09/05/2020

The presence of the Orthodox faith in Uganda (1919 – 2019) – Preparing a way forward



Many people wonder how the Orthodox Church exists in Uganda. Unfortunately, all these people don't examine the important questions of how and why the Faith arrived in Uganda because the Anglican and Roman Catholic traditions arrived from Europe first. For this reason, their surprise will always remain barren until they examine thoroughly those key questions. Indeed, the history of the establishment of the Orthodox Church in Uganda draws attention to the inconsistent and serious disagreements between the Anglicans and the Roman Catholics, whose controversies have been inescapable since the establishment of the Orthodox faith in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and elsewhere south of the Sahara to the present day (Fr. Reuben Sparta Ssebbanja, *Autobiography,* 1998, Irene Nabitaka). Adding to these controversies are the Balokole, the self-named "saved ones" of Uganda, who contend that they are the only ones who have returned to the original Church of Christ by becoming "born again."

In fact, however, as we shall see below, the "saved ones" of Uganda misinterpret the meaning of the Original Church (*Ekklesia*), the meaning of "salvation," and the

meaning of “re-birth” for the Christian (Rom. 13:11; 1 Cor. 1:18-30; Jn. 3:1-21; Mt. 10:38, 16:18; Mk. 8:34). They promote heresy, and they lack understanding because they read the Bible alone and without context; they do not acknowledge or appreciate the history of the Church of Christ (Prof. Basil C. Stephen, *Church History* , Athens, 1959, pp. 17-905). If they read and studied the history of the Church, the “saved ones” of Uganda would easily understand their errors; however, by insisting on reading the Bible alone apart from an understanding of ecclesiastical history, they turn their backs to the Original Church and render themselves blind to their own errors. Rather than coming to the Orthodox faith, they are misled by heresies readily found in the early decades of Christian history: Montanism, Docetism, and other strange misunderstandings (St. Hippolytus, *The Refutation of All Heresies*, ANF Series, vol. V, pp. 3-162). It should be recognized by the contemporary “saved ones” that from the first Apostolic Church of Christ, an inseparable part of the true faith was the indication and rebuke of misunderstandings by schismatic Christians, who were then characterized as heretics and the proponents of strange teachings (1 Cor. 11:19, Gal 5:20, 2 Pe 2:1, Jude 3-4).

In order to understand the very serious problem of Christian heresies, i.e. the grave departures from the true faith, you, Orthodox Christians of Uganda, must carefully attend to the following two examples. The first is drawn from the misunderstanding of some Christians about the role of Apostle Simon Peter with regard to the other apostles and the organization of the Church of Christ. Regarding this, it is important to study the following passages in relation to the entire Bible: Mt. 16:13-20, 22-28; Mk. 8:27-30, 32-38; Jn. 13:31-38; 18:16-17, 25-27; 20:1-9; 21:10-23. From the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of these passages emerged the docesis about Peter, i.e. “the primacy of Peter,” and the Great Schism (AD 1054) between East and West in the Christian world. All the inconsistent and serious disagreements between Anglicans and Roman Catholics, as mentioned above, arose from a distorted understanding of Apostle Simon Peter’s role in the Church of Christ (Fr. Vladimir Guettée, *The Papacy: Its Historic Origin and Primitive Relations with the Eastern Churches*, USA, 1886). The second example is drawn from the misunderstanding, again by some Christians, on the role of the mystery of Baptism and other mysteries (Jn. 3:1-21). With the misinterpretation of the meaning of the mystery in this passage came the reverse of the clauses, instead of using the correct clause, “from above” (as the Lord said it); in this passage concerning Nicodemus, the clause is commonly understood to mean “born again,” a misunderstanding from which came the Balokole movement of Uganda. In this passage, verses 3 and 7 of the original text (Greek) read “born from above,” even if in English (and in Luganda afterwards) the translation of this idea was rendered as

“born again,” a translation that was influenced by Nicodemus, who had misunderstood the teaching of the Lord in verse 3. Certainly, it is for this reason the Lord immediately made the clarifications of 3:5 and 8, so as to correct the false impression of Nicodemus: Someone to be born “from above” is to be born with “water and Spirit” (Jn. 3:5; 1:26, 33), not to be “born again” through a natural mother or through natural rebirth (Jn. 1 :12-13). This teaching of the Lord regarding the mystically born children of God is contained firstly in this Gospel of John and in his Epistles (1 Jn. 2:28-5:18), as well as in the Epistles of Apostle Paul (Ro. 8:12-17). However, inasmuch as Nicodemus hadn’t grasped the essential teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, today many contemporary faithful not only fail to grasp the Gospel and the Epistles of John but also of the entire Bible. Rather than being “born again,” Orthodox Christians are “the children born from God” by means of the saving work of the Church of Christ on earth.

Outside of the Church, there are many contemporary Christians who are misled by various false understandings and interpretations of the Bible. However, truth itself, the heavenly message of the Kingdom of God, has continually censured all such aberrations since the time in which they first appeared. These false understandings and interpretations pose a challenge to the Kingdom of God, and the “powers of the cunning devil and the manipulation of the perverted people” twist the truth in an effort to obstruct the saving work of the Church of Christ.

What are we to learn from the discussion of these problems, on which we have briefly touched above? By touching on such problems, we chiefly wish to illustrate the reason for the presence of the Orthodox Church in Uganda and elsewhere throughout the world. For, from the Biblical and historical perspective, the Orthodox Church, by bearing the deposit of the Seven Ecumenical Councils, claims continuity and identity with the original apostolic Church of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the custodian and nurse of the original truth of faith in its fullness. The “theory of branches” of Edward Bouverie Pusey (Protestant, 1800-1882) does not stand as concerns the Orthodox Church. In accordance with the saying of our Lord: “and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Mt. 16:18). The Eastern Orthodox Catholic Church (*Ekklesia*) is dominant in Eastern Europe, Western Asia, and Northern Africa, comprised of the original Patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, together with the later Patriarchates or Autonomous Churches of Greece, Russia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Poland, Slovakia, Cyprus, and others, and spreads by God’s glory in Africa, south of the Sahara and in Uganda.

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