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The Gift of Tears: Some Perspectives on "Joyful Sorrow" in Orthodox Art and Music

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Of all the famous people whom history remembers – all the great leaders, philosophers, humanitarians, the great composers, artists, poets, and authors – all the names we can recall from previous eras, the world holds an elevated place for those who have suffered great sorrow. It is as if the human mind were predisposed to honour pain in a special way.

Orthodox Christian hagiography offers some of the strongest support for this premise. In the lives of the saints, we certainly read of healers, wonderworkers, theologians, and holy fools-for-Christ. We celebrate, as our litanies confirm, the courage of "pious kings and right-believing queens." And while such biographies are indeed compelling, the stories that seem to touch our hearts most poignantly are those of the martyrs.

Is this because we are genuinely mystified at the capacity of one person to torture another so callously? Or is it – as Nietzsche suggests – that we gain power vicariously in hearing of the resilience of the human spirit and knowing the depths suffering one can endure? While both these divergent explanations offer certain elements of truth, certainly there must be something more to be said here.

Perhaps, we Orthodox Christians identify most closely with the condition of the martyr because, on some level, it helps us to come to terms with our own spiritual inadequacies. In Scripture, we are told to be "perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect."[1] How is this possible for us who are so unrighteous to attain such a goal? We who do not have the power to heal the terminally ill, to cast demons out of the possessed, or to covert thousands to the faith as did the Apostles of old?

Yet there are many paths to sainthood. Those travelled by the great ascetics were long and required a lifetime to navigate. Others, like the paths of many martyrs, were short, steep, and narrow. Knowing this, is it unreasonable to believe that any one of us could someday, whether by choice or circumstance, face a martyr's death? And should it come to pass in the 21st century that we are called to a similar end in our life, could we endure such suffering with the same kind of joy that characterized their ending? It is this question that likely motivates our identification with the martyred saint and causes us to examine earnestly the nature of joy and suffering in our lives.

1 Matthew 5:48.

Any contemplation of martyrdom necessitates a reconciliation of existential extremes. Can one truly rejoice in the face of tragedy? Has death unequivocally lost its sting? Such things provide impellent energy for great thought and, by extension, for great art as well, as great art so often seeks to unite the seemingly diametrically opposed. In contemplating these deeper issues, we come to realize that the sorrow of the martyr is not really about endurance or personal fortitude. It is not simply a sacrifice made for the sake of a nation or political cause. Nor is it even about the victory of rising above the tribulations of one's daily life. The martyr's joy comes from only one source, and once source alone: love and faith in the mercy of Christ. For this reason, amid the most intense pain and suffering imaginable, the martyr is still able to rejoice.

It is through this interpretation of martyrdom that we discover the state of mind that Orthodox call "joyful sorrow": an emotional signifier of trust in the unfailing love of God in the midst of a fallen world. The Lord Himself told us that "In the world you will be sorrowful; but when I see you again, your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you."[2] Thus, for the true believer, there can indeed be grief, but there can be no such thing as inconsolable grief.

The commingling of sorrow and joy within a believer's heart remains a mystery and also one of the primary tenets of the Orthodox faith. One without the other, it is said, reveals a kind of theological incompleteness. St Paul in his letter to the Corinthians observes that we Christians are "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing."[3] St John Climacus, in his *Ladder of Divine Ascent,* was the first Church father to write extensively on this matter, giving it the term *charmolypi* (χαρμολύπη), a Greek word that literally means "joy-filled mourning." He describes it as a feeling that manifests itself in tears–not of despondency, but of repentance. These tears act like a second baptism, bringing us closer to God and further away from our proclivity toward sin. The writings of St Isaac the Syrian similarly dwell extensively on the concept of joyful sorrow, referring to the tears that come from neither "triumphant joy nor abject despair, but from a prayerful encounter with God." Within such a state, he says, a person's mind becomes focused on God alone and all one's senses are brought into complete harmony.

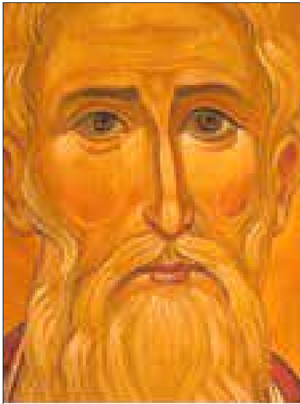
In studying the inner workings of this experience, we come to understand that "joyful sorrow" is not simply an ecstatic or fleeting sentiment. It is an expressed belief that our faith in God is stronger than our faith in the world– a theological truism that defines the whole of the Christian experience. It is this ethos that constructs our prayers, directs our worship, and by extension, inspires our liturgical arts.

Our icons and hymnography, for example, are replete with words and concepts reminding us that even in our darkest hour, there is always hope. We know that we cannot escape sadness in this world, but God's mercy is ever-present and has overcome the world. For this reason, we should, as Christ says, "rejoice and be exceedingly glad."[4] And while we weep for our own fallen state, the art, music, and hymnography of Orthodox Christianity provide an aesthetic salve that helps us see how no sorrow, pain, or tragedy can eclipse the brightness of Christ's Resurrection. This is the nucleus of both the Orthodox faith and Orthodox aesthetics. But as one might imagine, it is exceptionally difficult to calibrate artistically.

It is likely for this reason that iconographers, over many centuries, have developed a specific methodology for cultivating joyful sorrow through imagery. Such a tradition hinges upon the specific function of visual art in the Orthodox faith as expressed through the icon. The icon's role is not provide a realistic or quasi-theatrical narrative of a biblical event as some Western archetypes have done; neither is it a means for sensationalizing the experience of faith through a kind of abstract ecstasy. Rather, each icon embodies what Constantine Cavarnos calls a "quality

2 John 16:21-22.
3 2 Corinthians 6:10.
4 Matthew 5:12

of hieraticalness,"[5] or those particular spiritual dimensions that, when consciously imbued into the iconic image, convey theology in colour. Within an icon, a subject's posture, gesture, facial expression, and hand position all contribute toward a unified theological statement. The successful icon will evoke a careful balance of contrition and hope, presenting a converging experience of both earthly and spiritual realms. This is why so many iconographers refer to icons as "windows into heaven." As author Michael Quenot says, they bring us face to face, with a "light and beauty that would otherwise blind our eyes."[6]



In preparing for this talk, I had the good fortune of coming across a recent article by Aidan Hart, a contemporary iconographer who has written a great deal on icons. In describing his technique, Hart offers his own icon of St Cuthbert as an example of how one might go about cultivating this kind of "bright sadness" within the physical features of a particular saint. One simple way, he suggests, is to contrast the sorrowful shape of the eyes with the warmer, more hopeful shape of the mouth. The subtle effect of this he refers to as a kind of "inner joy."[7]

The icon of St Cuthbert by Aidan Hart is reproduced by permission.

In looking at other icons that specifically intend to depict sadness, we see that a particular figure, while sorrowful, never appears inconsolable. When a subject is in mourning, he or she is always accompanied either by the presence of Christ, or at the very least is shown in an act of supplication to Christ. Additionally, the physical appearance of a figure in terms of posture and facial expression are consciously controlled in order to convey visually an inner sense of hope, even when the figure is facing emotional distress or death.

When we compare an icon's portrayal of scriptural event to some of the more celebrated examples of Western sacred art, the differences are indeed worthy of mention. In a side-by-side comparison, the contrast would compel us to confess that the icon lacks the dynamic energy of a Michelangelo or the emotional intensity of a Rembrandt. We might even go so far as to accuse it of adopting a sanitized view of suffering where real pain is disregarded. Using the model of "emotional realism" as our artistic ideal then the icon most certainly falls short in this regard, for it rarely depicts the kind of inconsolable sadness, fear, and restlessness that preoccupies other styles and schools of visual art.

Yet, if we understand the icon's true purpose and message, we would never judge it on how accurately or it portrays a moment in time, or how deeply it conveys the pain and suffering of a particular event. An icon portraying the martyrdom of St Stephen, for example, will never focus on the physical tension or emotional shock of the incident, but rather will extract the spiritual dimension of the moment in a static and almost serene way.

Another good example of this can be found in the icon depicting the Raising of Lazarus. The Scriptures tell us how Jesus was deeply saddened after Lazarus's death. The Gospel of John tells us that Christ wept and groaned aloud in sympathy for Lazarus's grieving sisters, but despite this biblical narrative, we find no Orthodox icons showing Christ in tears or mourning. Yet this does not mean that the icon offers an inaccurate or inferior version of what happened that day. On the contrary, the absence of sorrow in this case is to draw attention to the salvific aspects of Christ's presence at the scene. In other words, the icon, rather than dwelling on the tragedy of Lazarus's death, emphasizes the more important spiritual implications that supersede it,

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5 Constantine Cavarnos, *Guide to Byzantine Iconography*, vol. 1, Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery Press 1993, 41.

6 Michael Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*, Crestwood: St. Vladimir Seminary Press 2002, 165.

7 Aidan Hart, "Designing Icons: Part VI: Faces in Icons," *Orthodox Arts Journal* (2016) http://www.orthodoxartsjournal.org/faces-in-icons/

namely his raising, and its prefiguration of Christ's own death and Resurrection.

These kinds of underlying theological themes are what gives liturgical art in Orthodoxy its power. In music and hymnography, we also can find examples of the way in which deep or complex theological issues become easily communicated by a tradition of subdued technique. Of course, music's abstract nature presents a greater challenge to describe in terms of concrete emotional states, but we can still readily identify some examples of how sorrow is depicted with an inner sense of joy. At this point, I must make the important disclaimer that in discussing aspects of liturgical music, I will refer to those works that come from Slavic choral canon since this is the tradition with which I am most familiar. I fully expect, however, that were we to look at other Orthodox musical traditions we could come up with equally compelling examples to support the presence of joyful sorrow in Orthodox liturgical music.

Were we to examine all of the music that a Slavic Orthodox choir sings over the course of given year, it would come as no surprise to find that some of best musical examples of joyful sorrow come during the season of Great Lent, particularly in the days leading up to Pascha. Here, the hymnography and music provide the ideal canvas for deep penitential introspection as we immerse ourselves in the liturgical narrative of Christ's Passion. The services lead us through these painful events and conjure up tears in more than a few of the faithful. Despite the high emotion, the measure of sorrow that one feels over the course of this week could hardly be described as debilitating, but is instead attenuated by the underlying anticipation of Christ's ensuing Resurrection.

The bringing out of the burial shroud (*plaschanitsa)* at Vespers of Holy Saturday is arguably one of the most sombre and moving moments of entire liturgical year. Here, the clergy process around the interior of the church while the choir sings the prescribed troparion "The Noble Joseph." In the majority of Slavic parishes, the tradition is to sing what is known as the Bulgarian setting of this Tone 2 hymn.

It might seem that the solemnity of this moment would call for a particularly grieving musical setting to correspond with the mood. Yet, far from being a clichéd kind of dirge, this particular hymn emerges peacefully in the key of D major. There are no chromatically saturated harmonies designed to accentuate the pangs of grief. The chords are instead childlike in their simplicity, focusing on only a few tonal areas. Special emphasis is given to the plagal I-IV relationship which lends a kind of softness to each phrase, and yields a rather atemporal or motionless effect.

Troparion of Holy Saturday, "The Noble Joseph," Bulgarian Tone 2 Melody

This setting could easily be interpreted as a kind of musical paradox, much in the way that joyful sorrow is, itself, a paradox. Here we have – by any measure – what should be one of the moments of the Church year most worthy of lamentation, and instead of dark grief, we hear the sound of undisturbed tranquility in a major mode. There is grief here, to be sure, but it manifests itself as a different kind of mourning, what the Church fathers might call "bright sadness" – a mysterious fusion of these two distinct emotions.

Another equally memorable moment occurs earlier in the in same service. In the narrative of Holy Week, it is at this point that Christ's body has been taken down from the Cross and readied for burial. While the shroud rests in the middle of the church, the choir chants the Aposticha verses in the special melody known as "*Yegda ot Dreva*," or "[Joseph with Nicodemus took Thee] down from the Tree." In many English-speaking churches in the West, it has become a common practice to sing the Pskov version of the melody harmonized by the late Helen Benigsen. Like "The Noble Joseph," the harmonic setting does not adopt the doleful sounds of a minor key, but rather uses the bright key of G major to bring comfort to the moment. The overall effect is similarly gentle and contemplative, thus counteracting the feeling of inconsolable grief.

The majority of this hymn is in the first person from the perspective of Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph was wealthy member of the same Jewish high council that had just condemned Christ to death. It is said that his misgivings about the Council's actions taken against Christ led him to a change of heart. Despite the great risk to his standing in the community, he found the compassion and courage to approach Pilate to ask for Christ's body that he might ensure a proper burial.

This text focuses on the inner conflict that appears in Joseph's words as he questions the metaphysical incomprehensibility of a man burying the 'Life of all' who created him. We find him asking a series of questions to the lifeless body of Christ. He asks, "How shall I wrap Thee in a winding sheet?", and then follows with, "How can I touch Thy body with my hands?" With each question a new layer of incomprehensibility is added to an already inextricable paradox. It is only after the last question – "What song, at Thy departure, shall I sing to Thee, O compassionate Saviour?" – that we are finally given an answer to the entire text: "I *magnify* Thy sufferings; I sing the *praises* of Thy burial and Thy Resurrection, crying: O Lord, glory to Thee [emphasis added]." In other words, our cosmic role in this event is not to despair, but to glorify in the suffering of Christ, for it is out of this suffering that we find our own eternal life and resurrection.

The musical setting seems designed to emphasize this internal dilemma. As the phrases oscillate between two basic tonic and dominant chords, both with equal standing, we find the third phrase moves to the minor submediant or "VI" chord–as if to offer way of perceiving things that is neither "tonic" nor "dominant," but something altogether different.

Excerpt from Aposticha of Holy Friday, *Joseph of Arimathea Took Thee Down from the Tree*,
Tone 5 Pskov Melody, arr. H. Benigsen

How shall I wrap Thee in a wind - ing sheet? How shall I touch Thy
I
pure bo - dy___ with my hands? What song shall I sing to Thee
V

at Thy departure O compas - sion - ate Sa - - vior?

V7/vi vi

tonicization of relative minor

To be clear, it is not my intent here to suggest some kind of complex or subconscious narrative at work in the harmonies of Orthodox hymn settings. Rather, I simply wish to stress that the very simple modal relationships of this particular setting seem to emphasize a reconciliation of opposing ideas or emotions. What is more, it is the transparency of the harmonic language found in most of *glasy* or "tones," that give them the communicative strength to convey ideas.

Ironically, we find that the texts that deal with deep theological issues (death, repentance, sorrow, deep supplication, etc.) are most often accompanied by unusually lucid harmonic pallet. Beloved Slavic settings of texts like *Vechnaya Pamyat'* ("Memory Eternal"), *Tsaritse Moya Preglagaya* ("My Most Gracious Queen") and *Da Molchit Vsakaya Plot'* ("Let all Mortal Flesh keep Silent") all constitute paradigms of this polyfocal approach to text setting in which music resides in two co-equal tonal areas, most often a major and its corresponding relative minor. In music theory some theorists refer to this a double-tonic complex, or a passage that exists simultaneously in two keys, each oscillating back and forth on a kind of equal footing, yet never in conflict. This contrast often contributes to a kind of dualistic mode of thought, as if one is looking on an object from two different angles. From an Orthodox perspective, these two angles plausibly correspond to the simultaneous experience of both joy and sorrow.

Pod tvoyu Milost' (*Beneath Thy Compassion*)
translation: *Beneath thy compassion we take refuge in thee, O Theotokos*

e minor g major e minor

Под тво - ю ми - лость при - бе - га - ем, Бо - го -

i V i V7 i I V i V i V

g major e minor g major

ро - ди - це, Де - во, мо - ле - ний на - ших

I V i V i i V i V7 I

There are valid reasons why so many theologians have referred to c*harmolypi* or "joyful sorrow" as a central condition of the Orthodox Christian faith. If we accept the premise that her liturgical arts are a direct extension of the faith, then it should not surprise us to find examples here as well. While many things could be said of the traditions, process, and performance practice of Orthodox art and music, I believe that what makes them so uniquely transformative is this very idea of combining two polar emotions into a single experience.

At a time when many present-day faith traditions are preoccupied with the brightness of the Christian message; it would be helpful to remember that objects are defined not simply by light alone. In an illuminated figure, it is the shadows that help provide our sense of texture, shape, and depth. In the Orthodox faith, one cannot disregard the shadows of our sinful nature and the fallen world.

We may someday meet a martyr's end; but even if we do not, we are bound to experience a fair degree of suffering in this world. Within such sorrow, however, we are told that there is a kind of joy that can never be taken away. Christ once proclaimed that, "In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."[8] If we truly keep these words close to our heart we will find that our sorrow is not destructive, but is enlightening. Under the shelter of faith, sorrow will transform into joyful sorrow, and sadness will forever be mingled with the brightness of Christ's holy Resurrection.

8 John 16:33