



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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July 10, 2016

New Martyrs of the Turkish Yoke

St. Anthony of the Kiev Caves (1073)

45 Martyrs at Nicopolis in Armenia (319)



† **New Inquirer's Class – Tuesday, July 12, 6:30pm (Old Hall)**

✘ **Holy Baptism – This Saturday, July 16, 3:00pm - Child David Johnson**

Note: Vespers will follow as usual at 6:00pm

† "The Faith of the Orthodox Church is totally unique in its placement of Holy Tradition, the Life of the Holy Spirit in the Church, at the center of its ecclesiology. We know the Way because it was transmitted to us through Holy Tradition, through the consensus of the Fathers of the Church as expressed in the decision of the Apostolic Council recorded in Acts, in Scripture, in the decisions of Ecumenical Councils, in Orthodox hymnography and iconography, in short, in that which has been believed and taught by the Fathers always, by all and everywhere - the Holy Catholic Faith - The Orthodox Faith."

✘ St. Paisios of the Holy Mountain said: "A person should experience his sinfulness and have trust and hope in the mercy of God, because that way he'll be saved. That way the mind is recollected and experiences the prayer as a need. That way he begins to say: 'Lord Jesus Christ, come...', and the heart gains rest."

On the Love and Humility of God

Christ does not need us, for He has thousands of angels who serve Him impeccably. In addition, by a word He is able to create thousands more of these holy beings. But His infinite love constrains Him to be concerned about us, without being disgusted by our stench and our festering wounds. So let us remember this love of God at every moment of our life, so that we shall do our worthless deeds solely for the love of God. Just think-- we were not crucified for our Christ, our Savior, whereas on behalf of us monstrosities, He endured death on a cross for the sake of obedience. Elder Ephraim

"God and the created spirits and the souls of the departed as well as those of the living are thinking beings and thought is rapid and in some sort omnipresent. Think of them with your whole heart and they will be present with you. God will always be with you and necessarily so by the gift and power of God, the others will also be with you."
~ **St. John of Kronstadt**

The Holy Spirit, out of compassion for our weakness, comes to us even when we are impure. And if only He finds our intellect truly praying to Him, He enters it and puts to flight the whole array of thoughts and ideas circling within it, and He arouses it to a longing for spiritual prayer.

Evagrios the Solitary, *On Prayer* no. 63, *Philokalia* Vol. 1

This and That

Fathers Matter

Research has long shown that the rate at which blacks are arrested is nearly identical to the rate at which crime victims identify blacks as their assailants. The police are in these communities because that is where the 911 calls originate.

If liberals want to help reverse these crime trends, they would do better to focus less on supposed racial animus and more on ghetto attitudes towards school, work, marriage, and child-rearing. As recently as the early 1960s, two out of three black children were raised in two-parent households. Today, more than 70 percent are not, and the number can reach as high as 80 or 90 percent in our inner cities. For decades, studies have shown that the likelihood of teen pregnancy, drug abuse, dropping out of school and other bad social outcomes increases dramatically when fathers aren't around. One of the most comprehensive studies ever undertaken in this regard concluded that black boys without a father are 68 percent more likely to be incarcerated than those with a father - that overall, the most critical factor affecting the prospect of young males encountering the criminal justice system is the presence of a father in the home. All other factors, including family income, are much less important.

As political scientist James Q. Wilson said, if crime is to a significant degree caused by weak character, if weak character is more likely among children of unmarried mothers, if there are no fathers who will help raise their children, acquire jobs, and protect their neighborhoods, if boys become young men with no preparation for work, if school achievement is regarded as a sign of having "sold out" – if all these things are true, then the chances of reducing the crime rate among low income blacks any time soon is slim.

~ Jason L. Riley, WSJ

Today's college students:

They have no sense of the great patterns of world history, the rise and fall of civilizations like Babylon and Rome that became very sexually tolerant, and then fell. If you've had no exposure to that, you can honestly believe that 'There is progress all around us and we are moving to an ideal state of culture, where we all hold hands and everyone is accepted for what they are ... and the environment will be pure...' – a magical utopian view that we are marching to perfection. And the sign of this progress is toleration – of the educated class – for homosexuality, or for changing gender, or whatever.

To me it's a sign of the opposite, it's symptomatic of a civilization just before it falls: 'we' are very tolerant, not passionate, but there are bands of vandals and destroyers circling around the edge of our civilization who will bring it down.

- Camille Paglia

Things have gotten so bad that biology has been replaced by chosen gender, with heavy penalties decreed for those who prefer the scientific interpretation of what is a man and what constitutes a woman.

~ Taki Theodoracopoulos

People aren't terribly interested in truth, because at worst it frightens them, and at best it makes them feel uncomfortable. Which is about the same thing.

– Rod Dreher

We Orthodox Christians have to prepare ourselves to pay a heavy price for fidelity to what we hold to be true. Don't lie to yourself: it's coming. This is not alarmism. This is reality. Our side lost the culture war. Now we have to learn to live under indefinite occupation.

– Rod Dreher

The One Thing Progress Cannot Do

Fr. Stephen Freeman, *Glory to God for All Things*

It is common among Orthodox teachers to identify prayer with the “one thing necessary” that Christ speaks of in John 11. This emphasizes prayer as communion with God – for communion with God is the very source of our life. I will expand this meaning of the “one thing necessary” to include the very “mind” required for its practice. And, as we shall see, it is strikingly at odds with the habits of our culture. Prayer has become perhaps the most difficult of all spiritual activities.

There is a very popular strain of teaching about prayer that resonates well with contemporary culture. This is prayer that “gets results.” Every few years, a new book will hit the market, offering a new prayer and promising wonderful outcomes. The Prayer of Jabez is a recent example. But even within Catholic Tradition, various groups advocate certain prayers or spiritual practices with promises of great results. Within Orthodoxy, certain saints gain great popularity because of their association with successful prayer. I note these latter examples only to say that “getting results” has always had an attraction for people of every mind.

Almost humorous have been the occasional experiments to find out if people praying as a group, or praying in a particular way, would have a statistical effect on outcomes. The headlines will ask, “Does Prayer Work?” And, of course, there are the frequent calls for prayer across a wide-spectrum with the implied message that the more people who are praying, the more a thing is likely to happen. This is prayer by democracy.

Experience tells me that this is simply not true. Such prayers are often little more than “well wishes.” “We’re sending out prayers to you!” the message reads. What does that possibly mean? St. Paul often includes requests for prayer in his letters. Years ago, a Jesus freak buddy told me that he was praying for St. Paul —. Startled, I asked him why? “Well, it’s in the Bible, so I thought I’d do what he asked.” I actually liked his answer. But missing in the Scriptures are any indication that prayer “works” in a manner that is more effective when undertaken by large groups. “Two or three” is pretty much the upper limit.

The mystery of “answered” prayer is indeed great. What seems most true, in the experience of the Church through the centuries, is that the prayers of some individuals seem quite effective, and that this mystery is also bound up with what we mean when we call someone a “saint.” And it is the mind of such saints that holds my interest at this point.

St. Paul says, “Have this mind among yourselves,” and then describes the self-emptying of Christ on the Cross (Philippians 2:5-11). This “self-emptying” mind is the hallmark of sanctity and is at the heart of what we describe as “humility.” It is the humble heart that pleases God, we are told, whereas, God “resists the proud” (James 4:6). And it is at this particular juncture that modernity and its drive for progress are unmasked.

“I want to be a better man,” sounds like the words of a saint’s heart. But the opposite is true. St. Paul was such a “better man” when he was a Pharisee that he later described himself as “blameless.” That blameless Pharisee, strangely, had made himself the enemy of God.

It is the same St. Paul who writes with such eloquence and care about our weakness and sin. I have written previously that we are only saved “in our weakness.” Christ has not come to save the righteous – only sinners. By the same token, we are not saved through our excellence, nor our mastery of life. Those who imagine their life as a striving for progress and excellence risk making

themselves the enemies of God. Fortunately, most of us are unable to be excellent, though our failure often only leads to despair rather than God.

There are recorded a number of examples in the gospels of those who came to Jesus and were refused. The man who came to Christ and wanted Him to make his brother divide the inheritance with him is simply rebuffed (Luke 12:13). In a similar fashion, Christ refuses to answer the questions of those who only seek to trap Him with His own words.

St. James offers a brief commentary on such refusals:

You desire and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask badly, that you may spend it on your pleasures. (Jam 4:2-3)

All of us can think of many egregious examples from our own lives and those of others when our desires overwhelm us and our prayers. I can think of any number of times in my life that I prayed with great fervor for something that, in hindsight, was simply born of my desire to avoid the anxiety I suffered by not having it. And this is very much to the point.

St. James' observation could easily be limited to those examples that seem obvious: greedy prayer gets nowhere. But his principle runs much more deeply. We will not be saved by getting what we want. The only creatures in the universe who get what they want are demons – indeed, they have largely become nothing more than a “wanting”: their rationality has almost completely disappeared. True prayer is a movement into ever greater self-emptying. It is the normative means of our daily union with Christ. Like Christ, it broods over the lost and those who are in bondage. True prayer willingly enters with Him into Hades (both literally and figuratively) to intercede for those who are held captive. St. Paul even willed that he himself be damned if it would mean the salvation of Israel. That is the heart of Christ.

No doubt, our modern world will continue to “make progress,” at least in its own mind. But those who adopt that mind for their Christian worldview will find themselves frustrated at every turn. The caricature that is the so-called “prosperity gospel,” with its boastful and begging TV preachers, is modernity at prayer. It builds empires on the sandy soil of people's desire for progress and the promise of the next new formula. Such prayer does not make us holy but draws us deeper into delusion.

From earliest times it has been clear that religion exists to serve the desires of people. Whether averting disaster or procuring success in agriculture, fertility, or war, every religion attends to those things that fill our human desires. It comforts those whose desires have been thwarted and assures them that everything will someday be well.

I have termed this “religion.” As such, the Christian faith is not a religion, except when it has been hijacked. It is worth noting that this hijacking is a constant threat and is universal. No group of Christians is immune from the lure of religion. [I will note here that both A. Schmemmann and John Romanides, and others, have used the word, “religion,” to describe this deformation. Obviously, the word can be used with other meanings.]

Christianity is not a religion. It is a spiritual path towards union with God. Jesus did not come to usher in a new system of how to get what we want. He “emptied Himself,” and repeatedly invited us to do the same. That emptying is the path of union, and the very definition of love. If unfulfilled desires can be of use to us, then this world becomes the perfect arena of our salvation. For, in truth, we generally do not have to become weak or incompetent in order to be saved. We already are. Those who are on the path know this and reveal it in their prayers.

ORTHODOX PARADOX

A Reflection by George Parsenios, Ph.D

Orthodox and Paradox. The two words have much in common. The "dox" that ends both terms has its root in the Greek word *doxa*, which means "belief" or "opinion." It will be suggested in what follows that these words share much more than just a linguistic root, but glancing at the root word is a good place to begin. In its later Christian usage, *doxa* comes to mean "glory," but only as an extension of its much older philosophical meaning, which is "belief." And so, if a *doxa* is an opinion or a belief, an *orthodoxa* is a "straight belief," a "correct belief." Likewise, something that is "paradoxical," a paradox, is beyond belief. A paradox contradicts what we might commonly believe to be true. And Orthodox theology consistently presents us with things that contradict what we might commonly believe to be true. What is Orthodox is often a Paradox.

For instance, we say that we are monotheists, that we believe in one God. But, as soon as we insist that there is only one God, we turn around and call that God a Trinity. Our God is both 1 and 3. This is a paradox. How can God be both 1 and 3? The early Church was riddled with heresies that tried to smooth out the mystery in this claim and remove the paradox. Opponents of Christianity could easily claim that, if Christians worshipped a Father, a Son and a Holy Spirit, then Christians were no different from the pagan Greeks with their

many gods: Zeus, Apollo and Athena. Some Christians responded to this charge by easing the paradox inherent in the Trinity. There is only one God, they would affirm, and sometimes he looks like the Father, sometimes like the Son and sometimes like the Holy Spirit - but he's always the same person who plays these different roles. Orthodox tradition, however, insists that the Trinity is not just one person playing different roles, but three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who are always three persons and yet always One God. In Orthodox theology, the rules of math do not apply. $3 = 1$, and $1 = 3$. What is Orthodox is a Paradox.

So, too, with Jesus Christ. The Orthodox Church insists that Jesus, while on earth, was fully the Immortal God and, at the same time, a fully Mortal Man. He was both. Again, just as with the Trinity, some have found it impossible to believe that the Immortal, Unknowable, Inexpressible God, who created all things, would enter into his creation as a frail, visible, mortal person who would die a shameful death on the cross. And so, two types of heresies arose. For some, Jesus was just a man. A good man, a good teacher, a prophet even, but not God. To others, he was indeed God, but he was not really a man. He looked human and seemed human, but this was only an appearance. He put on humanity like a costume. But as we saw in attempts

to understand the Trinity, these teachings about Jesus shattered the paradox of who Jesus was. In both cases, people tried to make him either God or Man, but could not see how he could be both. We will return to this notion of Christ as the God-Man later, to reflect on why he must be seen as both fully God and fully Man. But let us to prepare for that by going in a very different direction for a moment.

For, the connection between the words Orthodox and Paradox applies to more than just our conception of God. Orthodox theology is paradoxical when it thinks about humanity as well. Popular debates about human ethics, sin and morality are often reduced to either/or equations. Recall in the debates about the Trinity, people demanded that God is either 1 or 3, but not both. And Jesus was either God or Man, but not both. So, too here, many people today approach questions of ethics with the same either/or posture.

For instance, there are some who view sin and sinners with so much mercy and tolerance and acceptance that the idea of sin disappears altogether. For these people, to judge or condemn any act at all is unchristian. And they are correct - partly.

Others respond to sin with a call to repentance, and they are so judgmental that the idea of mercy disappears altogether. For these people, to tolerate sin at all is unchristian. And they are correct - partly.

But how can they both be correct? To elaborate on this, we can return to the discussion of Christ as the God-Man. For, the Church Fathers summarize why Christ became human in a very powerful phrase: "God became Man, so that men might be like God." The Immortal God became mortal, so that mortals might be immortal. He who is life entered death, so that the dead might rise to new life. Christ took on

our weakness. He became one of us, and tolerated our sins. He had compassion on us when we least deserved it, with mercy and acceptance.

But this is only half of the story. For, the Son of God did not become a mortal human being in order to leave us in our sins. He did not descend to humanity and announce, "The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, and you are fine the way you are." He, rather, opens his ministry when he proclaims, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand (Matt 4:17)". Christ became human in order to raise us beyond our fallen humanity. And so, together with his message of tolerance, is the call to live a new life. His mercy simultaneously demands repentance from sin. God's call to repentance is understood as a form of healing. It is not harsh judgment, but gentle medicine for the wounded sinner. And yet, the sickness is never ignored. The sickness is never permitted to be called health. Thus, mercy and the call to repentance stand side by side.

For many today, the combination here of mercy and repentance is hard to accept. Because of the commitments that we all have to philosophical or psychological or political ideologies, or even just because of the friends we have, we fall to one side or the other of this divide. This is not the Orthodox way, though. Just as in the Trinitarian and Christological debates, what is Orthodox confronts us with a Paradox.

But even more than all of the ways just mentioned, in an even more basic sense, what is Orthodox is a Paradox. For in claiming that we have correct belief, that we are Orthodox, we claim to have the correct teaching about God. But that does not mean that we know all there is to know about God. We cannot explain God in the way that we explain a math problem: $2+2=4$, $2+3=5$. Recall, in Orthodox math, $3=1$. God

is a mystery far beyond our comprehension. He has revealed himself to us, but only a little, in order to save us and draw us to himself. And so, the Orthodox way to understand God is to recognize that we cannot understand God. This is where heresies fall into error. They try to make God accessible. Because the Trinity confronts us with confusing realities, heresies try to soften this confusion, and simplify God. But Orthodox faith, true understanding of God, insists on our imperfect knowledge of God. We know only that we know only a little.

To bring matters full circle, we can return again to the meaning of the word doxa. For we mentioned above that the word gradually comes to mean not only "belief," but also "glory" or "honor." This additional sense of the word leads people to claim that the Orthodox Church is the Church that offers "true glory" or "true worship" to God. This meaning of doxa is helpful to keep in mind, because, as we just said, we cannot know God fully. Since our knowledge of God is incomplete, and since we cannot even begin to approach him, our only posture should be one of honor and praise. True belief (doxa) leads only to the awe-filled praise (doxa) of God. To speak about God is not to speak at all, in silent worship. Again, and finally, that which is Orthodox is a Paradox.



THE CALL

It has never been easy to hear the message of faith. In our day we are usually so engrossed in the problems of earthly existence that we simply have no time to listen to this message and to reflect on God. For some, religion has been reduced to celebrating Christmas and Easter and to observing a few traditions for fear of being 'torn away from our roots'. Others do not go to church at all because they are 'too busy'. 'He is engrossed in his work'; 'work is everything to her'; 'he is a busy man'. These are some of the best compliments that one can receive from friends and colleagues. 'Busy people' are a breed peculiar to modern times. Nothing exists for them other than a preoccupation which swallows them up completely, leaving no place for that silence where the voice of God may be heard.

And yet, however paradoxical it may seem, in spite of today's noise and confusion, it is still possible to hear the mysterious call of God in our hearts. This call may not always be understood as the voice of God. It may strike us as a feeling of dissatisfaction or of inner unease, or as the beginning of a search. For many, it is only after the passing of years that they realize their life was incomplete and inadequate because it was without God. 'You have made us for Yourself', says St Augustine, 'and our hearts are restless until they rest in You'. Without God there can never be fulness of being. It is therefore crucially important for us to be able to hear and to respond to the voice of God at the very moment when God is speaking, and not years later. If someone identifies and responds to the call of God, this may change and transfigure his or her whole life.

IN SEARCH OF A SUPREME GOOD

For as long as humans have lived on earth they have striven to find the meaning of their existence. In Ancient Greece the philosophers studied the universe and its laws. They investigated human nature and human reason, hoping to discover knowledge of the first causes of all things. The philosophers not only engaged in rational debate and logic, but also studied astronomy and physics, mathematics and ~~geometry, music and poetry.~~ A diversity of knowledge was in many cases combined with an ascetic life and prayer, without which it was impossible to obtain a *katharsis*, a purification of mind, soul and body.

In studying the visible world, philosophers came to the conclusion that there was nothing accidental in the universe, that every detail has its place and fulfils its role by being subject to strict laws: the planets never go out of orbit and satellites never abandon their planets. Everything in the world is so harmonious and meaningful that the ancients called it the 'cosmos', that is, 'beauty', 'order', 'harmony', as opposed to 'chaos' — 'disorder', or 'disharmony'. For them the cosmos is a huge mechanism in which a single unbreakable rhythm is at work, a single regular pulse. But each mechanism must have been created by someone, just as every watch needs to have been constructed and sprung. Thus the philosophers arrived at the idea of a single Author of the Universe. Plato called Him the Creator, Father, God and *Demiurge* (Maker or Craftsman).

The Greek philosophers also spoke about the Logos (meaning 'word', 'reason', 'idea', or 'law'), which was originally perceived as an eternal and general law upon which the whole world is constructed. However, the Logos is not only an abstract idea: it is also a divine creative force mediating between

God and the created world. This was the teaching of Philo of Alexandria and the Neoplatonists.

Plotinus, a representative of the Neoplatonist school, emphasizes the transcendence, infiniteness, limitlessness and incomprehensibility of the Divinity. No definitions can exhaust it, no attributes can be ascribed to it. In being the fulness of Being, the One, as Plotinus calls the highest Principle, God, engenders all other forms of being, of which the first is the Intelligence and the second the Soul. Beyond the confines of the circle of the Soul lies the material world, that is, the universe, into which the Soul breathes life. Thus the world is a kind of reflection of the divine reality and bears within itself the marks of beauty and perfection. The One, the Intelligence and the Soul comprise in total a Divine Triad (Trinity). Through purification (*katharsis*) we can be elevated to the contemplation of God. However, the One still remains incomprehensible and inaccessible. He remains a mystery.

With these examples from Plato and Plotinus we can see that the Greek philosophy comes very close to the truths that are finally to be revealed in Christianity: the one God, the Creator of the world, the divine Logos, the Holy Trinity (Divine Triad), the vision of God, the deification of the human person. This is why early Christian writers called the philosophers 'Christians before Christ'. JK

