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FROM THE ARCHIVES

Faith and Responsibility

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This essay, written in 1954, was inspired by the controversy surrounding the death in 1953 in New York of Russian socialist and revolutionary Vladimir Mikhailovich Zenzinov. Zenzinov had been involved in the Revolution of 1905 and was later an official in Alexander Kerensky's provisional government, but opposed the October 1917 Revolution. Exiled in 1918, he traveled to China, Europe, and finally to the United States, where he remained until his death. Not long after this, the newspaper Rossiya published an article by one Taras Novak condemning all revolutionaries to eternal damnation. Novak gloated especially over the fact that Zenzinov had died without a last confession and refused a church burial. Archbishop John's response has become one of his best-known works.

The disappearance of personal responsibility constitutes one of the difficulties of human life today. Nations are increasingly losing responsibility for their acts, spouses for their family life, individuals for their faith. Many people would like to exclude themselves, their party, their nation, and their church from the sphere of responsibility. But least of all can people who believe in the true God be excluded from that sphere. Only a belief in idols, indulging in passions and egoism, could allow such irresponsibility. Faith in the Living God stands opposed to any egoism, especially a religious one. Faith in God is man's recognition of his great—not simple—metaphysical responsibility for his own life and also for the lives



of his neighbors. The Gospel parable about the good Samaritan, about the wounded man who was lying by the wayside and the insensitive ministers of the faith, quite clearly demonstrates the character of this responsibility. It was superbly manifested in the apostles who assumed *responsibility for the whole world* for the sake of the truth they proclaimed.

In the Russian Church, this spirit found its realization in the Optina elders and in Father John of Kronstadt. Father John prayed not for the Orthodox alone, but even for non-Christians, healing them also by his prayers. Truth is always married to mercy. Where there is no mercy toward man there is, of course, no truth.

All of the world's believers—including the Orthodox—often stumble over the same thing that caused the older son of the merciful father in the parable of the prodigal son to stumble. This older son never left the father, he always worked in the father's house. But it turned out

that the father's attention was focused not on him, but on his prodigal brother, the sinner . . . Here begins the tragedy of false righteousness. The structure of such righteousness collapses under the icy weight of jealousy. And we see how "older sons" (many of them have been found in history!) not only envy the Father's merciful acts toward sinners, but would even challenge the very right of the Heavenly Father to be merciful to those who, in the opinion of the older sons, are not entitled to such mercy. Not waiting for the Father's judgment, these falsely righteous ones already proclaim damnation upon all of their prodigal brethren. This false righteousness thus turns into a genuine struggle against God. This is especially evident in the era of the New Testament, when the full measure of truth and mercy have become manifest in Christ. A person who considers himself "saved" and "close to God" not because of God's mercy but through his own righteousness will most certainly become the inquisitor. And we see that the world is being filled with "greater" and "lesser" inquisitors, who consider their faith to be a personal privilege and even their own power, rather than their responsibility.

This idea of faith as responsibility was central to my article "On the Irreligious Use of Religion," published in New York on November 29, 1953. I will clarify the principles that I defended in my article. One cannot consider any theoretical belief *taken in isolation from the grace of God* as sufficient for salvation. Even the most theologically correct expression of faith cannot be considered "sufficient for salvation" if it lies dormant in a person's mind. The salvation of a person's soul, its entrance into the kingdom of Heaven, depends only on the power, force, and mercy of the one and great living God, revealed in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,

who has created man not for death but for immortality. Nothing human has the power, in itself, to save man for eternity. As for salvation, the only thing required of man is the freedom to receive the Holy Spirit, the freedom to discover himself as a child of God. Only God saves, and he saves only those who do not reject his Spirit, but dispose themselves with love before him, before his truth.

Man is saved by faith, but not by faith alone: “Even the demons believe—and shudder” (James 2:19). Man is saved by “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). Man is saved by accepting Christ’s life into his own. A faith that is perfectly orthodox but abstract cannot save the soul, because “faith apart from works is barren” (James 2:20). But neither can one enter the divine eternity with good works alone, no matter how magnificent and grandiose they may be, if these works do not lead one’s soul into maturity in God and are not the result of God’s life in man, if they are not the fruits of the true Spirit within him. It is possible to carry out falsely good works, just as it is possible to speak falsely religious words, for self-aggrandizement, vainglory, and self-interest. The creator seeks faith not as a simple “acknowledgment” of his existence, but as an *organic* opening of man’s heart, mind, and will to God’s life, which sanctifies and saves. This is the substance of the Orthodox teaching about man’s *organic* salvation.

On the basis of this faith, it is impossible to anticipate what the divine judgment may be over anyone’s soul (particularly that of the late V. M. Zenzinov), either on the side of justifying that soul and proclaiming its salvation, or on the side of a proclamation of its spiritual death, particularly on the side of its damnation. I am an earthly man and do not know the ultimate myster-

ies of divine judgment. But I have a kind of a consoling hope, the source of which I find in the witness of the Word of God, in the traits of a deceased man’s soul, in the power and authenticity of prayers to God of the heavenly and earthly Church, and in the Eucharistic offerings that are offered not only for the righteous but also for sinners—even for those who consider themselves righteous, that is, for the greatest of sinners. The prayers of the Church are even stronger when she intercedes for humble sinners, for the whole creation that dies in sin and in blindness. In my article, I express my trusting faith that, on the threshold of eternity, even the soul of one such as the late Zenzinov *is capable of knowing its Savior, Christ*. My hope is Christ the Lord, the one and only *Door* (John 10:9).

Hope for the ultimate salvation of one or another person created in the image and likeness of God is always legitimate. St. Gregory of Nyssa hoped for a lot more than I do, for the ultimate salvation of *all* people and the whole of God’s creation. And the Church did not condemn him for the boldness of his hope. My hope is for less, for salvation “as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:15) of all the kind and humble people in all nations, those who loved Love in their earthly lives. No matter with what crumbs of Love from the heavenly table these people nourished themselves, each crumb was nourishing. The Church does not condemn great hope. Countless prayers of the heavenly and earthly Church ascend to God for sinners and the spiritually blind of the world. The sacrifice of Golgotha is offered on every altar in every Church “on behalf of all and for all.” Here are the words that the Church raises to God at St. Basil’s Liturgy: “Preserve the good in goodness and make the evil good by your goodness . . . reunite the separated; lead back those who are in

error and join them to your holy, catholic, and apostolic Church; free those who are held captive by unclean spirits Remember, O Lord, those who entreat your great lovingkindness; those who love us and those who hate us For you, O Lord, are the helper of the helpless, the hope of the hopeless, the savior of the afflicted Be all things to all men." This Eucharistic prayer of the Church lays out the path not only for the people's prayers, but also for their sensitivities.

Thus, the hope which I expressed concerning the late V. M. Zenzinov does not rest upon a faith in an abstract idea of a "higher good"; this would be absurd. Under the rubric of the "higher good" anything can lurk, in a distorted and obscurant consciousness. But for a mind that has been enlightened, divine truth can be found in this concept. The living Creator himself is, without a doubt, the highest, the very highest good that one can ever imagine. He is also the highest truth, the highest holiness, the highest purity, the highest love: everything that is supreme and good. And the evangelical good of Christ can rightfully be called the highest good. But in an abstract sense, as a term that desires to be a substitute for the living God, the "highest good" is not acceptable. It cannot internally determine the destiny either of mankind or of an individual person. Being dependent on a person's natural feelings only, it gives no criterion for good. But, as we all are aware today, a philosophy of natural feelings, without a compass from on high, can lead only to a distortion of "truth" and "good." We see how evil frequently hides behind the mask of good and even tries to put on the mask of the "highest good." Of itself, the term is imperfect, but one must not ridicule it. The Lord, the living God, is above any human definition, but man's highest moral attrib-

utes likewise belong to God himself: fatherhood, holiness, goodness, mercy, justice, graciousness, purity, and love, as well as other attributes which can be expressed in weak human language.

The Gospel advises each one of us to sit only in the lowest place. Our Orthodox hope regarding ourselves cannot extend beyond this: "Go and sit in the lowest place" (Luke 14:10). The Savior's words are clear. Lamentable is the position of unfortunate proud people: as pride is not conformable to the commandment of Christ, it testifies to their remoteness from his Spirit. And "any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (Rom. 8:9). Neither the name *Orthodox*, nor the priesthood, nor the episcopacy, nor even martyrdom gives one the right to salvation on the basis of such a spiritual makeup that was revealed in the article to which I am responding. This is clear to people who are even in a small measure sensitive to the Spirit of Christ. Each one of us must stand as if in God's temple, not daring to raise our eyes to heaven. And if *striking one's breast, then make sure it is one's own and not a neighbor's*, especially not the breast of one who has already gone on to the Last Judgment. The Church's pastors and preachers likewise are sent out to call other people to repentance and salvation. But their words will be fruitful only if they remember what the Savior said—"I choose to give to this last as I give to you" (Matt. 20:14)—and only if their words will be taken as comforting by the ones they are addressing.

The spiritual testament of the person who refuses a Christian burial is not the last word or act of his earthly life. For us, it is natural to see this desire of someone who was baptized by the Church as very sorrowful. This is a severe symptom. But this symptom is severe not only for the one who died,

but also for us, for the Church's pastors and all those who were around him. First we could not confirm him in his faith, and later we were unable to bring the lost sheep back to God.

Great is the mystery of man's posthumous journey. One must approach this mystery very cautiously. One can neither categorically confirm nor deny anything with respect to any soul that has gone to face God's judgment. Being conscious (from my own example) of the weakness and unworthiness of some of the Church's pastors, I could concede without any reservation (and I consider it just to concede even that) that some of us ministers of the Church would be found more responsible for Zenzinov's last will than Zenzinov himself. We are all responsible for one another, according to Christ's law, as Dostoevsky saw correctly and so profoundly. Perhaps some will not like such a thought. But it is no secret to any of us that we pastors, we *believers*, we *Christians*, occasionally stand before the unbelievers of this world not as an open door inviting them into the kingdom of Heaven, but as a door that is closed and even tightly slammed. Thus, in the case of any rejection of a Christian burial by a baptized person, we must not express anger and rage towards him, but must quietly weep. Weep for him who died—and for ourselves Many *believers* will answer for the unbelief of *unbelievers*! Many who did not commit suicide will answer for those who did! For having led them to it, for not holding them back, for not helping them, for not laying down our life for them

The "highest good" is a nebulous and imperfect concept. It is difficult even to comprehend how one can believe in it in place of the living God and the Gospel. How can one believe in a candle when there is the sun?! One can only

believe in such a "candle" because of blindness, misunderstanding, or delusion. Even the term *God*, taken in the abstract, is insufficient for an understanding of God and an expression of the true faith. *Deism* is not a belief in the living God. True faith is expressed in the Ten Commandments given to Moses, in the words of the Gospel and in the apostolic and patristic Creed. But even the Orthodox expression of the Creed, assimilated by man, is not the salvific faith itself. That faith must be implemented in life. The implementation of that faith is the opening of the soul to God, a total submission to him. It is through the submission of a person's heart to Christ's Spirit that faith enters into the person's life as a great gift from God, changing his hearing, sight, mind, and will, raising him in Christ and bringing him to everlasting life. Only such a faith saves.

One cannot be saved outside of the divine Logos and the Church, which is his body. The Church is the kingdom of the Word, of the Logos, of the Lamb of God. Outside of that kingdom there is no everlasting life. But it is not possible—it is even blasphemous—to anticipate divine judgment over any soul, even the most sinful one. The mystery of salvation is in God's hands alone. Only in isolated instances is it revealed to the Church by the Lord himself, who holds the "keys of Death and Hades" (Rev. 1:18). Some who appear to be unbelievers may secretly believe in Christ's truth, belonging to it in secret, loving it as did Nicodemus of the Gospels, approaching it unbeknownst to others and perhaps even to themselves.

I knew V. M. Zenzinov only during his later years. He would occasionally come to me on Second Street in New York for a discussion, before my move to San Francisco.¹ Having returned to New York last fall from my voyage

¹ The Cathedral of the Holy Protection is located on Second Street in New York City—Ed.

around the world, and having heard that Vladimir Mikhailovich was seriously ill and was waiting for an operation, I telephoned him. He was at home, expecting to go to the hospital the following day. Our telephone conversation was brief but somehow very significant. I expressed a thought to him, to which he answered exactly as follows: "Even K——v [the name of a writer] says that I believe in God." His voice lacked a firm certainty in this, but there was in it something kept in secret there Perhaps this was his desire for faith.

I recall an incident from my pastoral life in connection with this. Once, in Europe, a woman came to me and began to lament bitterly that she "had no faith in God," that she "did not believe in God." It turned out that in her tearful prayer to God, she poured out this sorrow, telling him in her bitter laments about her unbelief. This is an example of the evangelical poverty of spirit. The woman was not aware that she already had a profound faith and, more than that, an ardent love for God. People in this world somehow fail to understand what it is to be poor in spirit. They make less and less of it as the foundation of their approach toward life—their own and those of others.

I know of another case that affirms the Church's faith in the worth of an informal, spiritual, and cautious approach toward the mystery of the soul's salvation. In the mid-thirties, a well-known pianist M—— approached one of the pastors in Europe with a request to serve a panikhida. The slip of paper which she presented contained only one name: Avel. The priest prayed. After the service he heard the following story. The person for whom she offered the panikhida was Avel Enukidze, a well-known member of the Com-

unist party's Central Committee. Avel was kindly disposed towards artistic persons, and only because of his help the pianist, with her family, was able to leave the Soviet Union in the thirties. Here is what she told the priest: "Just before we left Moscow, I came to his Kremlin office for the last time, so I could thank him for everything he has done for me and my family. When I said goodbye and was leaving, Enukidze looked kind of strangely at me and said the following: 'I know that you are a believer. If you should hear anything about me, please *pray*.' I learned about his execution, and here I am to carry out his request." This is a true story, and here is what it shows: The collapse of all the ambitions of human life can lead even some of those people who have strayed far from the Father's house to realize the transparency and emptiness of transient earthly comforts and achievements. This realization can often soften and humble the soul. It can bring toward God even that soul in which everything has been displaced by faithlessness and false teachings except for a single drop of goodness. And then, in Pushkin's words, the *barbaric coatings* fall away from the soul like old scales, and it gains its freedom and perhaps even the joy of learning the truth.

We do not know what took place in the souls of those countless *Party bosses* and Red Army officers who, passing through solitary prison cells, disappeared by the thousands from the face of the earth. No one even knows where they were buried. Only the prayers of their loved ones were—and still are—raised for them towards heaven. How many among them, these truly unfortunate Russian people, turned out to have been like *the wise thief*, and how many were not so wise, never having raised a single

sigh of prayer towards heaven? Only the Lord knows all. However, there is greater joy in heaven over a single repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous ones who have no need of repentance. We who are attentive to God's word must understand that heavenly joy. If old biblical faith entertained the idea that "when the wicked perish there are shouts of gladness" (Prov. 11:10), then the attitude of Christians must be one of the deepest sorrow for those who have *deprived themselves of the highest heavenly joy*. St. Isaac the Syrian expresses a remarkable thought about the purified soul that has been granted closeness to God: "That soul receives the gift to be merciful towards all creation."

I do not believe in the juridical, legalistic understanding of salvation. Even the Catholic Church has moved away from it, allowing that *even Protestants can be saved*—that is, understanding salvation as not that which is outside the Church of course, but as something that belongs to the *mystery of the Church*. In the Gospels, in St. Paul's letters, and in the Revelation of St. John the Divine, this mystery of salvation is seen in its astonishing magnificence, like a great hymn of creation.

Following the father of the Orthodox faith, St. Athanasius of Alexandria, I believe in the organic salvation of people in Christ's Church. Along with the Blessed Augustine, I believe that not all the souls that are now *in the net* of the Church will be brought on the shore of the kingdom of Heaven (those who give false reverence to Christ will be thrown out of that saving net). Some of those who are presently not inside Christ's net will be let in and will be delivered onto the shore of God's eternity. Such is the faith of the Fathers. The first century Christian prophetic contemplations of St. Hermas bear witness

to this truth. Salvation is in the hands of him who came "not to destroy but to save" his creation, of him who "will not break a bruised reed nor quench a smoldering wick" (Matt. 12:20).

Addressing the Pharisees and the lawyers who knew everything *about God* yet did not know *God*, the Lord said: "The tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you" (Matt. 21:31). Some have no greater difficulty than with this thought. However, the thought is clear; it is only hard to understand why it makes so embarrassed, indignant, and uncomfortable those who think it undermines Orthodoxy. One ought to rejoice at such a shining truth!

The Lord, the Father who has created all, will turn away all the demons and those like demons who consciously oppose him in their hatred and evil—the unrepentant ones. His open and secret followers he will receive, some in the morning, some at midday, some toward evening, and some even at midnight, at the last minute . . . If an earthly mother worries and cares for her children with such great love, how much more will the Lord who created us. He does not want anybody's eternal destruction. He is the *Good Shepherd*. Truly, the highest good is the goodness of that shepherding.

Any flaunting of orthodoxy, any self-confidence in a self-righteousness, and even more so, any bold presumptuousness to anticipate God's judgment by hurling condemnations in the direction of the departed and even in the direction of their "mothers, who bore and nourished them," is a frightful spiritual illness, a darkness of the spirit. This darkness is even thicker where politics is fused with religion, where a spiritual struggle is confused with a struggle of the flesh.² The delusion of

² Archbishop John is responding to this passage in Taras Novak's article: "Cursed be the day and the hour when all these appeared on the Russian soil: all the rabid nobility-Decembrists, all the seminary dropout Chernyshevskys and Dobrolubovs, all the terrorist tsar assassins, all the morons of 'February' and the hardened criminals of 'October.' Cursed be the wombs of the mothers who bore and nourished you, and the breasts that nourished all these maniacs. This is the seal of Cain and Judas the Traitor that these miserable people will bring before the face of the Righteous Judge! It is frightful to die without repentance!"

anti-Christian false orthodoxy is obvious. This is not an imaginary delusion, in response to a clearly expressed truth in the world, but a delusion that closes the door to truth.

Only he who in repentance prostrates himself before God and is acutely aware of his own responsibility has the right to denounce people who do not repent. As Christians, we must first of all denounce ourselves (and perhaps only ourselves). This is what the Apostle recommends, and he adds: "God judges those outside" (1 Cor. 5:13). This is not a justification for being outside the Church. And nonbelievers cannot justify ignoring the call for repentance, as if it only applied to believers. This is obvious. But we are accustomed to look at everything through partisan eyes, and we even look at the Church in the same way. Those who attack the Church for the sins of her members are being partisan, as are those who defend the Church in an un-churchly manner, as something that is *their own*. The Church is not *ours*. It is *God's*. The truth of faith does not belong to us, but we, if we are repentant, might belong to that truth.

Let us recall the words spoken to the angel of the church in Sardis: "I know

your works; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead Remember then what you received and heard; keep that, and repent. If you will not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you" (Rev. 3:1, 3). This is addressed to the one presiding over the Church and not to pagans or Jews. Here are the words to the angel of the church in Laodicea, again through the one who presides over it: "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:15–16). Again, this is not addressed to pagans or Jews. This is addressing the Orthodox. The Orthodox should not take offense with me because I speak more of their repentance than the repentance of people outside the Church. They know well that for every sin of people *outside*, for every iniquity of this world, the faithful Christian has a sacred authority and a filial right to unsheathe the sharpest sword of truth: his own penitential stance before God.

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The Most Rev. **John** was born in Moscow as Prince Dimitry Shakhovskoy in 1902. After the Russian Civil War, he studied at St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris, worked as a missionary priest in Europe, and wrote poetry. Archimandrite John moved to the United States in 1946 and was elected to the See of San Francisco of the future Orthodox Church in America, where he served for over 25 years.