



Orthodox Mission of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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The Source of Tenderness Week of October 5, 2016

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

We love Him, because He first loved us. (1 John 4: 19)

On Tuesday this week we had a discussion in my Freshman Symposium class that was memorable. We had read a short account by the great American author Flannery O'Connor about a child who was a patient in a hospice run by an order of nuns in Georgia. The name of the child was "Mary Ann," and the story was titled, "Introduction to a Memoir of Mary Ann." The nuns recounted the way in which the young girl lived her last days. Disfigured by operations on her face to remove a cancerous tumor, she nevertheless came back from her surgeries with a strong desire to live a normal life, to enjoy normal food like hamburgers and soda, to play with her friends and to be just as active and outgoing as the other children in the neighborhood in which the hospice was located. When she finally succumbed to her illness, the funeral sermon was preached by the Bishop of the diocese who addressed the question, "Why should she have had to suffer and die so tragically."

Ms. O'Connor in her closing words for her introduction to the memoir observed that many people in our own *adulterous and evil* generation might be prone to ask, not why she had to die, but why she had to be born to lead such a life of illness and suffering in the first place. She observes, "One of the tendencies of our age is to use the suffering of children to discredit the goodness of God, and once you have discredited His

goodness, you are done with Him.” After giving several examples of godless philosophers who have done so, she says something truly profound. She observes that “if other ages felt less, they saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetic unsentimental eye of acceptance, which is to say, of faith. In the absence of faith now, we govern by tenderness.... And when tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced labor camps and in the fumes of a gas chamber.”

In my class discussion with my freshmen we focused on this observation, that “when tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror.” For so many of my students (I am actually tempted to say for all of them) the concept that God is necessary in the equation of our noblest human endeavors is something they have never considered. They tend to think that all that is necessary is to be “nice” and “agreeable” and “helpful” and “accepting.” So many of them missed the point that Ms. O’Connor was making in her story, that even the best intentions and the most positive of human emotions are so easily miss-channeled into selfish or hurtful endeavors without the source of all that is noble and good, God Himself. Without Him, as Dostoevsky warned over a hundred years ago, every manner of evil is not only possible, but likely.

The Holy Apostle John taught this very clearly in his first epistle. “We love,” he said, “because He first loved us.” Surely it is the case that we understand one aspect of what this means. It is precisely because God reached out to us in this fallen world to save it, to give His Life for the life of the world, that we come to love Him. This, I think, we can easily understand and accept. But there is another aspect to this teaching that we often forget. And that is that we cannot really love others, unless we know and participate in that love which God gives to us. All attempts at helping, or at serving or at caring for others will be tainted by our selfish desire to serve ourselves; only if we participate in the love of God, accepting Him in that relationship of trust and love called “faith,” can we truly love others in that noble and pure way that He loves us. “We love,” you see, only “because He loves us.”

We will hear this teaching of St. John on Sunday, because it is the day on which the Beloved Disciple fell asleep in the Lord. Perhaps when we contemplate it then we too will be as surprised at the strength of this simple teaching as were my students on Tuesday, when they came to understand the power of this simple message for the first time. It is truly the case that when our tenderness is “detached from the source of tenderness,” God, its logical outcome is always something far less than the tenderness that is born of the love of God.

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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