



Orthodox Mission of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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Blessed are the Poor in Spirit Week of March 24, 2013

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

We who are called to be poor in spirit, to be fools for Christ, who are called to persecution and abuse - we know that this is the only calling given to us by the persecuted, abused, disdained, and humiliated Christ. And we do not only believe promises of blessedness to come: now, at this very moment; in the midst of this cheerless and despairing world, we already taste this blessedness whenever, with God's help and at God's command, we deny ourselves, whenever we have the strength to offer our soul for our neighbors, whenever in love we do not seek our own ends. (St. Maria Skobtsova; closing words of "The Four Types of Religious Life.")

When people go "shopping" for church these days they do not usually choose one that has at its core a commitment to self-denial or sacrifice for others. Sometimes the choices they make have little bits and pieces of that commitment attached to everything else: there might be, for example, an occasional offering for the poor or the delivery of a bag of groceries at Thanksgiving or Christmas for this or that family. But a faith that has at its core a commitment to deny oneself for the least of the brethren is not one that is so easily chosen. And yet, this is precisely what St. Maria Skobtsova says is at the heart of our commitment as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Orthodox Tradition. She reminds us in the above quote that we are to be committed to the Call of our Lord and Savior to *deny ourselves, whenever we have the strength to offer our soul for our neighbors, whenever in love we do not seek our own ends.*

Surely we know that this message is at the heart of the Gospel. We hear the words repeatedly in church. The priest every Sunday places around his neck the very image of such self-denial: the *epitrachelion*, or yoke of his servitude to the Lord Jesus Christ. And then, lest he forget what that really does mean, he takes the icon of the Crucified One on the cross that he wears around his neck and says the words: “*unless a man deny himself and take up his cross and follow Thee, he cannot be Thy disciple.*” But still all of us – priest and people – nevertheless try our very best to overlook the radicality of the message of our Savior, seeking ever more clever and imaginative ways to make our faith easier and more comfortable.

In her essay entitled “*Types of Religious Life*” which is hyperlinked below St. Maria Skobtsova describes four things we Orthodox Christians focus on instead of the message of our Lord’s call to self-denial for others. She calls these things the *Four Types of Religious Life*, and they consist primarily of those traditions that are meant to be *means* to the end of our spiritual progress, but that instead so often become *ends* in themselves. The political life of the church, for example, or the rules of the ritual typikon, or the beautiful Orthodox traditions of our worship. Even the way of asceticism, she teaches, can become an end in itself, for those who pursue that end selfishly for themselves rather than for the sake of their servitude to the Lord and the least of His brethren. In other words, these time-tested and blessed means for our spiritual progress can themselves become means of our own self-service if we let them.

The true type of Orthodox life, St. Maria writes, consists in the Gospel of Jesus Christ itself – the call to become ever more like Him in His Life of love and sacrifice for others. We cannot be saved, she reminds us, if we pursue salvation only for our own benefit. This would be a very contradiction in terms. For salvation itself depends on the self-giving of ourselves for one another in the same way in which our Lord gave Himself for the Life of the world. Those of us who look at our faith as a means of our own personal benefit will never experience that benefit; only if we give up our lives, denying ourselves, can we be born to Life Eternal.

The importance of this message cannot be overemphasized. It is precisely those who are unworthy and guilty that we must strive to help; it is for those who are not beautiful or wealthy or successful that we must give of ourselves, for you see, the Lord did not come to heal the healthy or to congratulate the righteous; He came to heal the sick and to bring the sinner into reconciled union with the Father by means of forgiveness. If we live our lives for ourselves, we will surely lose them; but if we turn away from ourselves, then and only then will we find ourselves.

This is what the life of St. Maria Skobtsova demonstrated so well. Even as a monastic, she refused to see to her own salvation apart from service to others, for she knew that there is no salvation unless we like the Lord Himself give of ourselves for one another. This is the very meaning of the first beatitude, to become poor in spirit for the sake of others, and it is everything in the life of the Kingdom. We cannot be saved by and for ourselves; we can only know salvation in servitude to one another. This, Brothers and Sisters, is what we must be about, for only if we lose our lives in servitude in the Name of our Master Who did so for us – only then will we know salvation. *Blessed are the Poor in Spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.*

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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