



Orthodox Mission of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

306 W. Main Street
2nd Floor Loft
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

The Rev. Fr. Elias Yelovich, Pastor

<http://EntranceMission.org>

On Self-Justification and Compassion Week of November 25, 2012

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine....

I spoke yesterday at the beginning of my sermon about a study that had been conducted at a prestigious theological seminary back in the 1970s. A sociologist wanted to see how the incoming class of new seminarians would react if they were thrown into a similar set of circumstances described by our Lord in His parable of the Good Samaritan. As the new seminarians entered their first week of classes, with all the confusion and turmoil of settling in, signing up for classes and going from room to room to do everything that was required, the sociologist had strategically placed people to pretend that they were in some sort of need. One such person sat on a bench holding her head in pain; another person was told to act lost and distressed; a third was asked to behave as if he were light-headed and on the verge of fainting. The idea was to monitor the new seminarians and see how many of them, in their own confusion, would stop and lend a hand to those in obvious distress. It was expected that some would indeed stop and help and that others would not. But the results of the study were both surprising and scandalous; virtually none of the incoming seminarians stopped to help; all of them, when questioned

later, replied that they had good reason not to do so; someone else would come, they reasoned; they had schedules and responsibilities to fulfill; they were too busy themselves to get into trouble for the sake of someone who could be helped by one of the teachers or administrators. All of them justified their lack of action with great skill.

The priest and the Levite in the Parable of the Good Samaritan also had good reasons not to stop and lend a hand to the man who lay by the side of the road. Undoubtedly, as they journeyed along the road that led to and from Jerusalem, they were either on their way to service in the Temple or coming from such service there. Temple service required clerics to maintain a ritual purity that would have been compromised by their involvement in helping a man who was bleeding by the side of the road. Jesus of course knew that everyone in His audience would know this. And yet He contrasted the action of these two clerics who were “justified” by the legal mandate for ritual purity with that of a Samaritan who stopped to help. A Samaritan was a descendent of a remnant of the Northern people of Israel who had intermarried with idolaters; it was widely believed that their race had therefore been tainted, rendered impure; how ironic that our Lord used a Samaritan to illustrate what true purity is. Samaritans were disdained by the strict Jews of that time, who defined purity quite differently than did Jesus. Jesus also knew that everyone in his audience would have had this prejudice against the Samaritans; but, He offered no comment other than to say simply that the Samaritan “had compassion” on the man and offered him the kind of help that was necessary. It’s amazing, isn’t it, how little needs to be said about this parable. We all get it, even without any explanation. God wants us above all else to be people of compassion, people who cannot bear to see another suffer, who cannot bear to justify our own inactivity on behalf of others, people who actively love their neighbor in need.

And yet we all justify our selfish behavior, don’t we? There are many good reasons why we cannot reach out to help others in need: We do not have the money or the time; our families must come first; our jobs are so stressful, that the moments left for others are gone before we can even begin to act; the problems in the world around us are so large, how could we make a difference? Others will do so, we reason – in government, in social agencies, in this or that organization; I am only one person, we say. These justifications are common to all of us, but somehow now, as I look back over my own 62 years of life, I realize that they are all lies. I now see things much more clearly for what they are: *If only I had done this or that thing for someone; if only I had not said or done this or that, in this or that circumstance: If only I had taken action to help this or that person now gone. How I wish that I could undo all of these reasonable justifications that I made for my inactivity on behalf of others!*

We are all in this circumstance, Brothers and Sisters. And yet, the *realization* of our selfish behavior is not enough. *Seeing* our sin is only the first step; once we see it, we are offered the grace of *repentance* by our God, who is Good Samaritan to us all. To repent means to resolve and begin the process to change, to start out on a new path, a new direction, toward the fulfillment of the great commandment, to love the Lord our God with all our heart, and all our soul, and all our strength and all our mind – and to love our neighbor as ourselves. ***And our neighbor, as our Lord teaches in the parable, is anyone in need – anyone to whom we can show compassion.***

After the Liturgy yesterday a handful of us sat downstairs reviewing the wonders God has shown to us in our little mission. After the door of our effort to feed the hungry in Emmitsburg was closed, He revealed to us the need that was right under our noses up the road in a small assisted living home. Two of the residents that were in church yesterday said to me, “*Father Elias, are we allowed to come see the Bishop next week? Will you please bring us?*” I was so moved that I could hardly answer. We went to help them, to show just a little compassion, but it is they who have shown us compassion beyond measure; I know many priests who have never had such a beautiful question asked of them. This, of course, is the great

mystery of our faith that we so often miss, because we are so quick to justify our selfishness. When we show compassion to others, the grace and mercy flows without end back to us. How wondrous is this mystery, and how undeserving of it are we all!

There are a million reasons to justify our self-serving actions at any moment, Brothers and Sisters. But let us not do so any longer. Let us be the kind of people that beg God for the grace of repentance; let us then repent earnestly of our selfishness; and, let us strive in all things to become first and foremost a people of compassion. For as we lay bleeding on the side of the road of life, the Good Samaritan has come to us with healing in His Hand; He gives freely – the oil of healing, the wine of love, the Life-Bestowing goodness of His own Body and Blood, because He has compassion on us even as we persist in our sin. Let us do likewise with any and all of our neighbors in need!

Remember what the LORD has done for you! Give Him thanks and praise! *Glory to His NAME for all things!* Pray for me, His most unworthy of priests.

In Christ our true God,

+Fr. Elias

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717-817-1669