



Orthodox Mission of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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On Zombies and Lepers Week of December 21, 2014

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

[11] On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Sama'ria and Galilee. [12] And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance [13] and lifted up their voices and said, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." [14] When he saw them he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went they were cleansed. [15] Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; [16] and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. [17] Then said Jesus, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? [18] Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" [19] And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well." (Luke 17)

One of the strangest trends in popular culture at the moment is the entertainment media's obsession with the cult of the zombie. There are movies and television shows on quite a number of channels about people who survive some sort of post-apocalyptic future in which the so-called "normal" and "healthy" people must fight against the abnormal and disgustingly unhealthy people who have somehow become zombies. The whole idea is so preposterous that it is hardly worth commenting on or speaking about, until one considers the subject of Sunday's Gospel lesson, that is. The lesson from St. Luke's Gospel is about the healing of a group of lepers, about how Jesus came to them, healed them, instructed them to show themselves to the priests (for inclusion back into the community); and, how only one of them

returned to Jesus to give thanks for his healing. Lepers, you see, were about as close to being like zombies as one could ever imagine from real life.

The leper was afflicted with a horrible infection of the nervous system that took away the capacity to feel the pain of injury. As a result, cuts, scrapes and wounds of virtually any sort were unnoticed by the leper; infections developed as the disease progressed; gangrene could set in; and, and entire limbs could literally be lost. The leper of the first century, without the possibility of treatment of antibiotics and other medications could hardly ever expect to get better. Furthermore, there was a stigma of immorality associated with the leper, since the corruption of the leper's body was seen as an outward sign of an inward moral corruption; in other words, it was assumed by people that the leper deserved the affliction he suffered, because he was unrighteous, because he was a sinner. The community segregated itself from lepers, so as to protect those did not suffer from the disease from those who did. This was not merely seen as protection from physical disease, but more as protection against the unrighteous. Lepers had to draw attention to themselves when they came out in public, to warn the "healthy" so that the "healthy" could cross over to the other side of the street and run away from them in safety. The priests had the task of examining a leper who had somehow managed to come back to health, for only those whom God had set in positions of leadership could affirm that they were both "clean" and ready to come back into community with others without posing a danger to their physical or spiritual health. So you see, lepers were truly like the zombies of the first century: dangerous, to be avoided at all costs, and more likely to be hunted down and destroyed than to be offered compassion of any sort. In the movies of the present day, one runs from zombies; in the reality of the first century, one did likewise with the lepers.

It was therefore entirely unexpected that Jesus would not do likewise. Instead of running, he approached them. He reached out and touched them. And with that touch, for He Is God Incarnate, there was instant healing and purification. The lepers were cleansed of their bodily and spiritual filth; they were made whole and cured. Jesus sends them to the priests, so that they can be readmitted back into communion with the people of God, the holy people of Israel. Those who had been ostracized, despised and separated from community were now brought back, restored to oneness with others.

But only one returns to offer himself to the Lord in gratitude. Only one. The nine other lepers took what God gave them, the supreme miracle of restoration, and did not offer themselves back. One did. For gratitude is not merely a matter of saying "thanks" and going one's way; gratitude is self-giving, self-sacrifice; it is to give back what one has been given for the benefit of others. Gratitude is always about self-giving.

Every Sunday we come together to do what the one grateful leper did. All things have been given to us: life, salvation, the promise of forgiveness of our most terrible sins, mercy when we deserve justice instead, the self-giving of the Savior Jesus Christ, who entered the very regions of death and filled that darkness with His eternal Light, the Light of Life eternal, resurrection from the dead. All of this has been given to us. And how should we react? We should return to the Lord in in the gratitude of self-giving, self-sacrifice, rather than merely taking and going our own way. We should come every Sunday to the meal of thanksgiving, so that we are infused with the grace He alone gives, the grace of His own Divine

Self-giving, so that we in turn can return to Him through our self-giving to others what He has given to us. Let none of us take without returning to Him what He has given! Let none of us be like the nine who did not return to Him!

All of Christian life is sacramental. By this I mean that the Lord gives freely to us; we offer back to Him what He gives in the gratitude of our own self-giving; and, He returns to us what we offer back to Him, magnified greatly, beyond anything we could imagine. Lives offered become opportunities of blessing for others; the bread that He gives us, we offer back to Him, and it becomes the Precious Life-Giving Body of the Master; the wine that He created becomes the Precious Blood of the Lamb sanctifying all who partake of it; money given to us and then offered back to Him frees the giver from the false security it would otherwise represent and becomes the means to ease suffering in the lives of others; time offered frees the one who offers it from bondage to empty, useless hours, and instead becomes the means of service to others. That's why gratitude is always expressed in self-giving, and that's why the weekly sacrament of the Church is described as the Sacrament of Thanksgiving, the Eucharist.

As we approach the Holy Days of our Lord's Nativity, I want to ask all who read this email to take inventory about the many wonderful actions our Lord has accomplished for and in each of us. Each one of us should all return to Him in gratitude what He has given us, just like the one leper who returned to Him in the gratitude of his own self-giving. There is no time of the year when there is more opportunity for giving than this time, when *want is suffered most keenly* (to borrow the phrase from Dickens). And if you cannot identify a way that you can give of yourself in self-service, then ask – ask Him Who gives Himself entirely in self-service to all. Ask Him, and you will receive the answer most assuredly. Let each of us return to Jesus like the one leper did, and let each of us show the unprecedented compassion of the Master by reaching out to our own fellow lepers with the compassion that alleviates suffering and that heals!

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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