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DOUBLE FAITH, DOSTOYEVSKY AND BULGAKOV

In April 2005, a group of American students of Russian language and literature from Carleton College in Minnesota visited Fr. Artemy Vladimirov as part of their semester abroad Russian program. Their academic theme was Russian belief and *dvoye veriye*, the Russian phenomenon of “double faith”—the mixing of Christianity with local superstition that figures widely in Russian literature of the 19th and 20th centuries. A philologist and teacher of Russian language and literature himself, Fr. Artemy gathered with the students on a warm spring morning in the church orchard to speak on *dvoye veriye* from an Orthodox worldview.

As far as I understand, the subject of your study is *dvoye veriye* – “double faith” as a Russian spiritual phenomenon. Glory to God that double faith is not the final revelation of our life, and this is because the human soul is simple in its integrity. Our souls are not complex, therefore, any kind of ambiguity in our consciousness is an illness, something poisonous, a burden that is very heavy for our heart. Every soul wants to be integral, it desires wholeness, and I’m sure that even psychiatrists would say that a divided consciousness, a “double mind,” is not a heavenly gift, but a product of modern civilization that is difficult to bear.

In America we can find hundreds of religious congregations, confessions which contradict one another in their main dogmas, and it is quite characteristic of modern man to have some remnants of superstition that are a real hindrance to the spiritual growth of our personality. We also know that for Europeans now, Christianity is something that is fading away with the wind, and that Europe has a new orientation – some new age philosophies, perhaps occult practices, even Islam, but less and less Christianity. Also, many people who live in Russia were baptized as Christians in their childhood but were never brought up with Christian teaching, particularly those who lived under state atheism. All of this contributes to a fragmented sense of ourselves and our souls, a spiritual double-mindedness that leaves us feeling incomplete.

In investigating the literary works of some of our Russian writers – Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Bulgakov – we also come across these examples of spiritual double-mindedness, and in my perception, the spiritual root of any such ambiguity is a superficial attitude towards Christianity.

By the end of the nineteenth century, many representatives of the Russian intelligentsia were no longer enlightened by Christianity but were influenced by their studies in modern universities, and particularly in their younger years were fond of materialistic philosophies – perhaps not Marx, but German philosophers like Vogt and Moleschott, who were classified as “vulgar materialists.” Young Dostoyevsky, for example, was very much influenced by the French encyclopedist Diderot and some utopian teachings, and he had his own model of socialism, but it wasn’t until his exile in Siberia that he became a wise and deeply original philosopher. He was quite sure that Almighty God had enlightened his mind during those years of solitude, hard labor, and moral and physical suffering, and we have a Russian proverb that says: “The deeper your sorrow, the closer God is to your heart.”

Even so, we observe this split of the Russian mind in most of the compositions of our Russian writers, just as it exists in our own time. Many of our contemporary leaders and writers are influenced by New Age ideas, others by pseudo-psychology, and we know for sure how difficult it is for a modern human being to be free and open to Our Lord Jesus Christ, not binding oneself to this or that home-made spiritual observation, which can completely distort Christian doctrine.

Take, for example, *suyevariye* [superstition]. We know that many American young people are very fond of thrillers and horror films, and that this is just the atmosphere, in which superstitions, nightmares, and ungrounded fears arise. We priests also know that many people are like slaves, bound hand and foot by these psychological phenomena. It is not easy to teach them to feel, to have hope and love for Christ, Who resurrected from the dead, “trampling down death by death.”

This world of superstition is also obvious in Russia. Some people avoid walking on the path where a black cat made her promenade. Other people may say something positive, but then fear for their future... “Oh, I have a very, very nice child with bright blue eyes. He is like an angel. No one can help smiling seeing my family...” and then all of a sudden... [he spits three times over his left shoulder]... “What are you doing?” “Oh, it is something special I do so as not to ruin my future. I fear the evil eye.” But this is not a

Christian attitude because from the first century of our Christian era we have the ancient habit of making the sign of the Cross to sanctify our thoughts and to bless our children, saying, “In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” followed by a bow. And this is the sharpest weapon we can use to destroy and ruin the network of demons.

When my wife and I were students in the philological department of Moscow State University, we traveled during the summer, not on vacation, but on philological expeditions. We visited Byelorussia, where we had the habit of writing down stories, songs, even scattered phrases – we were interested in linguistics, in pronunciation, in variations in local dialects. There were no open churches then – the churches had all been closed during the Khrushchev era, and in these villages, many of the old women, the babushkas, demonstrated this phenomenon of *dvoye veriye*.

These babushkas from Byelorussia were very fond of healing people by using traditional texts of Christian prayers, like the “Our Father.” But while praying for the person who needed their help, they would often add some pagan magic formulas, in which they addressed not our God Who is Love, Who is Truth, Who is a Divine Person, but the elements: fire, earth, air and water, or they addressed the illnesses themselves, to force them to just fade away. They did not invoke the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ. This is one of the most evident examples of *dvoye veriye*, a poor attempt to combine elements that are quite contradictory in their essence and nature.

Therefore, we have a very strict church discipline which forbids Christians to communicate with these rustic “healers” and to use their abilities. Now in Russian cities, and I’m sure, also in America, we find many people who pretend to have special knowledge concerning your past or your future, who promise to heal you by means of some “cosmic energy,” directing a mystical force to your heart, but in fact, in the majority of cases, these people are not Christian at all. They have nothing in common with medicine, they use occult practices, and we know that in many cases very grave consequences result from these contacts. Unfortunately, our poor Russian people are so disappointed by official medicine with its commercial approach that many of them, knowing almost nothing about the Orthodox Church and its sacraments, come to these people who manifest this double-mindedness; they make the sign of the Cross, pronounce some prayers, but they also use Indian mantras, invoke invisible forces – demons, in fact – and do great harm to souls and bodies.

Every Russian priest is now very busy because not only adults, but also many teenagers and university students visit the church. They not only pray, but have many questions, and want to talk to the priest because our life here in Russia is not so simple; when you are here you just physically feel this tension. The main quality of the Christian soul is integrity and when we speak of this division of mind between light and darkness, God and demons, truth and lies, certainly our main aim is to try to help people rid themselves of these contradictory ways of thinking.

As a philologist, I was also a teacher of Russian language and literature, and I know that many of our famous writers not only lived through dramatic events, but real tragedy... Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Bulgakov. If you want to understand their ideologies, the philosophy of their literary heroes, you are to acquire an idea of their hearts, of their points of view. Take, for example, one of the most mystical literary works of the twentieth century, *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov. In this work you have two levels of narration: one is the Soviet time of the twenties. The other is the historical Palestine, describing an image of Jesus that does not coincide with the Holy Gospels.

Those who have investigated Bulgakov's creative life know that he was deeply ill. He was greatly influenced by drugs, by opium, and the world of his soul was burdened by demonic images. If you try to read his short stories and diaries, you will begin to understand his tragedy, how Bulgakov was overwhelmed by these spirits of the underworld. Some of the scenes in this novel are so vivid that you understand that his writing either embodied a nightmare or that he was a member of some secret demonic society.

As a priest, I remember a young girl, who visited the church here, where I confess people. She was dressed completely in black, and something in her eyes made me feel some anxiety, some disturbance. I began to talk with her and found out that she was very fond of Bulgakov. She knew *The Master and Margarita* by heart and had tried to follow the example of the heroine of this novel.

This young lady was frank with me and said that she had also become, so to speak, a witch. If I were not a priest I would have laughed, but I could clearly see this split in her consciousness. She had been baptized when she was fifteen and now, at eighteen, she had developed some demonic abilities. For example, she told me that she could attract the attention of young men using some forbidden practices, invoking demons, and that she could not



Young Georgian pilgrim on St. Nina's Way.

only attract their attention, but take revenge on them if they were indifferent to her charming smile. This young person had some experience of levitation, and certainly, it was not God's angels who lifted her into the air. But she did not formally renounce Christianity – something kept her from this.

Certainly, she did not have a spiritual father, she had never approached the sacrament of Holy Communion, she didn't read her prayers, but still, she did not count herself a satanist. For me, as a priest, it was a very, very serious problem – how to help her liberate herself from the darkness of her life and practices. I reminded her of Jesus Christ, of His redemption on the Cross, and that the incarnation of the living God as man is the ruin of the demonic network over the human heart. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the triumphant victory over sin, death, and demons...

I asked her, "Why on earth should you sell your immortal soul to Satan? Do you not understand that after your death you will be the victim of his 'claws and jaws.' Don't you know that he never helps anyone without the vile aim of mastering a human soul and ruining it in eternal fire? This is a reality, not a fable." "I understand all this, Father," she said. "But if you remember the sacred vows of Christianity..." – and then I proposed that she repeat those very vows that we pronounce when we reject the demons, before we are baptized. As a priest, I asked her, "Do you reject the devil and all his angels, and all his works and all his pride?" And she, as an obedient sheep, said "I do renounce Satan." Thrice we repeated this vow, and then, at the most crucial point, I invited her to spit on him.

This is a sacred, symbolic act in the baptismal service by which you express your domination over the invisible world of demons. The moment I offered this to her, to rid her of the demons' power, her face changed and she became very pale as if she were going to faint. I could see that there was an invisible struggle in her heart. Her teeth were clenched, and she answered, "I can't do it, Father." "But why? Satan hates you, he does not love you. He just uses your naïve heart. He offers some dubious help, but he wants to ruin your immortal soul. Do you understand this?" "Yes, I understand." "So, blow and spit!" "I can't, Father." "Why?" "I fear that he will take revenge. He knows me well and he is very close to my mind."

But I couldn't let her go away without this victory. So, at the last moment, I asked, "Do you want me to blow and spit onto his horns and muzzle instead of you?" She said, "Yes, I do. Please." So, I spat in the hearty rustic manner of a Russian peasant. She sighed with relief and smiled, and I saw

that this had been something very essential and important for her heart.

You might ask, "Is it true that it was only the literary work of Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, that influenced her to become a witch?" No, it wasn't. When we speak of the female sex, St. Peter says that woman is a fragile vessel. And we priests know that very often the most refined, noble, healthy, beautiful young ladies change light for darkness, the living God for demons, when they come in contact with a "boyfriend." If he smokes, she will smoke. If he is a drug addict, she is also prone to become a drug addict, as if for "solidarity" with his soul. He invokes demons, and she can repeat all of his dubious experiments. This is the law of the French scientist Blaise Pascal, who says that two communicating vessels will necessarily have the same level of liquid. So, it is very important to be discerning in your contacts, in your friendships, so as not to be enslaved by sin and spiritual disease by being naïve and uncritical in your communications with modern people.

Perhaps you perceive my narrative as that of a boring old priest, but nevertheless, I know that there is some salt in it, some rational seed. It is interesting that now in Russia there is a very peculiar spiritual atmosphere. After the ruin of atheism, of Bolshevik philosophy with its primitive materialistic ideology, we have a very evident splitting of our society into two parts, and I don't mean politically, but spiritually. Many thinking people – professionals, intelligentsia, parents, university students – are returning to Orthodox Christianity deeply and sincerely. For us it is neither an addiction, nor a way to promote our business or politics, nor is it simply *bon ton*. For us it is the cornerstone of our life. ✚