliation go in both directions; and peace and unity exist only when these two, forgiveness and reconciliation, like buttresses, strengthen the walls of the community’s ‘Jerusalem’.

Furthermore, it is not insignificant for unity within particular Christian communities that often in monasteries monks ordained into the priesthood administer the sacrament of confession and reconciliation, of mutual forgiveness, to all those who seek it with humility and repentance. This ministry is offered both to monks from within the monastery walls and to laity from the outside world. And although it is not so visible, its impact on Christian communities and their unity can be pivotal. Without it many cracks on so many walls will remain in need of repair.

### *3. Reaching Beyond the Walls*

It is not my purpose in this very brief address to discuss Christian unity across confessional boundaries, especially since unity from an Eastern Christian perspective is deeply bound with doctrinal orthodoxy, ecclesiastical canonicity and sacramental communion. Interestingly on this note, St Maximus the Confessor, in his allegory on the walls of Jerusalem, interprets the corners of the wall as signifying the unity of the

Church, and the towers built on them as devout doctrines on God and the Incarnation [*Qu. Thal.* 48]. But leaving that aside, there are, at least, two aspects in our monastic tradition, which somehow bypass these boundaries, but without, at the same time, causing any confusion at the doctrinal or ecclesiological level.

One of the ways in which monasticism in the Eastern Orthodox tradition contributes to a peaceful and fraternal relationship with other Christian communities, and with the surrounding world at large, is through the monastic virtue of hospitality. Many Orthodox monasteries throughout the world open their doors to pilgrims and visitors offering them an opportunity to experience the living presence of God in their daily worship and activities, common monastic meals and spiritual conversations; or simply allowing any visitor to spend a moment in a peaceful monastic environment.

One final aspect that is the most important in this context is, of course, prayer and specifically prayer for the whole world, prayer for the whole of humankind. St Silouan the Athonite has said that ‘a monk is someone who prays for the whole world, who weeps for the whole world [*St Silouan*, 407].’ And this is not to be taken simply ‘in a manner of speaking’. Monk’s prayer should emulate the prayer of the Lord Jesus Christ which he offered to God the Father in the garden of Gethsemane shortly before his betrayal and death. The monk, too, should aspire to bear in himself, in his soul, the sum total of human life; he should unite the whole of humanity in his own being through a life of prayer that embraces the lives of myriads of people.

*O Lord, build Thou the walls of Jerusalem:*

‘that all nations may rejoice in Thy peace,  
and behold the light of Thy countenance.’

[*St Silouan*, 319]

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