

Loving Our Enemies, Climbing the Ladder of the Beatitudes

By Jim Forest

Probably you know the British saying about carrying coals to Newcastle. It's used to refer to something that is obviously unnecessary and pointless. Newcastle is a coal-mining city. It has no more need of coal than the Sahara Desert has need of sand.

Such sensible advice comes to mind when I consider my own situation here today — an American who has been transplanted to Holland talking with Greeks about the New Testament! The New Testament is Greek. Greeks are the only people in the world who, with no special education, can read the most sacred of texts in its original language. Also I am aware that most if not all of you were born into Orthodox Christianity while I grew up in a culture in which the Orthodox Church is a fringe element. Speaking to Greeks about Orthodox Christianity, I am in danger of being like the boy who decides to teach his grandmother how to fry an egg.

So I speak to you with a certain hesitation, hoping for your patience, your kindness, your charity.

The Greek publisher Porphyra Books has in recent months done me the great honor of publishing two of my books, *Loving Our Enemies: Reflections on the Hardest Commandment* and *Ladder of the Beatitudes*. I will attempt to say something about the themes of these books and in the process say a little about what led me, 28 years ago, to become an Orthodox Christian.

That journey, in fact, has partly to do with love of enemies.

First a little history. I was not quite four years old when two American atom bombs destroyed two Japanese cities. This double war crime happened in August 1945. In the years and then decades that followed, thousands of nuclear weapons have been built. America's monopoly on such weapons didn't last long. During the Cold War, and even today, the nuclear-armed missiles and long-range bombers of both the US and the Soviet Union were kept — are still being kept — in a constant of readiness for use. World War III is never far away. Time and again in the past seventy years, the human race has been days and even minutes from a massive use of these most powerful weapons of mass destruction. It is a miracle that what has so often *nearly* happened has not yet happened.

But this is not a talk about the apocalypse. It is about love of enemies. In 1979, after seeing a Russian-made romantic movie, it occurred to me, as an American active in the peace movement, how odd it was that people like myself knew more about nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles than about the people at whom such weapons were targeted. The question arose in my mind: Might not the world be a slightly less dangerous place if we had more face-to-face contact with those whom we regarded as mortal enemies and whom we were prepared to kill by the millions? If we saw them as human beings instead of as gray political objects?

At the time this thought occurred to me, I was already a Christian, quite active in the Catholic Church, and was of course familiar with Christ's commandment that his followers were required to love their enemies, yet — like all but a few Americans — I knew more about imaginary Martians than about actual Russians.

To make a long and complex story short, I ended up drawing on my background as a journalist in order to travel widely in the former Soviet Union, with my main focus on the Russian Orthodox Church. Many magazine articles resulted and also two books. The first, published in 1988, was *Pilgrim to the Russian Church*; the second, issued a year later, was *Religion in the New Russia*. For many readers these two books opened doors and windows into a world quite different than had been shown to them before — a world in which, despite all the repression religious believers had faced, all the martyrdoms, all the suffering, a vital, even passionate spiritual life had survived. Making use of hundreds of interviews plus visits to churches, monasteries and theological schools, I was able to bear sober witness to the state of religious life in an immense country which had made a serious effort to destroy the Church, all other religious communities, and even the very idea of God.

If this were a lecture about the survival of Christianity in Russia, there would be many remarkable stories to tell, but let me limit myself to a conversation with an elderly priest, Father Mikhail, whom I met in the ancient city of Novgorod in 1987. Mikhail Gorbachev was then in his second year as Soviet head of state. To his everlasting credit, he had brought religious persecution to a halt. Ruined churches and monasteries were being given back to the Church. Many thousands of people were seeking baptism. It was truly a time of miracles. A long winter of persecution was ending, a springtime of religious rebirth was occurring.

Over supper with Father Mikhail, I asked, "Aren't you surprised?" "Not at all," he replied. "All believers have been praying for this every day of our lives. We knew God would answer our prayers, only we did not know when. I am only surprised that our prayers have been answered while I am still alive."

I thought of the countless people who had been shot or were taken to labor camps where they froze to death or died of disease or exhaustion. I had visited places of mass execution. I said to Father Mikhail, "But surely you must hate those who caused so much suffering and who killed so many people." Father Mikhail gave me an answer that I did not expect. "Christ doesn't hate them," he said. "Why should I? How will they find the way to belief unless we love them? And if I refuse to love them, I too am not a believer."

It was in Russia that I encountered not just a few but many Christians who loved their enemies. I don't mean they loved them romantically or sentimentally. They loved them in the sense that Christ demands. First of all they prayed for them, praying not for their destruction but for their conversion and salvation. They attempted to live in a way that, at the very least, they would not be obstacles to the conversion of their enemies.

What nourished them in their Christian witness? At that time not many churches were open. It was much easier to get a ticket to the Bolshoi Ballet than a copy of the New Testament. But sentences and parables from the Gospel — these precious fragments

survived in multi-generational memory even when every Bible is destroyed. Eucharistic life or, for those living too far from a living church, even the memory of eucharistic life — this too survived. So did the stories of saints, ranging from those who could be called heroes to those known as holy fools. There were also the books of such deeply Orthodox Christian writers as Dostoevsky.

Let me tell one more story that will perhaps show how a Christianity capable of loving enemies survived even in the most hostile environment. This happened in Moscow in the next-to-last year of the Second World War. Among the witnesses was the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, then still a child. He was standing at his mother's side on July 17, 1944, part of the crowd watching a procession of twenty thousand German war prisoners being marched across Red Square. Yevtushenko writes:

"The pavements swarmed with onlookers, cordoned off by soldiers and police. The crowd was mostly women — Russian women with hands roughened by hard work, lips untouched by lipstick, and with thin hunched shoulders which had borne half of the burden of the war. Every one of them must have had a father or a husband, a brother or a son killed by the Germans. They gazed with hatred in the direction from which the column was to appear.

"At last we saw it. The generals marched at the head, massive chins stuck out, lips folded disdainfully, their whole demeanor meant to show superiority over their plebian victors. 'They smell of perfume, the bastards,' someone in the crowd said with hatred. The women were clenching their fists. The soldiers and policemen had all they could do to hold them back.

"All at once something happened to them. They saw German soldiers, thin, unshaven, wearing dirty, blood-stained bandages, hobbling on crutches or leaning on the shoulders of their comrades; the soldiers walked with their heads down. The street became dead silent — the only sound was the shuffling of boots and the thumping of crutches.

"Then I saw an elderly women in broken-down boots push herself forward and touch a policeman's shoulder, saying, 'Let me through.' There must have been something about her that made him step aside. She went up to the column, took from inside her coat something wrapped in a colored handkerchief and unfolded it. It was a crust of black bread. She pushed it awkwardly into the pocket of a soldier, so exhausted that he was tottering on his feet. And now from every side women were running toward the soldiers, pushing into their hands bread, cigarettes, whatever they had. The soldiers were no longer enemies. They were people." [*A Precocious Autobiography* (New York: Dutton, 1963), p 26]

This event on Red Square was a truly eucharistic moment initiated by the courage and compassion of one brave woman. What was in her thoughts as she pushed her way forward through the police line? Would she have described herself as a Christian? Not necessarily. But perhaps she remembered her mother or grandmother saying these words from the Gospel: "I was hungry and you fed me." Perhaps. All we can say for sure is that food was in short supply and that nearly everyone in the crowd was undernourished. Even the smallest scrap of bread was valuable. Yet, inspired by the simple act of one person, hungry women gave bread to hungry enemies. We might say it

was a reenactment of the miracle at Emmaus. Once again Christ was known in the breaking of bread.

At this point let me say a few words about what led me to the Orthodox Church. Why am I not still a Roman Catholic? After all, the Gospel is the same for Catholics as it is for Orthodox Christians. Both churches have the eucharist and much more in common. Nor was I weighed down with complaints about the Catholic Church. I do not think of myself as an ex-Catholic with all the bitterness the prefix “ex” implies. Not at all. I am profoundly grateful for the wide river of Catholic saints who have blessed the world. I was not looking for a perfect or even a better church. The perfect church, the church without sins, does not exist. If it did, how quickly we sinners would spoil its perfection.

No, part of what drew me to Orthodoxy was encountering, in Russia, a suffering church in which love of enemies and prayer for them was not exceptional.

Let me mention another factor that, in my case, had unexpected consequences. In the course of my travels in Russia I found myself moving from bewilderment and at times physical pain while standing during long services (Russians seem able to stand for days!) to gradual appreciation of this unhurried, upright approach to worship. Perplexity slowly became gratitude. Just as it takes time to prepare and then enjoy a good meal, I began to understand that it takes time — even some discomfort — to be aware of the presence of God. If you hurry past a beautiful painting you don’t see it. Life, including liturgy, is best lived in the slow lane. What finally brought me to eucharistic life in the Orthodox Church was the unhurried liturgy.

Finally let me say a few words about what I call “the ladder of the Beatitudes,” the nine verses that preface the Sermon on the Mount. Brief though they are, the Beatitudes are not easily grasped. They are best understood by those traveling in the slow lane.

In the Slavic liturgical tradition, one meets the Beatitudes every week as these verses are normally sung during the Gospel-bearing procession at every liturgy. The Beatitudes are in fact a compact summary of the Gospel.

In that part of the world whose languages are mainly rooted in Latin, the word “beatitude” comes from the Latin word *beatus*, meaning happy, fortunate, blissful. In the late fourth century, *beatus* was the word Saint Jerome opted for in his Latin translation of the “blessed are” verses.

Of course the Gospels were written in Greek, a more nuanced language than Latin, conveying degrees of meaning which the hard-headed Romans might find too subtle. Here we encounter the beautiful Greek word *makarios*. In classical Greek *makar* was a word associated with the immortal gods. *Kari* means fate or death, but with the negative prefix “*ma*” the word means being deathless, no longer subject to fate, a condition both inaccessible and longed for by doomed mortals. It was because of their immortality that the gods, the *hoi makarioi*, were the blessed ones.

In Christian use, *makarios* means sharing in the life of God, theosis, the ultimate joy, a happiness without the fault lines of death running through it. There is no higher gift. We are not simply capable of an abstract awareness that God exists or of studying God as an

astronomer might study the night sky all the while knowing the stars are unbridgeable distances away, that their light may be centuries old by the time it reaches our eyes and that the objects which produced the light may no longer exist. The blessing extended to us is participation in the communion of the Holy Trinity, sharing in God's immortality, and being blessed with qualities that seem humanly impossible.

How might we translate the word *makarios* in a way that makes its meaning even clearer? I suggest "risen from the dead." To the extent we follow Christ we become people whose choices are not driven by fear and death. Thus we can say:

Risen from the dead are the poor in spirit...

Risen from the dead are they who mourn...

Risen from the dead are the meek...

Risen from the dead are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness...

Risen from the dead are the merciful...

Risen from the dead are the pure of heart...

Risen from the dead are the peacemakers...

Risen from the dead are they who are persecuted for righteousness sake...

Ours is a paschal faith. If we call ourselves Christians we see the empty tomb and the risen Christ at the center of life. Our lives and choices are not defined by hatred and death. As St. Paul said, "They call us dead men and yet we live." In such a radical freedom, we become free of fear and even free of enmity. As Fr. Mikhail said to me many years ago in Novgorod: "If I refuse to love my enemies, I too am not a believer."

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for possible use in the discussion period:

If love of enemies is understood in a Christian sense, it refers to a non-sentimental attitude in which one sees in the other, even an enemy, the possibility of a changed relationship. It is not easy, for the Christian any more than the non-Christian, to respond to an adversary in a non-hostile way, but history is full of examples of constructive rather than destructive response. For example consider this instance of what is sometimes referred to as a classic instance of "earthquake diplomacy." On August 17, 1999, Turkey experienced a massive earthquake that severely affected many towns and cities, with the city of Izmit the most severely damaged. A second major earthquake occurred five days later. The official number of casualties was 17,000, although the actual number is thought to be more than double that. About a third-of-a-million people were left homeless.

To the world's astonishment, Greece — historic enemy of Greece — was the first country to pledge aid and support to Turkey. Within hours of the earthquake, senior staff of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs contacted their Turkish counterparts, then dispatched personal envoys to Turkey. The Greek Ministry of Public Order sent in a rescue team of twenty-four people with trained rescue dogs plus fire-extinguishing planes to help put out the huge blaze at an oil refinery. Greek medical teams followed — doctors and nurses plus tents, ambulances, medicine, water, clothes, food and blankets. The Greek Orthodox Church launched a major fund raising campaign for humanitarian

relief. Throughout Greece, the Ministry of Health set up units for blood donations. The five largest municipalities of Greece sent a joint convoy with aid. When the Mayor of Athens came personally to visit earthquake sites, he was greeted at the Istanbul airport by the mayor. Both Greece's official actions and the responses of ordinary Greeks were given wide coverage day after day in every newspaper and TV channel in Turkey. Turks were astounded by the compassionate Greek response to Turkey's disaster.

As it happened, just weeks after the Turkish disaster, on September 7, 1999, Athens was hit by a powerful earthquake, the most devastating natural disaster in Greece in twenty years. While the death toll was relatively low, the damage to buildings and the infrastructure in some of the city's northern and western suburbs was severe. This time Turkey responded — in fact Turkish aid was the first to reach Athens from outside Greece's borders. Within thirteen hours a twenty-person rescue team was flown in by a military plane. The Greek consulates and embassy in Turkey had their phone lines jammed with Turks calling to find out whether they could donate blood. One Turk offered to donate his kidney for a "Greek in need."

The very last thing our enemies imagine is that we could wish them well or do them well. Such events can radically change the script.

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