

Finding Reality
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Upbeat
V.3, n. 4, 1970

Someone has said that the reason a man drinks is that he has had too much of life, and the reason a man takes dope is that he has not had enough. Alcohol is a getaway when life is “too much with us;” dope is an opening up of life when we can’t get enough. This is all very interesting, if you think about it, because it talks about the essence of Orthodoxy: life.

What Orthodoxy is all about is the experiencing of this new life in our own personal lives. Orthodoxy has never forgotten those first chapters of Genesis where we read that God created the whole world and gave it to man as a free gift. The world was supposed to be one big feast for man’s body, for man’s mind. The task of men was to understand the world and to use it for – life. Man was himself meant to be the center of the universe, the kind of creation, and to exercise power and dominion over the whole universe. Well, that’s the way it was supposed to be. You know what happened.

What was lost in the Fall was exactly the possibility of living forever. Man lost contact with his food and, in a sense, simply starved to death...because he had to eat dead food. Food that had no life in it.

Then Christ comes along and gives us food with life in it, the “bread from heaven,” the living body and blood of the risen Lord. In other words, he called us to communion with Himself, and he keeps calling us at every Liturgy to come and participate in the life of God.

Which brings us face to face with a problem. If I am put into a situation in which I can take dope, with all the promises of visions and trips and real great experiences after I do take it, doesn’t this say something else? Dope holds out the promise of seeing the world an myself and everybody else in a new and exciting way. But is this new vision of realty true, honest, real? Or is it a fake, something phony.

Because what is left out is love. Now love is supposed to bring things together – people, men and God, men and objects. Love is supposed to draw me out of myself. And the minute I leave myself, I meet – my brother. And the message of Orthodoxy is that my brother is Christ. And the closer I come to my brother, the closer I come to God.

Isaac the Syrian put it this way: Christianity is like a wheel. God is the hub, and the spokes are Christians. The closer the spokes come to the hub, the closer they come to each other. The Fall of Adam condemned men to a life of isolation, of alienation, to a life alone. Man became conscious of being a private person. Men lost contact with God, with each other.

But the coming of Christ built bridges over the gaps – built bridges between mankind and God, and between one man and another. In other words, life in Christ leads to a community, a group, a sharing and a concern for others equal to the concern for the self.

We see this in the Liturgy. Think of what you do on any day that you attend the Liturgy. We find you in the morning in your private house, in your own room, in your bed. You are alone. And then you begin to move towards the Liturgy, like those spokes in the wheel. From all over the town, men start drawing closer to each other physically. And in the Liturgy, led by the priest, the people gradually undergo a transformation: they acquire one mind and one heart; one voice and one concern; they become one body, the body of Christ. They become the Church. This is what life in Christ means. This is what Christ has to offer us.

And dope? It creates something new too. But it leaves us alone with ourselves. It is a trip, but a lonely one. It is a vision, but a vision that fades. And it does not involve love. It is purely and simply a chemical reaction in the body. It is automatic. It is like pushing a button. It treats man like a machine. And because of this it is a lie. It does not reveal the truth of man to us.

And what is this truth of man? Is it not that very literally we were made for each other? Is it not that in fact man was created to be immortal, to never die? And is not, in a sense, death the most horrible sin of all? And does not Orthodoxy recognize this in those fantastic services around Easter when the whole Church exults in the victory of Christ who tramples down death by death?

Dope is different, yes. But is it really different? Does it really change anything? Does it change man? No. Because the only really important change, the only change worth while, is the change from death to life, from my imprisonment in myself to my liberation into the community of Christians. And this dope cannot do.

E pluribus unum – out of many one. That's more than the motto of the United States. It in fact expresses a very important fact about Orthodoxy. It expresses the reason for Christ. About 30 years after Christ's resurrection some people wrote a story about what they felt was important about the Church. They said it this way: out of many thousands of grains of wheat, the Church makes one loaf of bread; and out of many thousands of grapes from all over the hills, the Church makes one wine; and out of many separate individual Christians, the Church becomes one Church – really the only work of the Church – is to make, or rather, to be – this unity in Christ. But the thing of it is, it has to be real, honest, and truthful. It has to be the real me and the real you and the real god uniting to each other, not fakes or phonies, not lies or facades. We have to become real. And the world has to become real. And Orthodox Christians, as I said, find this reality in the way things were “in the beginning.” God gave man a special responsibility for the world, and the Old Testament expresses this responsibility perfectly by saying that God told man to name things. Now when I give something a name I somehow take possession of that thing. I somehow say that I know what that thing is. I penetrate the truth of that thing. And I make that truth my own. And at the same time I give it back to that thing by giving it that name, that special insight into truth.

That' show it was mean to be, in the beginning...And that connection, that right relationship, is what Adam broke. And that connection is what Christ restored.

Do we need dope? -- Only if it can do that same thing. Can it? No! How do I know? -- Because people who take dope say so. A lot of people have experimented with dope. Like the Beatles And in an issue of TIME magazine, one of the Beatles said that dope was not a way out. Dope was not an answer. Dope was not a solution. Dope failed. And the Beatles were not alone.

Are you alone? Yes. That is one of the ongoing sadnesses of things the way they are. But pessimism is not the answer. You have to be alive. But with real life, not a substitute. Now let's be very, very frank. Is the Church the answer? Does Orthodoxy have anything to say to us in our lives today?

Sure you 'join' the community every Sunday. And no one could deny that there, standing in that community, are some hypocrites, some who come to be seen, to show off their cars and their hats and their clothes. The Church which was once the army of Christ has become the armies' hospital. Is that a betrayal? Who was it that said he had come not for the healthy, but for the sick, not for the righteous but for sinners? Well?

Dope is a present fact of life. Many of our friends are taking it, liking it, enjoying it, and getting a kick out of it. It used to be goldfish swallowing. But dope is different. Dope somehow gets inside you and does in fact give you visions. Visions not of a new world, of a new life, of a new way of being alive, but merely of illusions, illusions basically of distance and dimensions, things move and sway, come closer and move back, expand, get tiny, change color. Like a kaleidoscope. But there comes a time when a kaleidoscope doesn't really matter. Like those times when you have to be with people, with God – with yourself. Those times when you have love to give, or need love. Those times when you want to see things as they really are not as they might appear to you. You want to change the world? Fine. But that means quite a bit more than changing the way something looks in the surface. It means getting into the thing. It means discovering the truth of that thing. For that you need to become truth yourself. And for that you need to be in contact with the man who said "I am the Truth." You need him inside of you.

A philosopher once decided he had a pretty good argument against religion. He said, man is what he eats. By that he tried to say man is simply something material, not spiritual. But that man missed the point. Of course man is what he eats. Why did Christ decide to come into our lives by the eating of the bread and wine which have become his own blood and body? Of course man is what he eats – that is why we receive communion, isn't it? That is why Christ established a Church, isn't it?

Where does this leave dope? It leaves it exactly where dope leaves us. Alone! -- Condemned to the real hell of being alone with oneself. That's the real evil of death – being totally alone, totally cut off from any communion – with God or men, or with oneself. Life is the thing. Life is the hope, the only joy, the real possibility of being open to the universe, of making contact – meaningful, honest contact – with something other than myself.

At the beginning I quoted the man who said that people who take dope are looking for more life than they have. That superficially resembles the Christian's quest, too. But our quest is the quest for Christ, whom we discover first of all in each other, then in ourselves. Can dope do that? Unfortunately, no.

Christ described religion as the hungering and thirsting for the kingdom of God – described in Genesis. And he told us we would find the kingdom “in the midst of you.” And we experience this in the Liturgy, in the Church, when, having joined the priest in re-establishing those right relationships between ourselves and everything else by praying for everything – the world, this city, the president and the armies, all the Church, and everyone else, and even the weather and the food supplies – the Holy Spirit comes and shows, reveals, ‘manifests’ the bread and wine as the body of Christ.

And dope fails to do this. Because real life is more than an automatic, conditioned, chemical response. Because man is more than a machine. You see, he is the image of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the child of the Father, and Christ's brother. And he was created for love, and the whole universe has been given him as a gift to use responsibly and honestly, and he has been given the whole world as food, and he has been called to delight in this, and to give thanks in joy. And it is not an illusion. It is something I feel every time I receive communion. It is the real happening. It is really where the action is, the only real action possible: from death into life.