

Heavenly Worship

By Fr. Richard Ballew

Who am I, and what is the purpose for my existence?

A simple enough question-but one with profound implications. It has been asked countless times since the dawn of man. From ancient philosophers contemplating questions of "ultimate reality" to the small child gazing up into the universe, the question of man's purpose in life and place in the cosmos has been a subject of great curiosity. The Scriptures teach that men and women were created for this purpose: to worship, love, and serve God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Worshipping the Creator of all things is the very "heartbeat" of the human spirit. When such worship takes place, two crucial things happen. Most importantly, the Triune God is glorified. It was, after all, God Who created all things out of nothing and Who gives life moment by moment to every living creature. Surely our Creator is worthy of our worship. Secondly, when true worship takes place, men and women experience God's ultimate purpose for their existence. Thus true worship of the Holy Trinity gives life ultimate meaning and provides the definitive answer to the question "Who am I, and what is the purpose for my existence?"

TWO DEFINITE DIMENSIONS

Every school child learns that there are specific laws relating to space and time which govern the life we experience here on earth. These laws are often spoken of in terms of four dimensions. Length, width, depth, and time are the four coordinates that govern so much of what we think and do in this world. While preparing, say, for a plane-trip from Los Angeles to New York, someone might ask quite naturally, "How far is it to New York?" or, "How *long will* it take to get there?" Once the flight is in progress, the same person might ask, "How *high* are we?" Such questions are natural and proper as we move about in the earthly dimension. But another dimension exists, which although invisible to us, is every bit as real as those we learned about in school. This dimension can be called the heavenly dimension. It is not possible to understand this heavenly dimension from an earthly vantage-point. When we try, we quickly become disoriented and confused and our minds become darkened. A now famous Soviet cosmonaut exhibited this point well some years ago. On returning to land after a space

flight, he remarked that he hadn't seen God anywhere. Orthodox Christians reply, "Of course not. You may have been travelling through space in your capsule, but you were still moving through earthly dimensions!" We will never discover God from such a limited perspective, for He is in no way constrained by space or time. He dwells in His heavenly Kingdom, beyond the bounds of our understanding. Regardless of how much knowledge science obtains from probing the universe, a purely physical exploration will never reveal God's dwelling place. In fact, such a limited search often leads either to cynicism, as with the cosmonaut, or to the despair of agnosticism, which says: "Who can know?"

IF NOT OUT THERE, WHERE?

Unfortunately, such a foolish approach to God is not limited to atheistic Communist cosmonauts. Even some Christians have been fooled into looking for God in space and time. For instance, some Bible-interpretors naively teach that the ascent of the Lord Jesus Christ in Acts chapter one was somehow a trip through space. Supposedly, this trip finally ended at a far-away, geographically removed place called the right hand of God. From this isolated vantage point, they picture Christ sitting as the Son of Man, limited and circumscribed by the restraints of time and space. I assure you, this line of reasoning is contrary to the facts of Scripture. Christ's ascent was not to a time and space heaven. Rather, He left the earthly and visible dimension of space and time, and entered the invisible and eternal heavenly dimension, governed by its own laws. He will not ultimately re-enter the earthly dimension in a visible way until His own second advent. Then, as promised, "every eye will see Him"!¹ Although heaven is invisible to the earthly dimension, it cannot be separated from the earthly dimension. In a mystery, the two move on together, with the heavenly circumscribing the earthly. This is why the ascended Lord describes Himself in the Book of Revelation as the "One Who walks in the midst" of the Churches.² If the Son of God were limited to heaven by time and space, how could He still be walking in the midst of His Church after His ascension? Furthermore, if God the Son is confined to heaven, why did He comfort His disciples by saying, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age"?³ Those who cannot believe that there is more to reality than space and time wrongly assume that the Lord cannot be invisibly present with us, yet still seated at the right hand of the Father. To them, because He took on human flesh, His

humanity limits Him to time and space. He is now seen as "way out there" somewhere. Trapped by this space-time mentality, these individuals conclude, for example, that our Lord could not possibly be invisibly present in His glorified humanity at the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist--even though the Church has consistently believed this to be the case from her inception. The Eucharistic bread and wine, therefore, become for these individuals, merely symbolic. However, for those who believe God the Son is truly omnipresent as the Scriptures teach, the Lord is indeed invisibly present at the Eucharist. And for this reason the consecrated bread and wine become, in a mystery, His very Body and Blood--just as He said.

LIFE IN TWO REALMS

The Church on earth, then, lives simultaneously in both the heavenly and the earthly realms. Our union with Christ makes this truth a reality. In the waters of Holy Baptism we are by faith united with Him in His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension.⁴ Therefore, while living in the earthly realm we also, through this union, live in the heavenly realm, where Christ is. Because of our union with Christ in the heavenly places, the Scriptures declare that we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing "in the heavenly places".⁵ This same New Testament book, Ephesians, also makes the bold statement that we are seated with Christ "in the heavenly places".⁶ In fact, the word "places" is not in the original Greek text. It should read, literally, "in the heavenly". Christ is enthroned at the Father's right hand, and we, through our union with Him, are there also. Perplexed by these statements of Scripture, a few theologians, influenced by a spacetime rationale, have relegated "in the heavenly places" to what they call "positional truth". Whatever they mean by this, they are in effect saying that union with Christ in the heavenly dimension is somehow unreal. Such a conclusion is forced upon them because of their limited understanding of what heaven is all about. They rationalize that we could not possibly be in two places at the same time, and thereby deny the fulness of God's revelation in the New Testament. To the contrary, our life with Christ in the heavenly dimension is real and actual, not positional. One can be in heavenly and earthly "places" at the same time, for the heavenly circumscribes the earthly, moving invisibly in, about, and through it continually. Saint Paul spoke clearly of this when he said: "He [God] is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being".⁷ The Psalmist also

captured it when he wrote, "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there; if I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me".⁸ No distance of time or space can possibly remove us from the Father. His right hand is everywhere present. Since the Son of Man sits at His Father's right hand, He therefore is everywhere present in both natures. Indeed, the Scriptures teach clearly that He is one Person. With this in mind, we can understand the possibility of living in two dimensions at once. On the one hand, we live in the physical world, the earthly dimension; on the other, through union with Christ Who is present in both His natures, we live in the Kingdom of God, the heavenly dimension.

THE GEHAZI EPISODE

One example of the closeness and invisible presence of God's Kingdom is what may be called the Gehazi Episode.⁹ Gehazi was the servant of Elisha, a great prophet of Israel. It came about that as God's people were living in Dothan, the king of Syria declared war against Israel. But somehow, all of his battle plans were uncovered ahead of time by Israel, thereby allowing the Israelites to escape confrontation with the Syrians in battle. Enraged by a supposed leak in his intelligence system, the king called in his servants and demanded that the guilty party confess. One of them informed the king that a prophet in Israel knew everything spoken by the king—even things said in the privacy of his bedroom! Upon ascertaining the whereabouts of Elisha, the king sent a great army during the night to surround the city in which the Prophet lived. The next day, Gehazi got up early for a morning stroll and was terrified when he saw the great mass of Syrian troops encircling the city. He quickly contacted Elisha and said, "Alas, my master, what shall we do?" And Elisha replied, "Do not fear, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them". Then, he prayed for Gehazi and said, "O Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see". And the Lord opened his eyes, and he saw the mountains filled with horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. Then the Lord and His angelic army struck the Syrian soldiers with blindness, so that they needed to be led to Samaria and finally released by the merciful Elisha. How could Elisha have known about this great heavenly host of angels? He had spiritual eyes, and did not limit the heavenly

dimension to space and time. Somehow he had the spiritual discernment to know that heaven though distant was indeed present. No wonder he was not afraid! This episode is an unusually striking biblical portrayal of the immediacy of heaven, but it is not alone by any means. Consider, for example, the post-resurrection appearances of the Lord Jesus. On at least two occasions He appeared visibly to His disciples in a room with doors that were shut.¹⁰ Having been raised physically from the dead, He made Himself visible and invisible at will. Walls were no hindrance to Him. He merely walked through them. Further, He appeared to Saint Paul at his conversion and Saint John on the Isle of Patmos. Here again we clearly see one dimension moving in, about, and through another.

HOLY WORSHIP IN THE HEAVENLY DIMENSION

Even though the Church on earth lives simultaneously in two dimensions, the heavenly and the earthly, her worship is focused on the heavenly realm. God does not come to where we are that we might worship Him. Rather, we go to where He is, to His heavenly Kingdom, to the heavenly Holy of Holies. This is clear in the Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church which begins with the words, "Blessed is the Kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen". Our worship begins with an announcement of God's Kingdom which is present here and now. Then begins our ascent into the heavenlies! From a physical standpoint, we gather for worship in a place of worship, a Churchbuilding with icons, candles, incense, and an altar—all of which are biblical and necessary. But in a mystery, our worship is conducted in the heavenlies. Present are: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, the holy angels, and the saints enrolled in heaven. In worship during the Divine Liturgy, the Church on earth joins the Church in heaven (in fact, it's just one Church!) in praise and thanksgiving to the Blessed Trinity. There are numerous Scriptural passages that describe worship in the heavenlies. Let me refer briefly to two of them, one in the Old Testament, one in the New. In Isaiah 6:1-7, we see worship in heaven through the eyes of the Prophet Isaiah who lived in the years surrounding 700 B.C. He was caught up into the heavenly dimension and describes for us what took place. He says, "I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple". Present as well were the seraphim singing: "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory". Isaiah goes

on to describe a heavenly altar, the smoke of incense, and the door of entrance. It is significant that one of the seraphim takes a set of tongs and removes a coal from the altar and with it touches Isaiah's lips, saying, "Behold this has touched your lips, your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is purged". For anyone acquainted with Orthodox worship, this line will sound familiar. It is very similar to that spoken by the officiant at the Divine Liturgy just after he himself receives Holy Communion. Clearly the Church has not overlooked the connection between Isaiah's vision and the Holy Eucharist! My friend, heavenly worship is realityour ultimate reality. There is nothing "positional" going on here. For just as Isaiah experienced the liturgy of heaven, so we, too, joined to Christ and risen with Him in the heavenlies, may enter His presence in heavenly worship. The New Testament passage I wish to point out is the twelfth chapter of Hebrews. The passage begins by reminding us that "we are surrounded" by a great cloud of witnesses-not all that unlike the heavenly hosts in the Gehazi Episode. These witnesses are the saints who have gone on before us to their rest, in this case, those the author of Hebrews has just mentioned in the previous chapter: the "greats" of Old Testament times. Then, toward the end of Hebrews 12, we read again of our ascent as Christians into the heavenly realm. For we have come "to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and Church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the New Covenant . . . ". It would be difficult to mistake what is happening here, would it not? The Church on earth is actually stepping into the heavenly dimension for worship. The Lord is present as are the saints and the angels-the entire host of the Church in heaven. What an array! I cannot imagine why an Orthodox Christian would shrink back from any opportunity to experience this celestial encounter with the Triune God every time the doors of the Church are opened.

LET US ATTEND!

Don't be like the Communist cosmonaut, seeing only the physical surroundings, but failing to comprehend that the decor is pointing to a greater reality beyond. Don't be like the Christian rationalists who say that Christ is somehow removed from His Church by space and time. We all, like Gehazi, need to have our spiritual eyes opened! The Lord is present in the heavenly dimension. And true worship must take place

there. We worship Him where He is! In worship we enter, in a mystery, the most intimate dwelling place of the Most High, the very Holy of Holies itself. With such worship in mind, let us consider this Scripture: "Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water".¹¹ Do not the words "enter" and "draw near" indicate that worship takes place where God is? We meet Him together, as His Church, in the heavenly dimension. Furthermore, are we not encouraged to have the confidence or "boldness" that Christ, our Great High Priest, is present before us in His glorified flesh? Most assuredly! In fact, we would have no access to God the Father were our Mediator, our Incarnate God, not there. By the blood of Jesus we enter the Holy Place, and there we worship the Blessed Trinity. This is what the Holy Eucharist is all about. Therefore, fellow Christian, partaker of a heavenly calling, look for God where He is to be found. Approach the Divine Liturgy--the Ministry of the Word, the Intercessory Prayers, and the Eucharist this coming Sunday with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith. Don't substitute any earthly thing for it. And if you are not yet a part of this holy Faith, don't let anything stop you from becoming a true worshipper of God. There is no greater fulfillment in life than coming before the Creator of all things in spirit and in truth. Please come and share the wonder with us. With Saint Paul let us say heartily, "We do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal".¹²

FOOTNOTES

(Scripture References are taken from the New King James version of the Holy Bible.)

1. Revelation 1:7
2. *Ibid*, 2:1
3. Matthew 28:20
4. Romans 6:1-10
5. Ephesians 1:3
6. Ephesians 2:6
7. Acts 17: 27-28

8. Psalm 139:7-10
9. 11 Kings 6:8-19
10. John 20:19-20
11. Hebrews 10:19-22
12. II Corinthians 4:18