



Orthodox Mission of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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On the Denial of Self and the Cleansing of the Heart Week of July 23, 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

*Naked, small and helpless, you now pass on to the most difficult of all human tasks: to conquer your own selfish desires. Ultimately it is just this “self-persecution” on which your warfare depends, for as long as your selfish will rules, you cannot pray to the Lord with a pure heart: “Thy will be done.” If you cannot get rid of your own greatness, neither can you lay yourself open for real greatness. If you cling to your own freedom, you cannot share in true freedom, where only one will reigns. (Colliander, Tito. *The Way of the Ascetics*. Chapter 5: “On the Denial of Self and the Cleansing of the Heart.”)*

Over the years that I have worked with this book in a number of settings I have found that this chapter, “On the Denial of Self and the Cleansing of the Heart,” is the first true stumbling block to progress. We Orthodox Christians have a tendency to choose either “self-denial” or “cleansing of the heart,” as if they were separate choices. Actually, they are intimately united in the process of growth in the spiritual life.

We cannot pray “Thy will be done” with any sincerity if we are seeking the fulfillment of our own will; and, we cannot dare to hope for the cleansing of the heart if we are not beating down the

desire to fulfill our will. Only the Christian who seeks to put aside one's own will in subjection to the Will of the Father can ever hope to begin the process of cleansing the center of our being, the heart; and, only the Christian who has the motivation of cleansing the heart can ever hope to find purpose and good in self-denial.

Here's what I mean: Many Orthodox Christians that I have met in my lifetime try to do one or the other of these two goals without realizing that they are inextricably bound together in the pursuit of the spiritual life. I have met many in the congregations that I have served, for example, who know how to fast – what to eat, what not to eat, when to eat, when not to eat; they wear the knowledge of the rules of self-denial like a badge of honor. They read labels; point out this or that rule or regulation with meticulous accuracy; but, they lack basic Christian charity to their neighbor; in other words, they “strain gnats and swallow camels,” as our Lord observed in His description of the sin of the Pharisees of His time. On the other hand, I have also met Christians in my experience over the years who think they need only to be “nice” to one another; forget the basic guidelines of the Church; they labor outside of those guidelines to be “nice” and “pleasant” and “pleasing to others;” they reduce the faith to emotion and surface cliché; they have no understanding of the seriousness of sin or of the misdirected passions that lead to it.

The Orthodox way is to seek cleansing of the heart by means of the warfare against our own misdirected passions – by means of the never-ending struggle to beat down Satan under our feet (as the ancient Western Prayer of the Church that I grew up with on Good Friday expressed it). We must identify our own desires, and then pray for the aid of the All Holy Spirit to turn from them to the Will of the Father. What is the Will of the Father? How often I have been asked that question, as if it were some sort of secret! The Will of the Father has been freely given through the Life, Teachings, Death and Resurrection of the Savior. It is freely given to all who will receive it.

This struggle to turn from our own selfish will to the follow the Will of the Father is necessary along the path to the cleansing of the heart and salvation. The supreme sickness of our time is that of wanting our own way in all things; only when we put aside our incessant greed and self-will can we begin the process of healing, for salvation is above all health of our entire being; it is Oneness with the One Who in every action, thought, word, deed was the man for others, Whose very Life is self-giving and sacrifice for the Life of the entire world.

Thus, you see, Brothers and Sisters, we cannot in any sense say with any truth that we are traveling along the path of salvation unless we are truly *neptic*, watchful and vigilant to put aside our own desires and to subjugate our will to the Will of the Father. And that means that in so doing we will care as much for the well-being of others, for their salvation and healing and health, as we care for our own. We will take no pride in our attempts to do so, until those attempts lead to the cleansing of our own hearts, so that we too, as St. Isaac the Syrian in his “Ascetical Homilies” says, become as kind and merciful and loving toward all creatures, as the Lord Himself is.

This is our goal and our purpose: to attain unto the Likeness of the One Whose Image has been sealed within us. The denial of self and cleansing of the heart are forever united in our goal toward

Theosis; and this process, as St. Gregory of Nyssa so clearly articulated, is eternal, never ending. We will continue our progress eternally, going as he said “from glory unto glory” as we grow in our Likeness of the One Who made us and Who sanctifies us with the self-giving uncreated grace of the All-Holy Spirit. May this be the goal and desire of each of us!

In Christ our True God,

+Fr. Elias

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