



Orthodox Mission of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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The Four Steps Week of December 22, 2019

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

During the course of the turmoil of this past week, particularly turmoil in government and politics, I was once again reminded of the four simple steps that were recommended by the Elder Zacharias of the monastery founded by St. Sophrony in Essex, England. Among his several publications is a work entitled "The Enlargement of the Heart." Although I have read many of the writings of contemporary Orthodox authors during my life, I am often perplexed by their use of complicated terms and processes. When writers over-complicate the faith they forget that Christianity is not an academic discipline or a manual for nuclear fusion; it is a faith of Oneness with the Lord, of Love for God and of Love for neighbor in need. It is simple, direct and clear. Jesus called fisherman as His first Apostles, not academicians or philosophers. He called simple unlettered fisherman, whom the Holy Spirit, as we sing in the Pentecost Troparion, made "most wise." When I read Elder Zacharias, however, I find a non-philosophical, and non-academic presentation, a clear and simple presentation of vital Orthodox spiritual teachings

that I can understand and put into practice in my life. For this reason I strongly recommend that you get a copy of his book for yourself and read it. I think you will agree that he presents the practice of the Orthodox Christian faith in a way that is accessible and clearly understandable.

In one of his talks on the Name of Jesus and the Jesus Prayer, for example, he was asked a number of questions about the practical practice of prayer and Christian action in daily life. Many writers who address this issue speak in complex terms only to monastics, giving them the kind of ascetic instruction that few of us could ever hope to carry out in the world. Elder Zacharias, however, addresses us all, whatever our context is: married or unmarried, clergy or lay, monastic or non-monastic. As an example, he presented a four step spiritual process of living the example of Jesus Christ when one is insulted or offended by another. Rather than by reacting in some sort of psychological way, the first step of the four step spiritual ladder, he says, would be simply not to answer the insult back in any way; to bear it in patience. The second step would be not merely to bear it, but to pray for the one who has insulted us. If, however, we were to go beyond the words uttered in our prayer to also feel sorry for the harm the person who insults us has done to his own soul, then we have risen to the third step of the spiritual ladder. The fourth step would be to rejoice that we have been humiliated for the Lord's sake and that we share in a small way the example of the Humiliated One in our life.

This, you see, is not a complex methodology, but a simple one. When we experience the turmoil of political disagreement, for example, the turmoil of posturing, hypocrisy, judgmentalism and lies upon lies, we can follow the simple four steps that the elder recommends. As in all things, we should begin by realizing that we ourselves are in no way any better than those whose actions we disdain; in fact, our sin enables those who act in a sinful and self-righteous manner. Then, we may turn to the advice of the Elder's simple four steps: First, let us not react to those who sin publicly or privately in violence or judgment. This means not engaging them in accusation or personal innuendo. Second, let us pray for those who sin, asking the Lord to guide and forgive, even as we ask Him to do the same for ourselves. Third, let us feel sorry for those who commit sins of commission or omission, striving to see them not primarily as perpetrators, but as victims of the disease to which they are bound willingly or unwillingly, the disease of self-centeredness, the disease of pride and of whatever other sin they exhibit. Finally, and so very importantly, let us realize that God has placed us in the context of this place and this time, not to hide or look after ourselves alone, but to react by taking up our cross and following the Master. This means forthrightly looking to the Lord for faith active in love for others and seeking the salvation of those who are ill with the disease of whatever sin afflicts them. This means patience and prayer, prayer precisely for those whose actions we cannot sanction, particularly when it hurts us.

So, here are the Elder's four steps once again, which we may apply in many situations of turmoil:

- Step back when confronted with violence or sin; do not repay evil for evil; see yourself as guilty as those whose actions you disdain.
- Feel sorry for those who sin and commit violence against others. They are bound by a disease that can be healed only by the Divine Mercy of Forgiveness from the Great Physician of our souls and bodies, Jesus Christ.
- Pray for those so bound, that they might be delivered, freed and forgiven.
- Pick up your cross, lament and pray with tears for those so bound. This is the cross given to us in this time in place as the world drifts ever farther away from the One Who created it and Who alone can save it.

This is not complicated. Nothing in our Holy Christian Faith is complicated. It is straightforward and clear. This, Brothers and Sisters, is our task, our cross, our joy.

In Christ our true God,

+Fr. Elias

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