

Rejection of all the above-said is another way of deliberate alienation from God. Denial of these sacraments means a rebellion against God.

Fr. John Jillions: Critical questions are part of discernment, especially for a faith rooted in history. See for example the work of Orthodox New Testament scholars Veselin Kesich, John Breck and Theodore Stylianopoulos. Without undermining the importance of scholarship, the fathers, liturgical life—i.e., the normal context of church life—the scriptures and tradition always preserve the ability of individuals to hear the Word of God speaking to them directly through the words of the Scriptures. Indeed, this is one of the distinguishing marks of Church after Pentecost, that all have access to the Spirit. Yes, we have to discern the spirits, and usually require the help of others to do so, but it should be normal for the Orthodox Christian to read the Scriptures and encounter God himself there, without perpetual fear of getting it wrong. We are now a «kingdom of priests» (see Rev 1:6, 5:10, 2 Pet 2:5) and not limited to a caste of priests. All who have been baptized into Christ «have put on Christ» (Gal 3:27).

Nadezhda Lyakh: **Contemplation of God via the Church or even the Bible is similar to watching a TV program or reading a newspaper instead of talking with direct participants of the event. Is this blasphemy?**

Boris Kriger: As soon as Adam and Eve broke the commandment not to partake a forbidden fruit, they could not stay in paradise anymore. Sin obstructs our view and we cannot see God. The Church is the place where we can be purged of sin through repentance and confession. Without repenting our sins, we will not see or hear God and, therefore, will misinterpret His words. Saint John Chrysostom wrote: «When after meeting an obstacle we fall into a sin, there is one thing the Lord asks from us, knowing the weakness of our nature: He asks us not to surrender ourselves to despair, but to give up the sins and hurry up to make a confession. If we do that, He promises us we will be having mercy soon, as He Himself says: «Shall they fall, and not arise? Shall he turn away, and not return?» (Jeremiah, 8: 4)

Nadezhda Lyakh: **And now let me tell you a bit more about my attitude to the Church. My relationship with God is far better than that with the Church. God is merciful indeed. I talk with him, discuss things, and address Him fairly often. And I pray, of course. A little bit. «Lord's Prayer...» and my «own» prayers, so to say. I am sure He perfectly understands my prayers and the sincerity of them. I do not find anything for myself in these religious ceremonies, though I light candles in the church from time to time. Besides, I guess He does not care from where I am talking to Him—whether I am in the church or out in the open, looking up to the skies.**

Boris Kriger: Saint John Chrysostom wrote: «If you want to be saved, be in the Church, and it will not extradite you. The Church is a fence: if you are within its boundaries, you will not be offended by a wolf; should you happen to come out, then you will be captured by the beast. Do not avoid the Church: there is nothing in the world stronger than the Church. It is your hope and your salvation.»

The Sacraments of the Church were not invented by clergy. The sacrament at the Divine Liturgy directly accomplishes the testament of Jesus Christ pronounced at the Mystical Supper. He took the bread, blessed it, looked up into the skies, proclaimed the Lord, broke the bread, and handed it over to His disciples with wonderful, absolutely phenomenal words that you hear at every Divine Liturgy: «Take, eat; this is my body which is broken for you for the remission of sins.» After that, Lord Jesus Christ blessed the cup with wine and handed it over to His disciples, saying: «Drink from this cup, everybody, for this cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.»

The apostles accepted those mysterious words in their hearts and believed that Lord Jesus Christ is the Bread of Life that came down from heaven. And at the Mystical Supper, as He gave them His Flesh and His Blood as bread and wine, they remembered His words with a deep faith: «Should you not eat my flesh, and drink my blood, then you will not have eternal life. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.» They had accepted those words in their hearts.

Here we see the utmost importance of this Sacrament: the Sacrament of Oblation of Christ's Flesh and Blood established by the Lord Himself for us to repeat in remembrance of Him. So are there any limits of human pride if it averts us from this commandment and makes us think of it as of a meaningless religious ceremony and not as of a sacrament?



Walking with spiritual father Igumen Nestor (Mikhailetchko)

Saint Theophan the Recluse wrote: «Approach the sacrament of communion without a moment's hesitation. If you approach it with the faith in the Lord present in the sacraments, if you are full with devotion and are ready to give all your strength for the service of one God, then you shall not be in doubt of whether you deserve this. There is no one who can declare himself to be a fully deserving communicant. Everyone is dependent on the grace of God. You should do the same. God loves the communicants and is kind to their faults if they are in the right state of mind. The procedure of oblation itself will gradually correct these faults... You shall give everything to God in your prayers, with a child's belief... And He will accept it benevolently and make everything right.»

Nadezhda Lyakh: **Yes, I have read the article «Why Do You Need to Go to the Church» in one of the issues of your newspaper, but... By the way, what about hermits who had left for some «caves» to live there? It was them who did that for the sake of God, to become closer to Him, right? Did not they need the prayers offered in the church?**

Boris Kriger: Again, you are trying to compare ordinary people with the men of God. The hermits were spending days and nights praying and confessing. By the way, they gathered together, from time to time, to accept Holy Communion, or somebody brought the Eucharist to them (for example, as was the case with Mary of Egypt).

Fr. John Jillions: Of course everything Boris says is right. But we need to give a credit to the pathos in Nadezhda's question: there is a lot that seems empty and pointless in church services, that does not seem to connect at all with ones spiritual life, that goes forward mechanically—if even beautifully—with more attention to ritual than to content or to the lives of the people attending. This is a complaint heard often, even by many who go to church frequently, let alone those who go for a while and then give up. I accept the need for apologetics, but part of that is to accept the legitimate criticisms that come our way. And that ability to be self-critical is something that Fr Alexander Schmemmann says the Orthodox have yet to acquire.

Nadezhda Lyakh: **The problem is that when I am reading the «Orthodox Faith» newspaper, I am still reading it from a skeptic's point of view. And what is more, I happen to think sometimes: «They are fooling me somewhere around here.» Or like that: «Here I observe a very cunning and sophisticated manipulation of my mind.» A very unpleasant feeling, especially considering the fact that the Church had been learning how to manipulate human minds for two millennia already (has it not?). The Church has learned to do**

it fairly well. I apologize for being so bold here. However, it is not only Orthodox Christians who have a spiritual experience. Catholics, Lutherans, Adventists, Pentecostals, Buddhists, and Krishnaites have it as well... Moreover, skeptics, atheists, and agnostics also have a spiritual experience. They might even acquire a very extensive spiritual experience. As far as I am concerned, my experience also includes an attempt of some organization to manipulate my mind. From the best of motives, of course! No doubts! As a result, I have acquired an immunity (a strong one, I hope) to such «pinpricks». And I must say there are absolutely no attempts to manipulate the minds of readers in the books written by you, Boris, including your philosophic and cosmological books... They present an open-hearted, clear and fair conversation of an author with his readers. A question—contemplation—an answer that encourages our own thinking and deliberation. And as for the newspaper... I am sorry. Well anyway, it is a necessary newspaper for many people. And it helps many people. And it contains a number of good and wise stories. However, all of them are manipulating our minds to a certain degree.

Boris Kriger: The presence of a «spiritual» experience does not necessarily mean that it was acquired from God. We have already mentioned that demons exist... Since they are spirits, they are capable of giving us some «spiritual» experience. They wear a disguise of spirits of the light, and it may be difficult to distinguish the light from the dark. So the Savior tells us: «If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness?»

Saint Ignatius Bryanchaninov wrote: «Those who think it is possible to be saved without faith in Christ are therefore rejecting Christ and, perhaps without knowing, are falling into a heavy sin of blasphemy.» Our newspaper is called «Orthodox Faith» and it publishes any materials related to the Orthodox faith, to its advocacy and clarification. If you are not interested in Orthodoxy, what are you reading this newspaper for? How is it possible that we manipulate your mind if you deliberately refuse to read it? And if you say you belong to Orthodoxy, while the most of your affirmations are in conflict with Orthodoxy, then who is the manipulator? Is not it you who is trying to make yourself and others believe that your beliefs and perceptions of God are in any way connected to Orthodoxy?

Fr. John Jillions: Nor does it mean that the source of any spirituality beyond the orthodoxy is demonic. This was the Pharisees charge against the healings of Jesus, «he casts out demons by the prince of demons» (Mt 9:34). In general, we Orthodox have no trouble seeing demons; we have a lot more difficulty seeing angels in unexpected places.

Nadezhda Lyakh: **There is one thing I am confident about in my life: whether I am a believer in God or not; whether anyone is able to prove there is eternal life after death or not; whether the Universe was created by God or not; whether Jesus Christ is the Son of God and He resurrected on the third day after death or not...—these things will not have any influence on my life or conduct. There will be absolutely no changes in my life (not taking into account that I have made a lot of mistakes in my life, of course. But this is my road and I had to walk it from the beginning to the end.)**

Boris Kriger: It is a deceptive impression. As soon as you give up fighting with God, as soon as you yield and embrace Him meekly, join Him, through His Holy Sacraments, you will be surprised to see that your life has taken a turn for the better. It does not mean you will become a more rich and successful person. You will get closer to God. You will get a clearer picture of your sins. You will find spiritual closure and justification. You will cry the tears of tenderness. And, perhaps, you will start walking down the path shown to us by Christ and, what is the most important, you will understand there is no other true path in your life, for He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Nadezhda Lyakh: **I have received a lot of answers to my baffled questions. The issues of the translations of the Bible were especially convincing. I did have a «feeling» that there is no way the merciful God could threaten us with the punishment in the fourth generation. So thank you very much for your interview, for such detailed and lucid explanations. I have understood I need to continue studying the Scripture, but I will approach it in a different way. And I may continue asking the questions, anyway... I have found a great place to ask my questions to: it is the «Orthodox Faith» newspaper.**

Looking forward to receiving your comments!

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