

September 15th Address to the Plenary Session

By the Very Rev. Igumen Joseph (Kryukov)

The Holy Transfiguration Valaam monastery, to which I belong, is regarded as one of the most traditional and conservative in the Russian Orthodox Church. Both the history and the location aid to the monastery's reluctance to engage into any dialogue with the outside world. Located in the middle of the largest lake in Europe, it is relatively accessible only four months in a year. Yet, neither the body of water, nor the high rocks, that surround the island, nor the woods, that hide the monastery within their depths, became an obstacle to foreign invaders. During the monastery's ten centuries long history it was ravaged and burned to the ground several times.

In the beginning of the XX century, the Valaam monastery had to deal with one of the major challenges in its history, when the monastic community split over the issue of the Julian vs. Gregorian calendar. Many of the advocates of the Gregorian calendar ended up in a monastery called "New Valaam", in Finland. And up to this day there are monks who under no pretext would concelebrate with the new-calendarists when they come and visit old Valaam.

I am telling all this to demonstrate that up until recently the brotherhood of the monastery was if not hostile, than at least inhospitable to any level of interconfessional cooperation.

This gradually began to change when in 1999 the late Patriarch Alexy of Moscow and all Russia came up with the initiative to make Valaam into a main stage for the international Church music festival. The performants at this festival included Church choirs and soloists from many traditionally Orthodox countries, but also singers from Italy, France, Great Britain, Austria and so on.

Particularly interesting was a small choir "Harpa Dei", organized by a semi-monastic Catholic community based in Germany. This choir specializes in singing rare musical pieces, borrowed from the medieval Catholic liturgy as well as from the liturgical practice of Byzantium, India, Ethiopia, Armenia and other countries.

As far as I can understand, the choir consists of only 3-4 active members. And yet, through their art they were able to accomplish something, which I do not how could have been accomplished otherwise: despite their appearance, which was more than unusual for an Orthodox setting; despite their confessional affiliation, they made the monks listen. When analyzing this phenomenon, it would be quite

appropriate to recall the words of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, which he said after the concert that was organized by the Russian Orthodox Church, featured music by Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, and presented at the Vatican on 20 May 2010:

Somehow the music already anticipates and resolves the impact between East and West through dialogue and synergy, and likewise that between tradition and modernity.

Of course, one performance is just that – one of many steps that we need to make walking the road towards mutual acceptance. And the appearance of a Catholic monastic choir in the heart of the Orthodox monastic traditionalism should not be a reason for drawing too far-reaching conclusions. Yet, this shows once again that it is possible to have meaningful interconfessional dialogue above the logical arguments. In some ways the beauty of art brings people into unity, in others – it prepares the way for a total transfiguration of a person. On the other hand, the absence of beauty in human life breeds hostility. As Patriarch Kyrill of Moscow and all Russia says, beauty forms the inner state of a person, while ugliness releases the instincts, which turn a person from a creator into a destroyer.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI used to say that the true apology of Christian faith, the most convincing demonstration of its truth are the saints and the beauty that the faith has generated. In my address at the Seminar “Monastic Life and Christian Unity” I have tried to express how the faithfulness to our common patristic heritage transforms us from competitors into brothers. In my view, this message stands at the center of the recent “Joint Declaration of Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and All Russia”. Looking at the small examples that I gave above, of the Catholic monastic choir making its way to Valaam and the music of one of the leading Russian Church hierarchs – to Vatican, we see how the beauty of art, and of music in particular, is able to testify that at the highest rise of the human spirit we are able to grab the symbolic cloak of the saints, whom the a chariots and horses of fire take to the heavenly kingdom to unite all in God.