

INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL CONFERENCE OF RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH
«ESCHATOLOGICAL TEACHING OF THE CHURCH»

Moscow, 14-17 November 2005 z.

*Rev. Prof. John Behr,
St. Vladimir Orthodox Theological Seminary*

THE CHURCH IN VIA

Christ as the «Coming One»

In a very important sense, Christian theology is *always* about eschatology and the content of eschatology is *already* given. This is somewhat obscured by the language we use of a «first coming» and a «second coming,» as if they were referring two distinct things: the first regarding the past – what happened two thousand years ago; and the second regarding what will happen at some unknown point in the future – an eschatological drama with a different content yet to be unfolded. But Christian theology does not divide up that easily: what the apostles and evangelists proclaim about Christ does not simply lie in the past, merely a matter of history; and our discussion about what is to come is not uninformed by what is given in Christ. Even for the evangelists, who proclaimed Christ's coming, he remains, because he *is*, «the coming one»: «Are you the coming one, or should we look for another?» (Mat 11.3).

This description of Christ, as «the coming one,» is of course grounded in the Old Testament expectation of the coming Messiah, the blessed one who comes in the name of the Lord (Ps 117.26 LXX; Mt 21.9; Jn 12.13). But it also reflects the manner in which the disciples, in the first three Gospels, come to know who Jesus is. Apart from the confession of Peter on the road to Caesarea Philippi (Mat 16), «You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,» a confession that Peter did not really understand, as he then attempted to prevent Christ from going to Jerusalem to suffer (and so gets called «Satan») – apart from this episode, the disciples are remarkably slow in coming to that know Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God. Whatever the disciples heard about Jesus' birth from his mother, or about his baptism from others, whatever divine teachings they themselves heard from his lips or miracles they saw him doing with their own eyes, even seeing him transfigured on the mountain in glory – they still abandoned him at the time of the Passion (in the Synoptics; the Gospel of John is different, a difference to which I will return) and Peter even denied him: «I do not know this man,» he said three times (Mat 26.70 etc.). Neither for that matter did the empty tomb persuade them, nor even the resurrectional appearances: when he appears, they didn't recognize him, but instead told him about the tomb having been found empty (Lk 24.22-4)!

Only when the crucified and risen Christ opened the scriptures, to show how it was necessary for him to have gone to his Passion to enter his glory, only then did the disciples' hearts begin to burn, so that they were prepared to recognize him in the breaking of bread. But once he is recognized, the crucified and risen Lord disappears from their sight (Lk 24.31). At the very moment that the disciples finally encounter Christ knowingly, he passes out of their sight! We are left in anticipation of his coming; the one of whom we previously had no comprehension, appears and disappears, creating in us a desire for his coming. And so, as the apostle Paul puts it, we now «forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead,» responding to «the upward call of God in Christ Jesus» (Phil 3.13-4), knowing that our «citizenship» is not here on earth, but «in heaven,» from which «we await our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ» (Phil 3.20-21). The «first coming,» such as it is, cannot be easily separated from the «second coming.»

The encounter with Christ is thus always eschatological and is itself the content of the eschaton. It is spoken of in apocalyptic terms: the crucified and risen Christ, who opens the books of the Scriptures to show how they all spoke of the necessity of his having suffered before entering his glory (Lk 24.27), is the slain Lamb who alone is able to open the scroll (Rev 5), so that we can now see how all these things were written «for our instruction – for us, upon whom the end of the ages has come» (1 Cor 10.11). Having the Scriptures opened to them in this way, the apostles and evangelists used the language of Scripture to proclaim the coming one, the one who was crucified «in the last days» and who, likewise, was born «when the fullness of time had come» (Gal 4.4) – again, an eschatological event, with the account of his birth being grounded in the account of his Passion («to the tomb corresponds the womb,» as Augustine put it [DT 4.2.9], a point

made so clear in the iconography for the feast of the Nativity). The crucified and risen Christ, proclaimed in this way by the apostles «in accordance with Scripture,» is thus the starting-point and end-point of theological reflection – he is the Alpha and the Omega (Rev 1.8); he is the one by whom all things are created, and the end towards which all things tend, being recapitulated in him as the head of all things, and this, indeed, is the plan of God from all eternity (Eph 1.9-10).

Yet this eternal plan is known only at the end: «He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was made manifest at the end of time for your sake» (1 Pet 1.20). The beginning and the end of all things not only coincide in Christ and as Christ, but, as St Irenaeus puts it, he is the beginning who appears at the end (*Against the Heresies* [= *AH*] 1.10.3). Christ is revealed, in this way, at the end, and so we, in the present, are still in the process of «learning Christ,» as the apostle Paul puts it (Eph 4.20). We look back to the last image that we have of Christ in this world, his cross and Passion, as preached by the apostles «in accordance with Scripture,» yet stretch forward to encounter the eschatological Lord.

The Birth of Christ and the Motherhood of the Church

As we explore further how the apostles, evangelists and early Fathers spoke about the encounter with the always-coming Christ – especially in terms of his birth – we will again find the unity of the «first» and «second» comings already noted. And we will also see the importance of the Church as the Mother or Virgin Mother, the matrix (or «womb») in and through whom the people called by God are born again to be the body of Christ and the temple of the Spirit – so making the eschatological Lord present.

The apostle Paul who proclaims, as we have already heard, that the Son of God was born from a woman «when the fullness of time had come» (Gal 4.4) – an eschatological event – also announces, a few verses later, that by the proclamation of the Gospel, he is himself «in travail until Christ be formed in you» (Gal 4.19), in those, that is, as he puts it elsewhere, whom he (though this time as a father) has «begotten through the Gospel» (1 Cor 4.15). He continues by explaining how this is so, applying the words of Isaiah to Sarah, in an allegory in which she represents the Jerusalem above, our free mother: «Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in travail! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her that is married, says the Lord» (Gal 4.27; Is 54.1). Although modern scriptural scholarship would separate this verse, as a distinct oracle, from what it identifies as the fourth hymn of the suffering servant (Is 52.13-53.12), they are united in the liturgical tradition of the Orthodox Church: the only time that we read Isaiah's words about the one who is bruised for our iniquities and pours out his soul unto death, on Vespers on Holy Friday, we conclude with the joyful proclamation that the barren one will give birth. Again, the Passion of Christ is the basis for how we speak of the birth of Christ, and this birth cannot be separated from his birth in those who now have the heavenly Jerusalem as their mother – the barren Virgin who, as a result of the Passion of Christ, becomes a Virgin Mother. This Pauline theme of the birth of Christ in those who receive the Gospel, is also eschatological in its orientation: it is only brought to completion when the coming Christ arrives: as already noted, Paul speaks of us waiting for our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, then adds «who will change [NB – future] our lowly body to be like his glorious body» (Phil 3.20).

John the theologian also affirms that «when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is» (1 Jn 3.2). And in the Passion of Christ, as described by John, we can see the themes of motherhood and sonship developed further. Here, the Passion is again the moment of revelation: «When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I AM» (Jn 8.28), and it is described in terms we usually associate with the second coming: «Now is the judgment of the world; now shall the ruler of this world be cast out; and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself» (Jn 1.31-2). But in the Passion, in this the «spiritual Gospel,» Christ is not abandoned, as he is in the Synoptics. Instead we have the scene usually depicted in iconography, with his mother and the beloved disciple standing at the foot of the cross (together with his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene, though in iconography these others usually recede into the background if there at all). And on the cross Christ does not cry out, as in the other Gospels, «My God, My God, why have you forsaken me» (Mt 27.46; Mk 15.34; cf. Ps 22.1), but instead addresses his mother and the beloved disciple: «woman behold your son,» and to the disciple «behold your mother» (Jn 19.26). While the beloved disciple is traditionally identified with the evangelist himself, this is not actually an identification made by the Gospel; the only identification made here is that the one who stands by the cross of Christ and is not ashamed of him is the beloved disciple. Moreover, Christ does not say to his mother, «Woman behold another son for you in my place,» but simply «behold your son»: the faithful disciple standing by the cross becomes identified with Christ – the son of Christ's own mother – putting on the identity of Christ, as Christians do in baptism, so that the barren one now indeed has many children, as we saw Isaiah announce.

Given all of this Scriptural reflection and imagery, regarding the birth of Christ, the coming eschatological Lord, in those who receive the Gospel, putting on the identity of Christ by becoming sons of

the previously barren Woman, it is not surprising that Christians have, from the beginning, spoken of the Church as their Mother or Virgin Mother, in and through whom they put on the identity of Christ. This is done, for instance, in a very eloquent manner by *The Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons*, which describes in graphic detail the sufferings of the Christians of Gaul during the persecutions around the year AD 177 (Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* [=EH] 5.1-2). During the first round in the arena, some of the Christians «appeared to be unprepared and untrained, as yet weak and unable to endure such a great conflict.» About ten of these, the letter says, proved to be «stillborn» or «miscarried,» causing great sorrow to the others and weakening the resolve of those yet to undergo their torture (EH 5.1.11). However, these stillborn Christians were encouraged through the zeal of the others, especially the slave girl Blandina, the heroine of the story, who was hung on a stake to be devoured by the wild beasts, but who appeared to the other Christians as the embodiment of Christ: «in their agony they saw with their outward eyes in the person of their sister the One who was crucified for them» (EH 5.1.41). After describing her suffering, the letter continues:

«Through their continued life the dead were made alive, and the witnesses (martyrs) showed favor to those who had failed to witness. And there was great joy for the Virgin Mother in receiving back alive those who she had miscarried as dead. For through them the majority of those who had denied were again brought to birth and again conceived and again brought to life and learned to confess; and now living and strengthened, they went to the judgment seat.» (EH 5.1.45-6)

The Christians who turned away from making their confession are simply dead; their lack of preparation has meant that they are stillborn children of the Virgin Mother, the Church. But strengthened by the witness of others, they also were able to go to their death, and so the Virgin Mother received them back alive – finally giving birth to living children of God.

Another early text, *On Christ and the Antichrist* by Hippolytus, uses the imagery of the Church as a Virgin giving birth as a result of the Passion, connecting it directly to the Incarnation and the birth of Christ: «The Word of God, being fleshless, put on the holy flesh from the holy Virgin, as a bridegroom a garment, having woven it for himself in the sufferings of the cross, so that having mixed our mortal body with his own power, and having mingled the corruptible into the incorruptible, and the weak with the strong, he might save perishing man» (*On Christ and the Antichrist* 4).

He continues with an extended image of loom, of which the web-beam is «the passion of the Lord upon the cross,» the warp is the power of the Holy Spirit, the woof is the holy flesh woven by the Spirit, the rods are the Word, and the workers are the patriarchs and prophets «who weave the fair, long, perfect tunic for Christ.» The flesh of the Word, received from the Virgin and «woven in the sufferings of the cross,» is woven by the patriarchs and prophets, whose actions and words proclaim the manner in which the Word became present and manifest. It is in the preaching of Jesus Christ, the proclamation of the one who died on the cross, interpreted and understood in the matrix, the womb, of Scripture, that the Word receives flesh from the virgin. The virgin in this case, Hippolytus later affirms following Revelation 12, is the Church, who will never cease «bearing from her heart the Word that is persecuted by the unbelieving in the world,» while the male child she bears is Christ, God and man, announced by the prophets, «whom the Church continually bears as she teaches all nations». In this world the Church, a Virgin Mother, is always *in via*, a journey which is also a process of child-birth, bearing Christ, the coming Lord, in the children she now nurtures in her womb, till they reach the point exemplified by the apostle Paul, who can say: «I no longer live, but Christ lives in me» (Gal 2.20), and can also call upon God as «abba, Father» (Gal 4.6), a point which arrives in our death in confession of Christ, a birth into new life.

Bearing Witness and Becoming Human

If we return to the Passion of Christ as described in the Gospel of John, there is one further eschatological feature worth noting: after saying «I thirst,» «to fulfill the scripture,» receiving a sponge of vinegar (Jn 19.28-9; cf. Ps 69.21), Christ simply says «it is finished» or «it is fulfilled,» brought to completion or perfection (Jn 19.30): the work of God has been completed, and the Lord then rests from his works. The period of Christ's repose in the tomb, according to the hymnography for Holy Saturday, is the blessed Sabbath itself. The work of God spoken of in Genesis, creating «the human being (*anthrōpos*) in our image and likeness» (Gen 1.26-27), is completed here: as Pilate said a few verses earlier, «Behold, the man (*anthrōpos*)» (Jn 19.5). The work of God is complete, and the Lord of creation now rests from his work in the tomb on the blessed Sabbath. By himself undergoing the Passion as a man, Jesus Christ, as Son of God and himself God, fashions us *into* the image and likeness of God, the image of God that he himself *is* (Col 1.15).

That the crucified and risen Christ, the eschatological Lord to whose coming we strive, is the first true human being, and that we ourselves only become fully human in his stature, is a point made by many Christian writers across the centuries. Already with the apostle Paul, the preaching of the gospel is to

continue, he says, building up the Church, «until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ» (Eph 4.13). St Ignatius of Antioch, more dramatically, implores the Christians at Rome not to interfere with his coming martyrdom:

I seek him who died for our sake. I desire him who rose for us. The pains of birth are upon me. Suffer me, my brethren; hinder me not from living, do not wish me to die. ... Suffer me to receive the pure light; when I shall have arrived there, I shall become a human being (*anthrōpos*). Suffer me to follow the example of the passion of my God. (*Romans 6*)

Undergoing death in witness to Christ, the «perfect human being» (*Smryneans 4.2*) or the «new human being» (*Ephesians 20.1*), is a birth into a new life, for St Ignatius, to emerge as Christ himself, a fully human being. Again beseeching the Romans to keep silence rather than intercede on his behalf, he asserts «if you are silent concerning me, I am a word of God; but if you love my flesh, I shall be only a cry» (*Romans 2.1*). By undergoing the same martyr's death as Christ, the suffering God, he hopes to attain to the true light, to true humanity after the stature of Christ, and so to be a word of God, rather than only an inarticulate cry. When St. Irenaeus asserts that «the glory of God is a living human being» (*AH 4.20.7*), he means specifically the martyr – the one who no longer lives by the strength of this world, but by the strength of the Spirit (cf. *AH 5.9.2*). Just as the encounter with the coming Christ coincides with his disappearance from sight, so also the manifestation of a living human being is the point at which they depart from this world to be with God.

Baptism and Eucharist

This eschatological orientation of our present lives as Christians– directed towards the coming Christ, taking up our cross daily, ultimately to die in a good confession of Christ, so that we are born again into the fullness of life, as fully human beings, putting on the identity of Christ himself – all of this offers a very comprehensive and profound vision of the Church *in via*, as the Virgin Mother in and through whom Christ is born, and born in us, and also of baptism and the eucharist as the preliminary entry into and nourishment for such life. Much Orthodox ecclesiology of the past century has focused on the Church as being the place where the eucharist, the messianic banquet, is celebrated, or rather the Church as being constituted by the celebration of this sacrament of the kingdom («where the eucharist is, there is the Church») as Zizioulas paraphrases Afanasiev's formula, which is in fact more complex: «where there is a eucharist assembly, there Christ abides, and there is the Church of God in Christ» (*Una Sancta* (1963), 495; *Being as Communion*, 24). While this «eucharistic ecclesiology» may have had various positive effects (the so-called «liturgical renewal»), it has also had a deleterious effect, in that it tends to treat baptism as being but a step into the Church, a gateway which once passed through we can leave behind, now being able to receive the sacrament of the eucharist.

It is important to note the tenses that the apostle Paul uses in his words on baptism in Romans 6: if we *have died* with Christ in baptism, we *shall rise* with him (Rom 6.3-5). Although baptism is a specific, sacramental event, in which we sacramentally die to the world, we are still living in this world and still have sin and death working in us – and will continue to do so until our actual death, in witness to Christ, at which point we will be born again into the newness of life, putting on, fully, the identity of Christ and becoming a full human being. And so, until that point, we must preserve our state of being baptized: «If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. ... So you must consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus» (Rom 6.8, 11). In other words, baptism is not simply a stepping stone to membership of the Church. Rather the paschal dimension of baptism characterizes the totality of the Christian life, shaping and informing every aspect of it, until we are finally raised in Christ. The mode of *becoming* a Christian, through conversion and instruction, is the mode of *remaining* a Christian, all the while learning to confess Christ more fully and so put on his identity more perfectly.

The eucharist is, likewise, intimately connected to the paschal dimensions of our baptismal lives, in such a way that we can, in turn, see our dying to this world and birth to the next in eucharistic terms. When writing to the Romans, St Ignatius describes himself as being the «wheat of God, ground by the teeth of wild beasts,» so that he «may be found to be the pure bread of Christ» (*Romans 4.1*) – a clear eucharistic allusion. St Irenaeus develops this imagery more fully:

Just as the wood of the vine, planted in the earth, bore fruit in its own time, and the grain of wheat, falling into the earth and being decomposed, was raised up by the Spirit of God who sustains all, then, by wisdom, they come to the use of humans, and receiving the Word of God, become eucharist, which is the Body and Blood of Christ; in the same way, our bodies, nourished by it, having been placed in the earth and decomposing in it, shall rise in their time, when the Word of God bestows on them the resurrection to the glory of God the Father, who secures immortality for the mortal and bountifully bestows incorruptibility on the corruptible (*AH 5.2.3*).

By receiving the Eucharist, as the wheat and the vine receive the fecundity of the Spirit, we are prepared, as we also make the fruits into the bread and wine, for the resurrection effected by the Word, at which point, just as the bread and wine receive the Word and so become the Body and Blood of Christ, the eucharist, so also our bodies will receive immortality and incorruptibility from the Father. The paschal mystery that each baptized Christian enters by baptism is completed in their resurrection, celebrated as the eucharist of the Father.

By exploring how it is that we speak about the «coming» of Christ, I hope to have shown that it is not something that we can consign to history or an indefinite point in the future, but that this is an eschatological reality always breaking in upon us now, as we learn to die to ourselves and this world, with Christ being born in us, as we are reborn in the Virgin Mother, the Church, who sojourns in this world as in a desert (cf. Rev 5.6).