

The Holodomor 1933 - Spiritual Reflections

*For our soul is bowed down to the dust;
our body cleaves to the ground.
Rise up, come to our help!
Deliver us for the sake of thy steadfast love Psalm 44:25,26*

Love

It seems incongruous to speak about love when talking about a man-made famine, and yet it is only normal and natural for humans to refer to love under all circumstances.

*The living experience of love advances us to spiritual maturity,
much more so than the severest ascetic discipline.
The flame of love is what preserves the world alive.
A single person burning with love can bring about
the reconciliation of the whole world with God. Patriarch Bartholomew*

By commemorating the tragic events of 1933, we express our love to those, and for those, who perished from the face of the earth. We remember them and raise them before God in prayer and liturgy. We strive to incarnate their sacrifice by good deeds, by speaking out against injustice and cruelty. We stand as proxies for them and offer their muted voices through us a chance to speak to the world, a world that to a large extent turned its back on them.

*Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful;
it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right.
Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
I Corinthians 13*

How difficult it is to love in trying situations. Feelings of vengeance, of injustice attempt to crowd out what our faith calls on us to do - to endure all things.

*From the beginning till now the entire creation, as we know,
has been groaning in pain. Romans 8:22.*

Christians take seriously the marring of creation and the misery that this has brought with it. Christians describe the world as it should be - in our prayers, especially for those in dire need - but we refuse to accept the world as it is. We know that this broken world will be mended and the pain and suffering will disappear.

There is a story about one of the elders on Mount Athos that bears repeating. A young monk was angry at another monk and would not let go of his anger. And sometimes, when we are caught in

a deep emotion, it is almost necessary to figuratively slap us in the face in order to bring us back to ourselves. And the elder says to the young monk: Do you not know that God doesn't just display love, because in this case love would be uncertain, but God is love. He cannot be other than this because He would be contrary to His nature. He loves so much and is so full of love that He loves Satan as much as He loves the Blessed Theotokos. These are difficult thoughts and they jar us out of our modes of thought in order to impress upon us the depth of God's love. And we are to emulate God as much as we can with the help of His grace.

Given the above, we are called upon to make our commemoration of the Holodomor an occasion for love and growth and not one for recrimination. We do not need to point accusatory fingers at anyone but keep in front of us the depth of the sacrifice offered by millions of people and children. If we descend into hatred, we besmirch the memory of those who died. We must make the occasion of their death a positive factor in terms of the fruit that it bears.

We must pray, we must remember, we must meditate on the extent of the suffering, of their suffering and see how it strengthens us. Cursing comes so easily to us and yet it does not build, it does not contribute to growth in us as true human beings.

The whole universe is the incarnation of love directed towards us showing in a palpable fashion God's love for us. But love in this fallen world is not easy. It involves concern for others even at the cost to us. The obverse side of love in this world of ours is suffering. But it is only through God's eyes, through love that we can look at creation and all of it without exception and say that it is good. This enables us to bless and not to curse.

We do not know everything and one can say with certainty that there were acts of kindness during the Holodomor, acts which were buried with the victims. In a very deep sense love points to a very fundamental concept of creation, that of vicariousness. They died so others in the Ukrainian nation may live in a free land that will not permit a repetition of what they endured.

Many centuries ago, in 391 AD, there lived a monk by the name of Telemachus who prayed to God to reveal God's will. And Telemachus received an unmistakable message: 'go to Rome'. Telemachus obeys but he knows no-one in Rome and does not know why he is going there. In Rome he comes to the arena and sees people killing each other. He climbs over the fence and enters the arena calling out: In the name of Christ, stop. He is pierced by a sword of one of the gladiators and dying, Telemachus calls out again: In the name of Christ, stop. And a hush came over the arena and from that day onward, combat of gladiators in the Colosseum in Rome ceased - Telemachus died so that others would not die as he had.

We often think of love as merely an emotion but there is something much deeper to love than just feelings. The essence of love is communion, of sharing not only of things but mysteriously, of ourselves. We have hints of this even in the materiality of creation. The more we study the cosmos, the more we are struck by the fact that matter is a mystery of ever-increasing connections. This is just another way of saying that underlying the universe is love. This interconnectedness of all things and all persons is referred to by St. Maximus as a cosmic liturgy.

*If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things.....
And you will at last come to love the whole world with an abiding, universal love...
love is a teacher, but one must know how to acquire it,
for it is acquired with difficulty, it is dearly bought.
Brothers Karamazov, F. Dostoyevsky*

It is not easy for us to love, especially those who have done us wrong but it is something that is imperative for us to learn and it is indeed learned at a very heavy cost to our pride and to our self-love. One of the reasons for this is that the world we live in is twisted and is not the way God intended it to be. It is filled with violence, lies, and hatred.

Truth is always a homeless stranger in history. Clement

There are those who deny the Holodomor. It is painful to hear someone deny someone else's pain and to oppose the historical truth of something that should be remembered so that it will never be repeated. Who knows if the Holocaust would have occurred if the world had reacted with horror to what had happened in Ukraine.

But we are called to love all, without exception. Truth may be a stranger in this world, but it eventually does win out. Injustices do come to the light of day and deeds done in the darkness of night are illumined and condemned by the light cast by truth.

Love is the goal of the Christian life and humility is what enables us to reach that goal. Humility is not identical to self-abasement – humility is the ability to see other people as being as valuable for God as we are. The other thing that is important for us to realize about love is that it is a gradual process. Before we can even consider loving our enemies, we must take a small step of not hating our enemy. We must, with God's help, attempt to will good to those with whom we disagree. Remember that it is love that forms the best memorial for the memory of those who perished in the Holodomor. Let all of our actions go towards increasing good as a result of our commemorating the Holodomor.

Without charity, the virtues are merely an illusion. Abba John the Dwarf

There is a story that originates with the Fathers of the Desert. Abba Anthony is asked what he would do if he noticed a brother fallen asleep during the Liturgy. And Anthony's reply shows the primacy of love over everything – "I would not admonish him, but place his head in my lap." The most important thing is to love gently, taking into account that we are all fallen and none of us should ever judge his brother.

In our services we end memorial commemorations with the singing of Vichnaya Pamyat. Memory is a significant display of love. We re-member those who died in the Holodomor in the sense that they become living members of our community and they have not been lost to oblivion. Memory is very positive and active because each of us, in a sense, is a memory, a

thought of God. We emulate God and remember those who suffered innocently and died. Yes, we grieve and we are in pain but we recall the words of Gregory of Nyssa:

...the conclusive harmony in the world has not yet been revealed.

We await the resolution. We await the Resurrection!