

Youth Spiritual Awakening?

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

After the mid-20th century, a reform movement emerged in the Roman Catholic Church called “Aggiornamento”. This movement was born in the rapidly changing world after World War II. It sought to “modernize” the church in order to more effectively deliver the message of salvation.

Lifestyles and values began to change rapidly, from fashion to the most sacred norms that had prevailed until then. The effects of this reform in the Catholic Church quickly became apparent, during and after the Second Vatican Council. At the same time, liberation movements and the adoption of new secular values gained momentum in the Protestant churches, as the basis for examining religious and pastoral issues. Meanwhile, in the Orthodox Church, there was tension between a group calling for similar reform and a group advocating for adherence to Orthodox Holy Tradition, while a minority called for a distinction between the Holy Tradition and the traditions that had come to be attached to it over changing times and cultures.

Biblical studies developed significantly during this period: there was a spread of critical methods and the reading of religious texts in light of ancient cultures and modern linguistic and historical sciences, to the point that many theological schools began calling for a distinction between the divinely inspired word and the human author’s intent and style. Thus, these sciences contributed to the spread of a new, non-traditional interpretation of the sacred scriptures. Some interpreters went so far as to deny everything that was beyond human reason, such as the divine incarnation, resurrection, ascension, and so on. Readers can imagine the impact of these ideas on day-to-day church life and spiritual and moral teaching.

After the Second Vatican Council, a group separated from the Catholic Church and rejected the modernization brought by that council. During the days of Pope John Paul II, an attempt was made to restore unity, but with Pope Benedict XVI, the movement of critics of this modernization came to the fore, from the time he assumed the presidency of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Vatican. An internal struggle began to appear between the traditionalist and liberal groups, but it remained quiet and contained.

In the Protestant churches, the wave of modernization went further, leading to the emergence of what were called traditional churches and liberal churches. Amid these developments, a group has recently emerged seeking the authentic church. Thus began a movement of mass conversion to the Orthodox Church in the United States. Some individual conversions had preceded this in Europe, especially by prominent Catholic fathers, such as Fathers Lev Gillet and Placide [Deseille], to name just two examples.

In our Archdiocese, the movement of those coming home to Orthodoxy accelerated noticeably. In recent years, other Orthodox churches in America have also started to receive numbers of converts, known as catechumens. What is striking in recent years is that a significant number of new catechumens are from the youth.

At the same time, as a reaction to the accelerating liberal movements, some Orthodox archdioceses have experienced movements of return to old traditions and adherence to all their details, sometimes to the extent of not distinguishing between the essential and the incidental. This phenomenon can be understood in light of the modernization we mentioned, which reached a point where some questioned whether some “churches” were indeed the Church of Christ or something else.

The appeal of the slogan “A Church for Our World”—which prevailed in Western Christian circles in the 1970s and proposed to make the church resemble our world—began to fade. Advocates of this slogan had forgotten that the Church’s mission is to transform the world into the image of the heavenly kingdom.

Today, after currents have revolutionized ways of thinking and post-modernism has become dominant, Western societies, in particular, may be witnessing the advent of a spiritual awakening among the youth here and there, showing that youth have not found the spiritual fulfilment they seek in these liberation movements.

Recently, the media has shown us images of thousands of American university students praying and praising Christ on their campuses. In France, several thousand walked on foot for three days from Paris to Chartres Cathedral to celebrate the traditional Latin Mass.

The phenomenon of youth returning to faith and the emergence of a desire for traditional churches is still in its infancy. It is too early to analyze and build upon it.

However, it is important to pay attention to it, to revive communication and meetings with the youth, and to present and discuss their spiritual experiences. Sociologists will certainly be interested in this phenomenon, but how will the churches respond to it, and what is required of them in this area?

In our Archdiocese, we noticed this Pascha a significant number of youth among the new converts. Therefore, I am asking the priests of those churches that received these young people to conduct interviews with them, asking them to explain their experience of conversion to the Orthodox Church, and to send these interviews in writing to the Archdiocese Headquarters for further study.

The mission of the Christian church today is to witness to Christ the Savior in the heart of this secular society, without fear of it or fascination with it. Olivier Clément (+2009), a French Orthodox theologian, has pointed out that “Christians are oscillating between cursing and unconsciously joining the bandwagon,” and he warns that “the core of spiritual energy, which led to the emergence of modernity, is on the verge of running out. On the horizon appears the ‘death of man’ after the ‘death of God’... The time is right for Christians to arouse, with humble strength, some sense of existence, some glow of fire and light. If they do not succeed in finding a role for themselves in a secular society, they will have left room for other religions that are now invading the West” (Raymond Rizk, *Olivier Clément: A Hermit in the City*).

It is truly a time to bear witness, par excellence.