

The human person –
A reflection on Christians in the world today

Rt. Rev. Bishop Jovan

The first reality that every man encounters is the world around him in which he lives. He is part of that world and in a sense the world is his, and as such, man raises the questions: Who am I? What am I? Where do I come from? And where am I going? And furthermore: What kind of world is it and what is the world around him and where is it going? And it is impossible for a man not to raise such questions for he is a reasonable and logical being, free to ask many things of him and others. And it is not only that man asks but rather that he understands the one hand, he is part of the world and living in the world, and that the world is not distant from him nor he from the world; and the other hand that he has a purpose in the world for he in himself, overcomes the world.

It is a mistake and indeed impossible to link humankind to only the world, as it is equally wrong to separate man from the world or to isolate him from it. It is also wrong to link humankind to that which is material or spiritual, or to idealize him or place him into a different world apart from this one, for example, into a "spiritual world."

Man lives in the world, he is with the world, he is part of the world, and however a man is not merely linked to the world. However, the world is his and without this world he cannot be conceived nor explained and therefore cannot be isolated from it. But, the fate of man is not the world; rather the fate of the world lies in man.

In the history of humankind some have said that the measure of all things is man (Sophicists), and still others along the lines of Plato have said that the measure of the world is God. For us however, man is not the measure of the world, nor is God alone the measure of all things, but rather we seek that which I wanted to address in my remarks to you today, and that is: the true place of man in the world, history and eternity. That place is the God-man, Christ. Therefore, for us the measure of all things is the God-man.

If God did not create the world, it would be absurd to speak of God and creation, or the meaning of creation. And when the world is created and man is created within it, then man rightfully asks the questions which I mentioned earlier: Who am I? What am I? Where am I? How did I get here? Where did I come from? Where am I going? and equally significant, the questions: What is this world around me? What is this world? Why is it here? Can I live without it? Do I need to identify with it, or do I need to overcome it? These are the difficult questions placed upon man's shoulders as raised by the biblical wisdom of Solomon who spoke of the difficulties of man, "spiritual difficulties" not so much to live as much

as to bear the burdens of life, and to seek and find the meaning and purpose of life.

From our Christian experience, we know that man is placed in this world and sent into it in order to give it meaning, and at the same time is responsible to give meaning to it for salvation, by filling the world with eternal contents. According to Christian revelation, that fullness is unity with God. God created the world for friend to himself, as when He spoke through the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah concerning Jerusalem: "Behold, I have created you and hold you in the palm of my hand for eternity." And this is how God upholds the world, which is even sometimes seen in artistic expression: God holding the world as if it were a sphere. In other words, God upholds the whole universe in his hands, which is why he is called the Almighty [the one upholding all things]. God created the world for eternity, and he gave man his own living image--as a living person.

Man, therefore, is created as the image of God, as a living person in the world, not the same as the world but linked to it. It is written by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans chapter 8 vs. 19 through 23 as well as in the writings of various saints who had the same vision, that all of creation is linked with the fate of man and that all creation co-suffers with man. But at the same time, it awaits from man to give meaning to all of creation, and to lead it from its enslavement, and the unnatural state in which it finds itself since the fall of man. Among the Serbian people there is a beautiful story, similar to a poem, written by Father Justin Popovich in one of his articles titled "*a doe lost in Paradise*". In the article he writes about a certain doe symbolizing man's soul, which is sorrowing over the evil in the world, and how such a world has no meaning and how every experience in the world is like a bruise on it, "*a wound in its heart*." From this wound flow tears, blood and pain; and it searches for meaning in all of it until one day it encounters a man. That man was Christ, who had mercy on nature, and with Whom it was wonderful to be in the company and have life. For it is He who gives meaning to nature and demonstrates that man can be truly human, great, a child of God and faithful to the image in which he is created.

The growth of industry and its exploitation, and the whole world which is rapidly became a consuming civilization, has greatly affected the spirit of man and has exploited the world around us. Therefore, there can be no improvement of the world or of civilization, if first and foremost an effort is not made to save mankind. For only by a transformed man, transfigured in Christ, can nature be saved as the work of God and man in it. However, unfortunately, man does endure rules necessary for such transformation. The great Dostoyevsky said: man has little patience for many rules, (and just the opposite,) their existence challenges him to break them.

Man is also not a being that desires to be compelled. This is why Adam did not remain in Paradise. God could have forced Adam to remain in Paradise, and certainly it would have been much better for him to remain there. However, had

it been so, God would not then been able to answer the question raised by Adam, "could it be another way, other than the way that You have established?" Herein lies the problem of man's freedom. In the other words, there is no force where there is freedom.

Man is placed into the world as *person*, however, the world is given to him for a purpose, as his home that he must care for. At the same time, he is responsible for the world. In the words of a great saint "God has created us and the world without us, but he will not save us without us, i.e. without our participation." This is then the responsible role of mankind in the world--as priest, as physician, as brother, pedagogue, as builder, as ecologist, or as we Orthodox Christians say, economy or dispensation. Therefore we must give meaning to our human household and it's surroundings, where we live. This is true Orthodox ecology.

Man is placed to live in the world as in his home, in as much as God expects that man will live and behave with the sense and understanding that God Himself is present in that home, that it is the House of God, for God has created it, and therefore it belongs to him. God's order of things and man's order exist, and freedom exists. However Love also exists. God awaits in man a co-worker in the world. God places man into this world for the purpose of being a priest and king to reign over it. Not a king who above all rules, but rather one who above all things is *"the servant to the servants of God,"* as taught by the saints.

In the world, man lives in relationship to God, and in relationship to nature and to the whole world. However this relationship can also be destructive, for man is a free being. But this is why man is also created to be a responsible being. His freedom is linked to his responsibility. Freedom is not to do that which I want to do and way that I want to do it, for that is tyranny over others and oneself. Unfortunately, such freedom is easily translated into self-tyranny. This was spoken so eloquently by the great Dostoyevsky, and before him, witness to by many saints.

We must, as human beings, take the world and ourselves into our hands. In other words, we must have a creative, positive, pedagogical, educational, priestly, kingly, pastorally, parentally, and the brotherly relationship with the world and with all people in it. Only in this way will man truly sense that God is present in the world and that He is *essential*, or as stated by Martin Buber: that Biblical man may permit all things, however he cannot permit a situation or instances or reality in the world or in life in which Yahweh-God is not present.

Man is therefore a free and responsible being, for he is a rational being with a God-given mind. However, all things are not linked to the fact than man is a rational being. The West often presents that that which is logical, rational and reasonable in man is foremost, and therefore does all things merely rationally. Unfortunately, this may not always be done in humane ways, with love, and therefore can often lack sympathy for the pain of others be they from Damascus,

Rwanda or Serbia. And rather has its own "logic" by which it does all things and which is most often imposed on others. In such instances, man himself becomes the measure of truth, inasmuch as he has been given a mind. For this reason, they would have us believe, he has no use for any other authority that would lead him to truth. Thus, there have appeared as many different truths as there are people. Such an understanding in the West may have also contributed to the Roman Catholic doctrine proclaiming one man to be infallible, namely the pope. This is also why the philosopher Zarko Vidovic said, "logic is like a child's toy car which when wound up, goes logically in the direction that it is placed. If you direct it elsewhere it will go in that direction." Everything then depends upon direction—and that direction is given by the heart.

And in addition to justifiable concern for the world, Christians must not give into the temptation of creating a "*social gospel*" or "*social utopia*." Paradise on this earth as we know it is not something that can be fully realized. However it is our duty to do all that we can to assure that our life on earth does not become hell. The world was given to us by God to care for, to use properly, and not destroy or misuse. The world is part of man's structure, but he does not only belong to this world, but to the world to come, to a spiritual and Godly world. This is why it is expected that Christians, especially us priests, be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. On these things that are on us matters not so much to convince others concerning God, but more so to demonstrate the same by a way of our life. Only then is our work creative.

The world today, in all respects is increasingly and unbelievably fast paced. It seems as if a "planetary civilization" is being created which is radically different from all preceding civilizations. Cultures and religions are being blended together. Humankind is not simply moving toward a worldly community of inner-dependent peoples, but even more so towards a cosmopolitan unity in which the idea of the Church Fathers concerning "one cosmic Liturgy," where all things are united in a inner-dependence and symphony, becomes reality, according to Metropolitan Ziouzoulos. Today's Orthodox Christian must not in panic negate nor fully adopt the ways of the world, culture or civilizations, but rather must make a sacrificial effort to interpret and understand these modern processes, and proclaim to the world the witness of the Gospel of Christ. They must express Godly love and goodness to their ancestors, contemporaries as well as their descendants. If all this is reflected by true Christians, which it is, then we pastors must reflect it. We are those who are sent by God to lead the people and true leadership is determined by the direction in which we lead our flock. For we offer the bloodless sacrifice for our sins and for "the ignorance of the people." (Prayer of the Offering) Saint John Chrysostom said, "I do not believe in the salvation of one who does not make an effort to save others." Hence, this should be the primary role of contemporary man.

Contemporary man, day by day seems to lose sympathy for other, for his predecessors, his cultural past and traditions. Modern man is more and more

becoming a self-contained and self-sufficient being. He is distancing himself more and more from his contemporaries and is less and less mindful of his descendents and the future. A spiritual crisis is shaking the whole world. Man's *person* and his dignity are being destroyed, desecrated to immeasurable proportions. We are at a point when there is serious consideration being given to alter human nature itself. Spiritual, cultural and religious riches are being turned into high-priced saleable items. For this reason it is justifiable to ask whether anything with real value will have maintain that value or whether there will be any historical remembrance and what that remembrance will be.

The church and Her faithful people oppose such a philosophy of life. The Church, simply by its existence speaks with a mystical voice that nothing in the world can exist in and of itself, that no one is self-sufficient, that others are essential to us, that people and everything that exists must be saved, that all people and nations must work together, in love and respect, helping one another, to share their spiritual and material riches, to have the awareness that this world is a common home and in a way a temple which they must build together, and to respect and care for the church. Through the church we submit ourselves to one another, for in an empty and hardened heart, there is no room for anyone or anything except despair and hopelessness.

These modern times have brought about these modern illnesses, and there are many of them. I will mention only two: alienation and secularization of our time. These are truly heavy and difficult illness affecting all humanity. The medicine for this illness is not and cannot be found outside the church. Our Lord Jesus Christ has given the means to healing all diseases within the church; if they are take on time and with the proper dosage. St. John Chrysostom has said, "the medication is beneficial if it is used at the right time and right dosage. Otherwise, it is poison." The means for healing given to us in the Church by our Lord are the Holy Sacraments and Holy Virtues. If we receive them correctly they no doubt will heal us. Therefore, there is no salvation outside of the church, for outside the church there are no saving forms of healing. Individualism and isolationism are diseases of fallen man. Egocentrism and selfishness as a negation of communal love lead to alteration of human nature.

A person outside the church community is isolated, alone and helpless, enslaved in human or devilish ways. For this reason the world, which is not the church, remains separated and divided. In this way, man distances himself from others and by so doing remains alone in his isolation, seeking unfortunately, to be healed by the production and consummation of countless and unprofitable things and goods.

Thus, the church, especially today, must once again be revealed as the mystery of sanctification and personal holiness-which gives the blessing of baptism-as the root "presence in the world" which truly liberates and brings peace. As such the church must nourish man with life and purpose, for man is a consumer. The

church must not be used for any other purpose, except to once more teach man spiritual warfare which is even greater than warfare between men. The church must not be used for any other purpose than to transform the sorrow of death into the joy of the Lord.

Contemporary problems, which exist even in our Orthodox communities, are the relationship one to another, the relationship to the world and prayer, especially the liturgy or common prayer. People in our time are too busy and often enclosed in a chocking world and are enslaved, trapped and confused in their endless secularism.

There remains today no aspect of life not affected by secularism: in all forms of art, literature, ethics, architecture, and even religion. Even the many religions in the world today are unable to extinguish its influence. On the contrary, religions today, especially Christianity, are abandoning their mission, purposes and value and are subordinate to the purpose and values of secularism. Unfortunately today, even in the Orthodox Church we find the presence of a desire to adapt to such modern secular approaches. And we should not even speak about what has happened in the West where such things have been easily accepted. This sincere desire for the church to adapt to modern ways as needed, since the church is always concerned about the fate of the world and man, is often transformed to the abandonment and destruction of the church itself. In essence, this would mean that we should adapt the church to the world and not the world to the church-which means that the church should become more secularized and not the world more "*churched*."

The liberal thinking under secularism today understands progress as the weakening of the influence of religion on the world and man. Secularism in some ways has been truly verified, since almost universally is the church now separated from the state. The church is given spiritual matters and her mission is *private*. It has no influence on life, for that is the business of state institutions, which often regulate in opposition to spirit of Christian morale. In this way, today's culture has imposed a dual way of life for man: worldly and religious.

If this secularized religion is translated in theological terms, it is nothing less than a *Christian heresy, which* encompasses all other heresies. This is a new faith in man as god; instead of the Orthodox believe in the God-man. Secularism today seeks to exchange the church for a new idolatry, which means serving the world.

Secularism, which hides itself under the guise of humanism and the so-called "scientific outlook" on the world, is of course a universal religion today. This religion was called by Fr. Justin Popovich, the "religion of man as god." Secularism preaches that which all religions preach: brotherhood, equality, love, justice, and self-sacrifice-everything except the God-man Christ who is its greatest enemy. According to N. Burgiev, the emphasis of brotherly unity and

that mentioned above is nothing other than an attempt to create a false *sobornost*.

Today, many enemies of the church, and sometimes unfortunately even some friends, want the church to remain outside of all problems in the world. They believe that church should not concern itself with these problems, in order not to lose its essence. However, they all forget that the essence of the church is that the world be saved. The Orthodox Church today, perhaps more than ever before, has a need for its voice to be heard throughout the world. Her responsibility however is even greater in that that voice has to bear Her authentic Tradition which flows from Her Liturgy.

Today, many view the church as an organization and the temple as the best place to fulfill ones religious needs. From this perspective there are more and more requests to shorted liturgical services, for modern man has very little time for worship. We are all struggling to bring man to the church, however, we tend to stop there and not lead him into the church and its life.

And with all of the insufficiencies found within our church communities, nonetheless that which is essential to our church today, is that it does not abandon its belief, despite the fact that it unfortunately places itself in the service to the world and accepts something of that which is offered by the world. Maybe this is the reason why some Orthodox people do not understand the language of the church. No doubt the church does not always speak through its language of mystery and symbols. Church art, for example, stopped expressing the essence of the church, and now serves more the purpose of decoration. Icons were replaced by picture with religious motifs. These two things are radically different.

Our church boards are becoming more beurocratic and are beginning to resemble civil organizations. The priesthood is often understood as a mere profession and not as a calling. Love is being replaced by sentimentality. We are also witnesses to the appearance of different organizations, which are witnessing to the fact that we are loosing the sense of unity in the church.

So that we do not loose site of the good things that are happening, it is important to mention that our Orthodox people are experience a spiritual renewal for which most certainly rejoice. This is not a particular reform, but an effort to reveal the true ethos of Orthodox theology. This is an attempt to transform theology into a way of life and the effort of the church to answer the concerns of modern man without loosing its essence. This path, which has been the path of the church for centuries, is shown more and more to be fruitful and unto salvation. It is evident that there are a greater number of younger and educated people attending church.

Today we live in a strange spiritual climate, at a time when the world does not offer an optimistic vision of the future. We live in a culture that has imposed two lifestyles upon us and which is ripe for either the destruction or a transformation. We hope and believe that the world is on its way to return to the "Father House" and that return we know will be difficult but not impossible for those who believe, for Christ said, "All things are possible for those who believe." With faith we can accomplish those things, which otherwise we would not. Whether this return will happen or not depends much upon us and our readiness to transform the world and ourselves. Personally I believe that the 21st century will be the century of Orthodoxy, for despite such difficulties as secularization, the appearance of many *confessions*, materialism, and all other forms of falsehood in which the world today finds itself, the world will find the need to return to the church of Christ and His words "learn the truth and the truth will set you free." It is up to us Orthodox Christians, especially us pastors to realize these saving words of Christ in our daily life and bear witness to them to others.

We will not achieve anything by totally rejecting or accepting everything that is offered by today's secularized culture. We must rather, study this existing secularized culture in order to interpret it, and at the same time create that which was spoken of by the great theologian Florovsky, "a theology of culture." Our Lord entrusted us with the task of witnessing to the presence of the Living God here and now through theology and personal lifestyle and to help the people entrusted to our care to once more experience themselves as *person*, as church and as a living community with a living God. Only by so doing will we be faithful to the Holy Fathers of the church. Following the Holy Fathers and their teaching, we will better see how many among our Orthodox people there are who are unchurched and how best to minister to them. If the church is prepared to witness to Christ by way of the Cross-, and first and foremost we the priestly servants of the people, then the people will follow.

Therefore, let me conclude briefly and clearly. If we desire to improve the church, we must first improve ourselves and we will have immediately improved one aspect of the church. And that is our duty and responsibility and our mission in this world and the salvation of man in this world.

The concern for the world and its salvation is the holy duty of Orthodoxy. The world is truly God's world and its history is created by God, which he never accomplishes by force or without man in his freedom. The incarnation of the Son of God speaks to this point most clearly and eloquently.