

# CHRISTIANS! YOU MUST KNOW CHRIST!

By BISHOP IGNATY BRIANCHANINOV

*One of the great Church fathers of the 19th century, Bishop Ignaty played the very important role of spokesman for uncompromising Orthodox Christianity to the Russian intelligentsia, who had departed so far from Christian truth as to be incapable of distinguishing it from error and heresy. The following letter<sup>1</sup> offers a refreshing antidote to some of the confusions of the apologists for a diluted Christianity -- in our own day as well as in his.*

**H**ERE IS A spectacle worthy of bitter lamentation: Christians who do not know in what Christianity consists! Yet one encounters this spectacle almost everywhere one looks today; rarely, in the great multitude of those who call themselves Christians, can one find anyone who is a Christian both in name and in deed.

I will answer the question you have raised point by point, in as few words as possible. "Why," you write, "cannot pagans, Moslems, and so-called heretics be saved? There are excellent people among them. To condemn these good people would be contrary to the Divine mercy! ...Indeed, it is even contrary to sound human reason. -- Heretics, after all, are Christians just the same. To consider oneself saved, and the members of other faiths damned, is both foolish and extremely proud!"

Christians! You reason about salvation, yet you do not know what salvation is, why men are in need of it, and finally, you do not know Christ, the only means of our salvation. Here is the true teaching on this subject, the teaching of the Holy Ecumenical Church.

1. No. 28 of the "Letters to Laymen" in Vol. 4 of the complete *Works* of Bp. Ignaty, 2nd ed., St. Petersburg, 1886; the title here was added by the translators. Bp. Ignaty is discussed briefly above in Prof. Kontsevich's article, pp. 45-46.

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Salvation consists in the recovery of communion with God. This communion was lost by the whole human race when our ancestors fell into sin. The whole human race belongs to a category of doomed creatures. Damnation is the lot of all people, whether virtuous or evil-doers. We are conceived in iniquity and born in sin. *I will go down to my son mourning to hell* (Gen. 37:35), said the holy patriarch Jacob of himself and his holy son Joseph the chaste and fair. It is not only sinners who descended into hell at the end of their earthly pilgrimage, but the righteous men of the Old Testament as well. Such is the power of the good works of men; such is the worth of the virtues of our fallen nature!

In order to restore man's communion with God, in other words for salvation, redemption was necessary. The redemption of the human race was accomplished not by an angel, not by an archangel, not by some other of the higher but still limited and created beings,-- it was accomplished by the infinite God Himself. Execution was the lot of the human race, commuted by His execution; the insufficiency of human merit was compensated by His endless worth. All the feeble good works of men, which lead to hell, are compensated by a single powerful good work: faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. The Jews asked the Lord: *What must we do, that we may work the works of God?* And the Lord answered them: *This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him Whom He hath sent* (St. John 6:29). One good work is necessary to us for salvation: faith; but faith is work! By faith, and by faith alone, may we enter into communion with God, with the aid of the sacraments which He has granted us.

You are quite wrong, then, if you think and say that good people among pagans and Moslems are saved, that is, enter into communion with God! You are quite wrong if you look upon the opposite view as some kind of novelty, as some kind of error that has crept in! No! Such has been the constant teaching of the true Church of the Old Testament as well as of the New. The Church has always acknowledged but one means to salvation: the Redeemer. She acknowledges that the greatest virtues of fallen nature lead to hell. If the righteous men of the true Church, the lamps from which the Holy Spirit has shone, prophets and wonder-workers who believed in the coming Redeemer but died before His coming,-- if they descended to hell, how can you think that pagans and Moslems who have neither acknowledged nor believed in the Redeemer, but just because they seem good to you, have attained the salvation that is attainable by one means and one means alone, faith in the Redeemer?

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Christians! You must know Christ! You must realize that you do not know Him, that you deny Him if you acknowledge salvation possible without Him for any kind of good works! He who acknowledges salvation to be possible without Christ denies Christ and, perhaps without knowing it, falls into the grave sin of blasphemy. *We reckon therefore that a man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law*, says the holy Apostle Paul (Rom. 3: 28). *The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ unto all them that believe; for there is no distinction. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus* (Rom. 3: 22-24). You reply: "The holy Apostle James without any question asks for good works; he teaches that faith without works is dead." But consider just what it is that the holy Apostle James asks for.

You will see that he, like all the Divinely-inspired writers of the Holy Scriptures, asks for works of faith, and not the good works of our fallen nature. He asks for living faith, confirmed by the works of the new man, and not the good works of fallen nature, which are repulsive to faith. He cites the conduct of the patriarch Abraham-- a work in which the faith of that righteous man was revealed. This work consisted in offering as a sacrifice to God his only-begotten son. To slay one's son for sacrifice is not by any means a good work according to human nature; it is, rather, a good work insofar as it fulfills a Divine command-- it is a work of faith. Look into the New Testament and into the Holy Scriptures in general, and you will find that they ask for the fulfillment of God's commands, that this fulfillment is called works, that from this fulfillment of God's commands faith in God becomes living, being active; without it, faith is dead, being deprived of any activity. And on the contrary you will find that the good works of fallen nature, whether from feelings, from blood, from impulse, or from a tender sentiment of the heart-- are forbidden and rejected! And these are the same good works that please you in pagans and Moslems; for these, even if they involve the denial of Christ, you want to give them salvation!

Your conception of sound reason is a strange one. How, by what right, do you find and recognize this in yourself? If you are a Christian, you should have a Christian understanding of this subject, and not some other arbitrary opinion taken from nowhere. The Gospel teaches us that by the fall we acquired a falsifying reason; that the reason of our fallen nature, no matter what its innate worth, no matter how well sharpened by worldly learning, retains the worth transmitted to it by the fall and

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remains a falsifying reason. We must reject it and commit ourselves to the guidance of faith; under such guidance, in due time, through much effort in piety, God will give to His true slave a reason of truth, or spiritual reason. This reason we can and must acknowledge as a sound reason; it is an informed faith, as the Apostle Paul excellently described it in the 11th chapter of his epistle to the Hebrews. The foundation of spiritual reasoning is God. Being founded on this hard rock, it does not waver nor fall. What you call sound reason we Christians take to be a reason so infirm, so darkened and so far gone astray, that there can be no healing for it except by cutting off, with the sword of faith, and renouncing all the learning that has gone into its formation. If we take it for a sound reason, basing ourselves on a foundation that is uncertain, tottering, indefinite, constantly changing-- then it, being sound, will renounce Christ too. This is proved by experience.

And what, may I ask, does your sound reason say to you?--That the condemnation of good people who do not believe in Christ is repulsive to it! And not only that; such a condemnation of virtuous people is contrary to the mercy of such an all-good Being as God.

To be sure, you had a revelation from above on this subject, concerning what is contrary and what is not contrary to Divine mercy? --No, it was sound reason that pointed it out. Ah, your sound reason! Still, where in your sound reason did you find out that it was possible to understand, with your own limited human mind, what is contrary and what is not contrary to the Divine mercy? Permit us to speak our mind.

The Gospel -- that is, the teaching of Christ, that is, the Holy Scriptures, that is, the Holy Ecumenical Church -- has revealed to us all that man may know of the Divine mercy, which surpasses every kind of reasoning and all human apprehension, and is inaccessible to these. Vain is the trifling of the human mind when it seeks to define the indefinable God, when it seeks to explain the inexplicable, to submit to its own calculations...whom?...God! Such an undertaking is a satanic one.

Oh, these people who call themselves Christians and do not know the teaching of Christ! If from this blessed, heavenly teaching you people have not learned the incomprehensibility of God,-- then go to school and listen to what the children are taught! The teachers of mathematics explain, in the theory of the infinite, that it, as an indefinite quantity, is not subject to the laws to which definite quantities, numbers, are subject, that when you calculate with it you may get a result completely

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at variance with that arrived at through calculating with numbers. And you wish to define the laws by which the Divine mercy acts; you say, this is in accord with it, that is against it! It is in accord or not in accord with your sound reason, with your understanding and feelings!

Does it follow from this that God is obliged to understand and feel as you understand and feel? Yet this is what you are demanding of God! What a foolish and prideful undertaking! Do not accuse the Church's judgement of a lack of common sense and humility -- it is your own lack. She, the holy Church, merely follows unswervingly the Divine teaching on the acts of God, revealed by God Himself. Her true children follow her obediently, scorning the puffed-up reason that rises up against God. We believe that we can know about God only what God deigns to reveal to us. If there had been a different path to the knowledge of God, a path which our mind could have cleared for itself with its own powers, revelation would not have been given us. It was given because it was necessary for us. Vain and deceitful, then, are the personal opinions and wanderings of the human mind.

You say, "heretics are Christians just the same." Where did you take that from? Perhaps someone or other, calling himself a Christian while knowing nothing of Christ, may in his extreme ignorance decide to acknowledge himself as the same kind of Christian as heretics, and fail to distinguish the holy Christian faith from those offspring of the curse, blasphemous heresies. Quite otherwise, however, do true Christians reason about this. A whole multitude of saints has received a martyr's crown, has preferred the most cruel and prolonged tortures, prison, exile, rather than agree to take part with heretics in their blasphemous teaching.

The Ecumenical Church has always recognized heresy as a mortal sin; she has always recognized that the man infected with the terrible malady of heresy is spiritually dead, a stranger to grace and salvation, in communion with the devil and the devil's damnation. Heresy is a sin of the mind; it is more a diabolic than a human sin. It is the devil's offspring, his invention; it is an impiety that is near to idol-worship.

Every heresy contains in itself blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, whether against the dogma or against the action of the Holy Spirit. The essence of every heresy is blasphemy. St. Flavian, Patriarch of Constantinople, who sealed with blood his confession of the true faith, pronounced the decision of a local council held in Constantinople on the

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heresiarch Eutyches in the following words:

Eutyches, until now priest and archimandrite, is entirely convicted, both by his past actions and by his present statements on the errors of Valentine and Apollinarius, whose blasphemy he obstinately follows, all the more so as he did not even listen to our advice and instructions directed to his reception of sound teaching. And therefore, weeping and sighing over his complete damnation, we proclaim before the face of our Lord Jesus Christ that he has fallen into blasphemy, that he is deprived of every priestly rank, of communion with us, and of the direction of his monastery, and we give it to be known to all that from henceforth whoever shall converse with him or visit him shall himself incur excommunication.

This decree is a sample of the common mind of the Ecumenical Church concerning heretics; this decree was acknowledged by the whole Church, being ratified by the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon. The heresy of Eutyches consisted in his failure to confess in Christ in His Incarnation two natures, as the Church confesses; he admitted only one Divine nature.

You will say: is that all! One may see a mentality similar to your own in the reply of a certain person invested with worldly power to St. Alexander, Patriarch of Alexandria, concerning the Arian heresy; it is a reply ludicrous in its want of true knowledge and woeful in its nature and consequences. This person advised the Patriarch to preserve peace and not to start any quarrels, which are so contrary to the Christian spirit, just because of a few words; he wrote that he found nothing reprehensible in the teaching of Arius, -- a certain difference in the turns of phrases, -- that is all! These turns of phrases, as the historian Flerius notes, in which there is nothing reprehensible, reject the Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ -- that is all! They overthrow, that is to say, the whole Christian faith -- that is all! It is remarkable that all the ancient heresies, behind various changing masks, strove toward a single aim: they rejected the Divinity of the Word and mutilated the dogma of the Incarnation. The more modern heresies above all strive to reject the action of the Holy Spirit: with terrible blasphemies they have rejected the Divine Liturgy, all the sacraments, everything, everything in which the Ecumenical Church has always acknowledged the action of the Holy Spirit. They call all this human ordinances -- even bolder: superstition, error! To be sure, in heresy you see neither robbery nor theft; perhaps it is only because of this that you do not consider it a sin? Here they reject the Son of God, there they reject and blaspheme the Holy Spirit -- that is all! A man who has received and upholds a blasphemous teaching and

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utters blasphemy, but does not thief, does not steal, and even does the good works of fallen nature -- he is an excellent man! How can God refuse him salvation!... The whole reason for this final perplexity of yours, as well as for all the rest, is a profound ignorance of Christianity!

Do not think that such ignorance is a defect of small importance. It is not! Its consequences can be fatal, especially now when any number of books with a satanic teaching are circulating under a Christian title. In ignorance of true Christian teaching, just like that you can take a false, blasphemous idea for a true one, appropriate it to yourself, and together with it appropriate eternal damnation as well. The blasphemer will not be saved! And the perplexities you have expressed in your letter are already terrible omens regarding your salvation; their essence is rejection of Christ! Do not play with your salvation! Do not play with it, or you will weep forever.

Occupy yourself with the reading of the New Testament and the holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church (but by no means Teresa, nor Francis and the other madmen<sup>1</sup> of the West whom their heretical Church passes off for saints!); study in the holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church how to understand Scripture aright, study there what kind of living, what kind of thoughts and feelings are fitting for a Christian. From Scripture and living faith study Christ and Christianity. Before the terrible hour comes in which you will have to appear before God in judgement, acquire the justification given by God freely to all men through Christianity.

1. This term is by no means carelessly employed by Bishop Ignaty. In his essay on *prelest* or spiritual deception, he points out how the loss of spiritual discrimination in the Church of Rome has led in many cases to the confusion of psychic fantasies with genuine spiritual attainment. This essay will be presented in due time in *The Orthodox Word* (trans. note).