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CHRISTIANITY IN ALSACE: A COMMON HERITAGE

Archimandrite Philip Ryabykh, rector of the newly-built Russian Orthodox Church of All Saints in Strasbourg, gives an insightful overview of Christianity in the Alsace region of France and the first-millennium history and saints shared by Orthodox and Catholics alike.

RTE: Father Philip, can you sketch an outline of Christianity in Alsace?

ARCHIM. PHILIP: It is important for us that Christianity was here in the eastern part of France very early, and that the era of the undivided Church is also our heritage – even after the Great Schism, I would dare say. When you live in this context of non-Orthodox Christianity, you understand that God cares for His people and does not leave them. There are many stories of appearances of the Mother of God and of help from the saints, and as Orthodox we have to recognize this.

Having said that, this history is ours as well, and we can't simply regard ourselves as newcomers. We shared these common Christian roots for centuries when the region was rich with hermits, missionaries, and laypeople who labored for the Christianization of the region. From the beginning it was a forested and sparsely populated territory with a scattering of tribes and primitive pagan cults. Even under Roman occupation, the region remained undeveloped because there were so few people. Small settlements and forts existed, but most of Alsace was a wilderness.

Opposite: Roman Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Strasbourg. Erected over an earlier 7th-century church, the 9th-century cathedral was built in the reign of Charlemagne and added onto over succeeding centuries. At 142 metres (466 feet), it was the world's tallest building from 1647 to 1874. It remains the highest extant structure built entirely in the Middle Ages.

There are no written sources, but pious tradition and evidence from place-names says that the first preacher to this region was sent by the Apostle Peter; his name was Matern and he preached along the Rhine. A more evident wave of Christianization in the second century is linked with St. Irenaeus of Lyon, whose disciples settled here, and in fact, the ruins of a church from the late 300's have been found under Strasbourg's Cathedral of St. Stephen. This was perhaps a bishop's seat, the first cathedral.

Many of the earliest Christian settlements were destroyed by intermittent Roman persecution and barbarian invasions, but they were seeds for what came later. In the fifth and sixth centuries, Irish missionaries arrived to found schools and monastic communities and Irish hermits settled in these forests. There were also traveling missionary bishops from Switzerland, Germany, and Bavaria, who ordained local priests. Soon, the land produced its own luminaries, such as the Frankish bishops Sts. Arbogast and Florentius who founded a lasting church life here.

Monastic Life in Alsace

It's also interesting that monastic life here was particularly developed by saintly women – for example, the seventh-century St. Odile, who is the patron saint of Alsace. Because she was born blind, her father, the duke of Alsace, wanted to leave her to die. She was saved, however (we will speak of this later), and eventually they reconciled. The duke sponsored the building of the Augustinian community now known as Mont Ste. Odile or Hohenburg Abbey, on a mountain in the Rhine River Valley, and Odile was its first abbess. She later built a second monastery that was destroyed during the French Revolution and is the patron saint of those suffering from eye disease.

Saint Odile was the first to develop a strong coenobitic monastic life at a period when Alsace, still part of the Western Roman Empire, was made up of many independent duchies. Monasticism flourished throughout the region for almost eight hundred years until the Reformation, when most of northern Europe's monasteries were forcibly closed and sold or destroyed. In Strasbourg it was prohibited to serve the Roman Catholic Mass, and Protestant reformers obliterated all monastic life. Hundreds of years later, when a few monasteries did revive, they remained small and relatively unknown, never again key to the region's Christianity. Until now, Alsace has not recovered from this catastrophic destruction.

As an example, the small women's monastery in Eschau that enshrined the relics of St. Sophia of Rome and her daughters was destroyed in pre-Reformation riots. These were local people, not mobs from the outside, but still enflamed by early Protestant rhetoric. The relics were lost, although the abbess and nuns managed to save some of the other holy things from desecration. After the tragedy, the bishop of Strasbourg wrote to the abbess several times proposing to restore the monastery, but she always replied, "No, it's almost completely ruined, and we don't know if this will happen again." (In this she was right, as the widespread devastation of the Reformation soon began.) So, the nuns stayed in Strasbourg, and what was left of the monastery functioned as a parish church. I will say more about St. Sophia and the monastery of Eschau later.

Another famous saint of the region is St. Richarde, a ninth-century empress and monastic founder, whose abbey church and relics are still in the village of Andlau, not far from Strasbourg.

These pre-schism saints were steadfast in their faith and their will to live for God, and in Alsace our common heritage extends from the very earliest Christian centuries to Pope Leo IX, who was born in Alsace and was the last pope of the undivided Church. He died right before the schism and was later canonized in the West. So, for us, even after the Reformation, the French Revolution, and many succeeding wars, there are still relics, holy places, and miraculous springs associated with saints where pilgrims can come to pray. The Catholics are generous about opening these places for us to venerate and we have led several Russian pilgrimages to Alsace to allow people to see that this land has a grace-filled Christian history.

RTE: Are the Catholics of Strasbourg and Alsace also interested in these common roots?

ARCHIM. PHILIP: Some are interested in particular saints – St. Odile being the most known and venerated. The Catholic Church preserves the names and lives of these saints, but their approach to veneration is different from our own. They don't touch or kiss the relics, which are usually enshrined in a reliquary on an altar, or within the altar itself. For centuries, the Catholics of Alsace have been so strongly accused by Protestants that, "You venerate the saints more than God," that they are extremely cautious; it is obviously an effect of centuries of incrimination.



Although the region of Alsace (with its capital in Strasbourg) is now entirely a part of France, this is the only region where Protestantism has a significant presence. Because the Protestant minority is influential here, local Catholics sometimes respond to this pressure by not being “too Catholic” and this is why some sites where saints lived and died are practically forgotten.

There are many Catholic churches here but because the rural communities are aging and there are fewer priests, it is not clear what will happen. Some of these churches have both relics of local saints as well as relics that were brought in, such as those of St. Brigid of Ireland and St. Amand in Strasbourg’s Old St. Peter’s Church. Because of the lack of clergy, some are only open certain days and hours. For others, you need to call ahead.

The Napoleonic Concordat

I also have to add that in Alsace we have a unique religious situation in France in general. In 1801, Napoleon signed a concordat with Pope Pius VII to recognize and solidify the Catholic position in France, which included instituting “public-law religious organizations” to be overseen by the government. Over the centuries, the territory of Alsace has belonged at times to France and at other times to Germany, so in 1905, when France enacted the separation of church and state, most of Alsace was unaffected as it was still on German territory.

However, even when the Catholic diocese of Alsace was reunited with France after the First World War, its status as a public-law religious organization was left in place. This is a unique situation because, in practice, when a new Catholic archbishop of Strasbourg is appointed by the pope, the decree must be approved and signed by the president of the French Republic. Only in Strasbourg and Metz does he approve the appointment of a bishop on French territory.

By this concordat, the state also pays the salaries of Roman Catholic and Protestant priests and ministers, as well as Jewish rabbis. It also provides religious lessons in schools, and funds university theology departments of different denominations. These benefits apply to Catholics, Protestants (mostly Lutherans), and Jews, the three major groups in France at the time of Napoleon. Nevertheless, other religious communities such as ours do not

Opposite: Ninth-century relief of Christ from the sarcophagus of Bishop Adeloehus of Strasbourg. St. Thomas Church, Strasbourg.

feel discriminated against because our needs are also taken into consideration and acted upon by the local authorities.

It is interesting that such a system exists openly in modern France, whereas the rest of the republic operates under the principle of *laïcité* [secularism]. To my mind, this situation in Alsace is a good example of cooperation between the state and religion. Something close to this system appeared recently in Russia and in other post-Soviet countries. In Russia, for example, it became possible for the four traditional religions: Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism to receive funds to restore religious buildings destroyed during the Soviet era, to have religion classes in schools and universities for those who want them, to have chaplains in the army and in prisons, and to be able to visit and hold services in hospitals. The only difference is that Russian priests, Buddhist leaders, imams, and rabbis do not receive salaries from the government. I think it is good thing.

Orthodoxy in Strasbourg

RTE: Father Philip, what can you tell us about Eastern Orthodox parishes in Strasbourg?

ARCHIM. PHILIP: Orthodox parishes only appeared in eastern France in the twentieth century. In Strasbourg the first such community was a parish of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) in the 1930s, named after the newly-destroyed Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow. This parish has never owned their own property and unfortunately hasn't had a resident priest for decades. When a priest is able to visit from Lesna Convent in Normandy, they serve in a private apartment. Unfortunately, they separated from ROCOR after the reunion with the Moscow Patriarchate, which is a pity as we would like to be in communion with them.

After World War II, immigrant Greeks founded a mission in Strasbourg dedicated to the Three Holy Hierarchs and last year they celebrated fifty years of the founding of their community. They hold their services in a Catholic chapel. Later, the Romanian Church came, then the Serbian, and very recently, the Bulgarian. All of these jurisdictions work with their own immigrants and serve in their own languages, but none have built their own church. Also, because of the scarcity of priests, it is difficult for them to function as parishes.

In the early 2000's, a French-speaking Orthodox parish joined the Moscow Patriarchate. This community was originally from the French Orthodox Church that St. John Maximovitch supported after the Second World War. After his repose, the various parishes went their separate ways, and when the parish here in Strasbourg decided to look for a more canonical situation, they chose the Moscow Patriarchate.

In our church, although anyone is welcome, the services are mostly in Slavonic, with one French liturgy per month, while this French sister-parish has its own very good priest and thirty or forty parishioners who worship in a rented space. Their services are all in French.

So, as you can see, the Orthodox presence here is very recent and its aim has mostly been to fill the needs of people coming here as immigrants from Orthodox countries.

RTE: To change the subject for a moment, do you feel any lingering suspicion of the Russian Orthodox Church in regard to the seventy years it suffered under Communism? Many Russians who fled after the Revolution settled here and wrote openly about the periods of Soviet persecution.

ARCHIM. PHILIP: A member of one of the old Russian Strasbourg families invited me for tea and we had a nice talk, but soon she began to drag out all of the old accusations against the Moscow Patriarchate. When I asked her if she had read anything about Patriarch Kirill, about his childhood and family, she replied "No, never," and I said, "Do you know, he is from a family of priests that were persecuted during the Soviet period, that his grandfather was in the gulag camps, that his father was also persecuted as a priest. As a child, our patriarch never belonged to the Young Pioneers or Komsomol, and was always looked down upon at school as the son of a priest. "I never knew this," she replied. "Yes, we have such a patriarch who witnessed to his faith through all of these difficult Soviet times. How then can you say that he is linked with the secret service or that he was not faithful?"

Sometimes members of this community even come to our church, but they remain suspicious and cannot accept that something could appear in Russia after the Soviet times that is sincere and faithful, without their help. They seem to resent the fact that God did something in Russia without them and feel that they should have been the ones to restore church life there. I see that, for some of this older generation, Soviet Russia was a kind of spiritual

tabula rasa and it was impossible that faith and church life could have been maintained and now reappear. But this has been the work of the Holy Spirit.

I think what would be interesting for these people is if they could read accounts of bishops, priests, and laypeople who became believers during the Soviet period. For example, Moscow's Fr. Artemy Vladimirov has written about his childhood and how he came to faith in a family that never practiced Christianity. This renaissance of faith in today's Russia was not by order of the government: "Yes, first we persecuted the faith and now we decree that you shall practice it." This is absurd, a lack of true faith. God can work without any instructions from governments. He works directly on human hearts.

RTE: Strangely, in America it wasn't always the old Russians that felt like that. I was told by WW II émigrés in America that hierarchs such as Met. Philaret, St. John Maximovitch, and Archbishop Andrew (Adrian) Rymarenko (who suffered terribly under the Soviets) always said, "We can't judge, we aren't there, but once Russia is free, we will see what has happened." It was the people who had not been born there, especially converts from the 1960's on, who were so hostile and resistant to the idea of any good coming out of Russia. Some of these priests actually changed after they went there and saw that it wasn't what they thought, but there are people who didn't accept the reunification and still carry this mentality.

ARCHIM. PHILIP: To my mind this is the attitude of people who don't want to see real church life. They see a photo of how the patriarch meets a church leader or some politician, and they think that is the only agenda of church life in Russia. Of course, when a church is large and has an important role in society, the president and other officials want to meet the patriarch. It is normal that the patriarch meets them, just as he meets other Orthodox patriarchs, or the pope of Rome.

RTE: What is your experience of French converts to Orthodoxy?

ARCHIM. PHILIP: Among French people who come to Orthodoxy are two groups. The first is made up of those who were not previously baptized. In the West, parents sometimes don't baptize their children, wanting them to decide for themselves later. When these people mature, some of them do to try to find faith and may eventually discover Orthodox Christianity. They

Opposite: Street leading to Old St. Peter's Church where portions of relics of St. Brigid of Ireland and St. Amand of Strasbourg are enshrined.



come with a pure heart, open to Christ and the world, and their faith has been shaped by this search.

A second group becomes Orthodox because they are dissatisfied with Roman Catholicism or with their Protestant church, and they feel that there is a fullness of Christianity here. But those who come openly critical of Catholic and Protestant realities are difficult because often they are trying to find an ideal church or community, which doesn't exist. When I meet such people and they begin making accusations against the human failings of the Catholic or Protestant churches, I tell them, "You will meet the same problems in the Orthodox Church. You should not think that we are better because sometimes we also have negligent bishops, incompetent priests, and confused faithful. But what you *can* find in the Orthodox Church is a fullness of faith, this direct way to Christ."

When they insist, "But you have better priests than in the Catholic Church," I say, "No, I'm not better. I'm a sinner and you cannot idealize human beings." Sometimes, I'm not sure that they will even remain in the Orthodox Church, and in these cases it's better for them to prepare for a longer period than those who have not been previously baptized.

Strasbourg is in the region of Alsace, and its other cities of Mulhouse and Metz also have an Orthodox presence that arose after World War II. Early twentieth-century Russians generally didn't come here as they perceived this to be a German-speaking culture. Not only were Russians and Germans on opposite sides in World War I and II, but for centuries, Russians have felt culturally closer to the French.

However, there have been signs that Orthodox Christianity would eventually be planted in this region. There is a very interesting story from the 1930's told by the venerable Metropolitan Benjamin Fedchenkov. One wealthy Protestant noblewoman from Alsace (here people retain their former titles and remember their lineage although the state does not officially recognize them) wrote to Met. Benjamin, who at that time was the Moscow Patriarchal bishop in Paris. She told him that one day, while sitting in her garden in the sun reading a book about St. Francis of Assisi, she fell asleep, and in a dream saw St. Francis coming toward her in the garden. There was another elder with him, a little shorter and bent over, who was as bright as the sun. Saint Francis led him up to her, and pointing at him said, "In his church is the truth." When she woke up, the Russian Church immediately came to mind. She had read about the persecution in Russia, so had an idea of the church.

After some time passed, she hired an immigrant Russian worker to help on her estate. The day after he came, she went to his room to see if he was settled, and looking at his icons recognized the elder she had seen with St. Francis. She asked him who it was, and the Russian told her that it was St. Seraphim of Sarov. So, she wrote a letter to the metropolitan about this dream and asked him to come and speak to her about the Orthodox Church. This was written down by Met. Benjamin, who did come to Alsace to talk to her but never recorded her name or location because she was still alive when he wrote her story.

Once, before I came to Strasbourg, Archbishop George of Nizhny-Novgorod passed through Strasbourg with Matushka Sergiya, the abbess of Diveyevo, and the bishop celebrated liturgy in our previous church. They gave our parish an icon of St. Seraphim of Sarov with a small portion of his relics. I believe that this gift coincides with the prayers of St. Seraphim for this land and his appearance to a woman who had never heard of him.

European Spirituality

RTE: What can you tell us about contemporary Christianity in Alsace?

ARCHIM. PHILIP: Catholic and Protestant churches are preserved by the state if they are historically important, but as I said, I see that many churches in villages are closed because there are fewer priests and it is mostly the elderly who go to church. Sometimes the church may be open, but can feel a bit abandoned if there isn't a very active prayer life or funds to support it. There is probably more life in city parishes and certainly in monasteries. To add to this rural problem, even if people want to have an active church life, their priest may be assigned four or five parishes, so he can only come every few weeks. There may be interested people, but not always a priest around whom they can gather. This drop in vocations is a huge problem for the Catholic Church in France, since their tradition does not allow married priests.

RTE: How has Islam impacted the region?

ARCHIM. PHILIP: Although there are a few Muslim organizations that proselytize and awaken an interest in non-participating Muslims, I don't see interest in Islam as a spiritual tradition among Europeans, except perhaps among those who have Muslim spouses. I think that Europeans are in search of

spirituality, but they don't look to Islam for this. Interest in Islam is almost always confined to the realm of art, culture, and history. On the other hand, some Muslims do become Christian here, but no one speaks of this openly because both the churches and the former Muslims could be attacked. This is not right, of course. People should be able to change their faith and their rights should be protected.

Of course, there are radical Muslims who attack cars, businesses, and churches, but this is certainly not most Muslims. I have met many Muslims here who are very friendly to Christians, interested in Christianity, and who want to live in peace. We had French Muslim construction workers on our church site who were always very respectful that they were building a place of worship. Some of them fasted strictly during Ramadan, and I could see how neither eating nor drinking until sundown was very difficult for them, especially on hot summer days.

I also see that there is a basic lack of respect for Muslims by some Europeans. It's not right to refuse to see the difference between the Islamic faith and radicalism, between peaceful Muslims and terrorists. The Muslims themselves speak out against these things, but frequently, such hostile Europeans are not just against Islam – they are against any religion.

Secularism and Searching

RTE: What can you say about this secular bias against religion?

ARCHIM. PHILIP: Sometimes, you find government administrators who dislike you simply because you are religious, although, as in my experience with the city during our construction, many are also warm and courteous. But religious people frequently tell me that they feel this, so there is some polarization between people who deny religion and those who are religious. Animosity in France is not so much about Christians versus Muslims – it is much more often directed toward religious people by the non-religious. Both Muslims and Christians have this sense of God who is our Creator and of sacred things in general. We also share moral values, such as the importance of family and children. From my experience, you can't assume that any individual Muslim has extreme views about such things as the role of women, or even about Christianity. We have to get to know people.

Those French Europeans who are searching outside of Christianity for spirituality often go to Hinduism or Buddhism. Here, even in French shops and restaurants you can see statues of Buddha or other oriental deities. (Of course, for many, these statues do not mean that they are Buddhist, but are a sign of calmness, of peace – some cultural features.) Such statues may be in a bank or a furniture store, but you will never see an image of Christ or the Mother of God there. If it is unacceptable to have Catholic crosses and statues in public places, why can you have statues of Buddha? If you are going to say that the public space should be free of religion, why are such statues allowed?

The Dalai Lama has come to Strasbourg two or three times to speak about spirituality to a full stadium of people. Some French Christians go because they are searching for a deep spirituality that they don't think they can find in their own churches.

RTE: Which is sad because they have such a rich heritage. Also, the Dalai Lama is a very sympathetic figure.

ARCHIM. PHILIP: Yes, He is an interesting person, and he has some deep human wisdom. People are lost today. Their schools are not teaching them what it is to be a human being, but only, "You are free, you can do what you want." That is all. But no one teaches how to be a human being. They are taught to understand their wishes and desires, but not, "What is my essence, my task in life?" or "What is my place?"

It's so important today in talking to people to start with basics such as, "Who are we? What is human nature?" It's not your individuality or your personality but something even more fundamental; your life is unique. Many people here seem to believe in reincarnation, but a human being, both body and soul, is unique and unrepeatable. ✦