

## 16a: The Sanctification of Persons & Saints

### Introduction: The Church as the Communion of the Saints, Here and in Heaven

Consider this exhortation from the Profession of Faith at the Chrismation of an adult who is received into the Church:

I believe and confess that it is proper to reverence and invoke the saints who reign on high with Christ, according to the interpretation of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Church; and that their prayers and intercessions avail with the beneficent God unto our salvation. It is well-pleasing in the sight of God that we should do homage to their relics, glorified through incorruption, as the precious memorials of their virtues.

Furthermore, the writer to the Hebrews speaks clearly about the Church as being that one communion of saints both sides of the grave that is the family to which all Christians belong:

You are come unto Mount Zion and unto the city of the living God, the Heavenly Jerusalem and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and the church of the firstborn, who are written in heaven and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men [i.e. the saints] made perfect. (Hebrews 12:22-23)

It is in this fellowship or communion that all human advancement in God is to be made and for a very simple reason: we need each other to make spiritual progress toward salvation. So salvation is both personal and social in the Church.

### Saints Embodying the Gospel

The saints personalise Christianity by showing that it can lived and by living it, Christianity is life transforming. There are versions of Christianity around—heterodox Christianity—which reduce Church life to a set of doctrines, which, whilst true in themselves, are not primarily presented as enfleshed in the lives of real

people. Such variants of Christianity remain abstract, dry, formal and conceptual. They are not experienced in the lives of persons.

When we recall being children at school, mostly it is not the lessons that we now recall directly, but rather the teachers who, for each of us, embodied and made accessible what they taught. So it is with saints. If we want to know who the Holy Spirit is, then let us read the account of Motovilov's conversation with St. Seraphim of Sarov. If we would understand the place of monasticism in the life of the Church, let us read St. Athanasios' Life of St. Antony the Great, because St. Athanasios knew St. Antony, sat with him and wrote down what he said. If we value the healing work of God, we should invoke the prayers of St. Panteleimon, St. Swithun or some other unmercenary healer, for as the Apostle St. James says in the context of divine healing: *"The effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."* (James 5:16). The saints make real, vivid and personal what we believe and how we live by those beliefs and each to his or her own charism or gift. As our Lord taught: *"He that receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet's reward: and he that receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man's reward"*. (Matthew 10:41). Therefore, by receiving or internalising a saint in fellowship and prayer, a believer can more closely conform his or her own life to those aspects prominent in the life of that saint. This explains and justifies the affinity that many believers feel toward a particular saint.

### **Saints in the Celebration of the Church**

Second, the saints warm the fellowship of the Church and enable us to come alive. Being the friends of God, as described in the Gospel of St. John,<sup>1</sup> they are our friends as well. As friends, we should get to know them and develop a personal relationship with them. This may be achieved in ordinary tangible ways. Pilgrimages can be made to the place of their death or other significant sites. Their icons may be venerated. Their remains are memorials of a faith and a life that was dedicated to

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<sup>1</sup> John 15:13-15

God and was literally death-destroying through the power of God; and so the relics of the saints may be honoured. (Moreover, if the remains are, for a time at least, incorrupt, then this attests to the power of the resurrection even in this life.) Their prayers, when invoked, avail with God for our salvation. They are mighty intercessors before the Lord and many are the miracles that have been wrought by their prayers.

Liturgically and canonically saints are glorified in the Orthodox Church when after local memorials, attestations of sanctity and miracles have been received and authorised by the local bishop. A service follows in the diocese after which the relics will be venerated, icons written and services composed. The degree to which that saint is then commemorated in the global calendars of the Orthodox Church depends on the renown and stature of that particular saint. The process of the glorification of saints in Orthodoxy is therefore a locally based and a very “home grown” grass-roots process unlike the west in the second millennium where it was and is very much centralised in Rome.

Some think that the cult of saints is a late even medieval development that has no place in the Scriptures or the life of the apostolic Church in the earliest period. This is very far from being the case. Most if not all the Scriptures are associated directly or indirectly with a particular righteous person and especially after the restoration of Israel after the deportation to Babylon there was a growing sense in Israel in all but the most conservative of traditions that such persons were active beyond the grave. A key example here is the Prophet Elias or Elijah who was caught up to God in a whirlwind and whose mantle fell upon the Prophet Elisha imparting to him his spirit. Grace is personal and may be shared between persons according to their capacities and obedience to God. Elias remained an important figure in Jewish messianic expectation, especially after the building of the Second Temple—so much so that there is some confusion in the New Testament as to whether or not Elias has returned with the Messiah. Moreover we even find relics in the New Testament, albeit artefacts, blessed by living apostles as when the Apostle St. Paul bequeathed

linen which he had blessed for the cure of the sick (Acts 19:11-12). Finally, in the apostolic period we have the account of the martyrdom of St. Ignatius of Antioch which characterises the concerns, hopes and experiences of thousands of such witnesses in ages to come:

Having returned home with tears, we had the all-night vigil ... then after sleeping a little, some of us suddenly saw blessed Ignatius standing and embracing us, and others likewise saw him praying for us.

How significant this is! This was only a couple of generations after the death of Jesus Christ. The intercession of the saints goes right back to the beginning and is not a medieval innovation as some suppose.

### Saints as Signs of Hope

Third, the saints provide us with living testimonies of a redeemed humanity. They show that Christian perfection is not an absurd or inaccessible goal. They are the ones whom God has touched and made whole. They shine with the uncreated light of the Godhead, irradiating their humanity with the new life of the Kingdom against which even death itself has no power. They are mirrors, as we behold them, of what we could be. They inspire us towards this goal, *theosis*—the promise of a new humanity, a New Creation, transcending even the biological necessities and chances of evolution towards something much more sublime and much more true, what St. Paul described later in his writings as the Love of God made visible, the birth pangs of a new age in which God shall be all and in all. This is what the great Orthophile Christian author C.S. Lewis wrote about this in "Mere Christianity." <sup>2</sup>

The command 'Be ye perfect' is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command. He said (in the Bible) that we were "gods"<sup>3</sup> and He is going to make

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Macmillan, 1952) p. 174

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 81(82):6

good His words. If we let Him—for we can prevent Him, if we choose—He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, dazzling, radiant, immortal creatures, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to Him perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful; but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what he said.

Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. Jesus Christ did not set an impossible task. We can and should become saints.

### **Conclusion: We Can All Become Saints**

Orthodox Christianity without the saints would be inconceivable—a dry and arid thing incapable of bringing forth fruit in godly lives and no sign to the world at all. The glorification of our humanity in the risen Christ, to which the teaching of *theosis* attests, is an indication of the transformative power of the Holy Spirit in an evangelical life—a life that is lived according to the gospel. Such a vocation to become a saint is urged by the gospel on us all.

## Homiletics

### 16b: Choosing Content

The first half of this lecture implied that unless we get right our own personal search for sainthood, we are not going to get right our liturgical theology. In a similar sense, unless we get give the Word of God within us, we are not going to be able to communicate that Word to others.

#### Move the Word Of God “from within to without”

In choosing content preachers (and at times teachers) must first place themselves in unity with the Divine Word, in touch with Christ Himself, as they seek to communicate the love of Christ for every human being. Jaroslav Pelikan, the Orthodox historian and theologian, has pointed out that:

. . . the act of communication is at the very center not only of human existence and its origins but of the mystery of the Divine Being itself. And so the transmission of the word, the moving of the word from within to without, from the word that dwells within to the word that emerges, *logos endiathetos* to *logos prophorikos*—the mystery of that process is the mystery of divine communication and of divine self-communication, and therefore of the Divine Self.<sup>4</sup>

When the profound theology of this insight into the nature of relationships within the Holy Trinity is stripped to its bone, a deeply practical reality remains: before preachers can move the Word of God “from within to without” that Word must first be within the heart of the preacher. If the preacher is simply prancing a priestly ego before the congregation, then that bit of advice on using a computer becomes all too true: “Garbage in, garbage out”—or more pertinently, “Ego in, ego out.”

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<sup>4</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, “Writing as a Means of Grace,” p. 124 in William Zinsser (ed.), *Going on Faith: Writing as a Spiritual Quest* (New York: Marlowe, 1999), pp. 123-136.

Every preacher has a divinely given responsibility to seek to call people on in their personal journeys toward oneness with God. It is self-evident then that those true preachers whose primary goal is to call others on in their journeys to oneness with Christ must first tackle the challenge of calling themselves on into a deeper oneness with Christ every time they choose content to preach.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said: "People grow through experience if they meet life honestly and courageously. This is how character is built."<sup>5</sup> So how can we each meet the challenge "honestly and courageously" of choosing appropriate content when we preach and teach? The basic guidelines for choosing good content when we preach are clear: pray silently, spontaneously and privately; stick to the gospel and the epistle; search for the Patristic insights into the readings for the day; and consider the lives of the saints that are being commemorated. However, Eleanor Roosevelt's insight is disturbingly appropriate: face yourself first and tackle the problems and hopes in your own life "honestly and courageously" before you stand up to preach and seek to communicate the Word of God to others. The congregation does not want us as preachers to recite our own private sins with them publicly, but each congregation does wish "to sense that we know that we're sinners, too."<sup>6</sup>

### Preaching the Gospel: Communicating the Word of God in Human Words

Before choosing content for either a sermon or a teaching, every preacher and teacher needs to reflect on the significance of the Gospel of St. John, Chapter 16, Verses 12 and 13 when Jesus Christ tells His disciples: "I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth." Those verses are open to two interpretations, both of which are important for those who seek to communicate the Word of God. The exegesis could be either that the disciples (and us) do not yet have the spiritual

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Gary Noesner, *Stalling for Time: My life as an FBI Hostage Negotiator* (New York: Random House, 2010), p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Ken Untener, *Preaching Better: Practical Suggestions for Homilists* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), p. 95.

maturity to understand the full meaning of the words of Christ or that because the Holy Spirit is not yet an empowering presence in the lives of the disciples (and us) they (and we) must wait until the Holy Spirit is present before seeking to communicate further insights about the Word of God. In essence then, as preachers and teachers we must make careful judgements about how much our listeners can understand as well as whether we have received enough of the enabling presence of the Holy Spirit to preach and teach effectively.

The experience of growing in our awareness and understanding of the presence of the Holy Spirit is a gradual process. In an exegesis on these verses from the Gospel of St. John, Tertullian (c. 160-220), the Latin apologist from North Africa, reflected:

The Lord sent the Paraclete because, since human weakness could not receive everything at once, it might gradually be directed and regulated and brought to perfection of discipline by the Lord's vicar, the Holy Spirit. . . . And so, he declared the work of the Spirit. This, then, is the Paraclete's guiding office: the direction of discipline, the revelation of the Scriptures, the reforming of the intellect and the progress in us toward 'better things.'<sup>7</sup>

When we preach, we too need to recognise that because of our own human weaknesses neither we nor our congregations can "receive everything at once," and that we all need to be perfected by discipline as we seek to progress toward the "better things that belong to salvation" (Hebrews 6:9) through understanding the Scriptures and communicating that understanding to others.

In *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective*, Father Theodore G. Stylianopoulos has set out how we can approach Scripture "as the word of God communicated in human words;" and that approach can take place on three levels—exegetical, interpretative and transformative.<sup>8</sup> First, in an exegesis of any

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<sup>7</sup> Tertullian, *On the Veiling of Virgins* 1. Quoted in Joel C. Elowsky (ed.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament IVb, John 11-21* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), p. 206.

<sup>8</sup> (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999), pp.45, 187-238.

Biblical text, we strive “to comprehend and describe—not to evaluate, assent to or dissent from, or render relevant to contemporaries” what the Biblical author is seeking to communicate. This first level is greatly assisted by some knowledge of Hebrew and Greek, and is quite challenging because we are trying to appreciate the Biblical author’s “own understanding of God, the [W]ord, humanity, salvation, historical events, predilections, concerns, and specific points of discussion as accurately as possible.”<sup>9</sup> The range of this study is very broad indeed, including “all matters in the texts whether grammatical, literary, historical, sociological, theological, cosmological, or eschatological.” It should be emphasised that if we are cheeseparing in this first approach to the Scriptures, the subsequent interpretative approach is likely to be unsound.

Second, as we seek to interpret a Biblical text our own response comes to the fore—our “questions, motivations, needs, values, philosophical presuppositions, purposes, and goals, whether explicit or implicit.”<sup>10</sup> The primary purpose of this interpretation will be pastoral for the homilist, “seeking the right balance between faith and reason . . . with primacy falling to faith.” Precisely because we accept the authority of Scripture, as well as the relevance of Tradition, we are driven to consider the writings of the early Church Fathers, as we seek to interpret a Biblical text appropriately.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Father Stylianopoulos points out that the necessity of engaging seriously in this descriptive exegesis “made it possible for me in good conscience to study in Protestant graduate schools” (p. 191n). The same possibility is open to all Orthodox Christians seeking to deepen their understanding of the Bible. It should be noted this descriptive focus is quite different from a normative emphasis, which requires a firmly Orthodox (and often informed Patristic) understanding of a Biblical text. Father Stylianopoulos is certainly not implying in any way that study in a Protestant graduate school is appropriate to deepen one’s Orthodox faith and worship. He is simply saying that such study helped him at a particular point in his learning process.

<sup>10</sup> Stylianopoulos, pp. 197, 203-205

<sup>11</sup> The work of Johanna Manley is very helpful in choosing content, especially *The Bible and the Holy Fathers for Orthodox: Daily Scripture Readings and Commentary for Orthodox Christians* (Menlo Park, CA: Monastery Books, 1984). Also of note is the series *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998; Gen. Ed., Gerald Bray, which, book-by-book, verse-by-verse, offers periscopes of Scripture as viewed by the early Church fathers. See also Theodore G. Stylianopoulos (Ed.), *God’s Living Word: Orthodox and Evangelical Essays on Preaching* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1983).

Third, “for any reader, transformation hinges more on inner receptivity and the action of the Spirit rather than on the accuracy of exegetical and interpretive knowledge as such.”<sup>12</sup> In a sense then, while the reader is actively engaged in the exegetical and interpretative stages of Biblical study as a part of preparing a sermon, when the transformative stage begins it is the Biblical text itself that now acts upon the homilist. The goal for the Biblical text as preached is to “become the living word of the living God in the present,” both for the preacher and the congregation. It is important to acknowledge that this transformative experience is a “direct experience of God and his blessings, is most profound and least open to discursive reason [among the three approaches to Scripture].” Every preacher seeks to balance the exegetical, interpretive and transformative aspects of communication of a Biblical text, so that both the preacher and the congregation grow in their closeness to the Word of God.

As preachers, we always need to remember not to start “in a vacuum at square one, but to start “where we are with what we have and with what we have found.”<sup>13</sup> As Jaroslav Pelikan reminds us, our quest in both writing and preaching a sermon is “in Augustine’s beautiful term [for] *fides quaerens intellectum*—faith in search of understanding—so that, having found understanding, faith can search yet again.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Teaching within an Open Curriculum . . . Inviting and Responding to Feedback**

All teachers develop and refine their own unique teaching styles, tested by experience, but for every teacher the process of teaching includes three distinct tasks: (1) planning and preparing what is to be taught; (2) implementing the teaching session while coping with emerging problems; and (3) evaluating a particular teaching session and linking it to a broader series of sessions. By

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<sup>12</sup> Stylianopoulos, *The New Testament: An Orthodox Perspective*, pp. 215-216.

<sup>13</sup> Pelikan, p. 136.

<sup>14</sup> Pelikan, p. 136.

examining our own assumptions and practices on each of these three essential dimensions of the curriculum—planning, implementation and holistic evaluation—we can improve as teachers.<sup>15</sup>

Whether or not we do actually improve is largely determined by the extent to which we engage in realistic self-evaluation and whether we welcome or fear honest responses from students, fellow teachers and administrators. If we nervously view any response as a threat to the ideas and techniques of our predetermined, rigid efforts to educate others, we will ultimately fail, because neither we nor our students will listen to each other or learn to think creatively. A pre-set curriculum that is not open to change is, by definition, minimalist teaching—that is, teaching that is grounded in the least possible intervention from students or new ideas. In contrast, a creative, freshly emerging curriculum offers the possibility of a stimulating and memorable learning experience precisely because of the inherent drama in which neither students nor teachers know precisely what will be learned.<sup>16</sup> Never forget the distinction between “teaching” and “learning” and the puzzled student who when asked about what happened in the last class replied, “I dunno. I forget what was taught. I only remember what I’ve learnt.”<sup>17</sup> That is true of all of us: we do not remember what is taught; we remember what we have personally heard and chosen to learn.

Now, whether any long-term learning takes place depends largely on how neural networks in the brain process new information and ideas through short-term feedback in which new information is linked to old information.<sup>18</sup> As the feedback

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<sup>15</sup> David Nunan & Clarice Lamb, *The Self-Directed Teacher: Managing the Learning Process* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. xi, 1-3

<sup>16</sup> See Roger von Oech, *A Whack on the Side of the Head: How You Can Be More Creative*, Rev. Ed. (New York: Warner Books, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Quoted by Nunan & Lamb, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Charles S. Carver & Michael F. Scheier, *On the Self-Regulation of Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 10.

from new ideas generates the possibility of a changed perspective, there is an essential tension between chaos and order, between being shaken up in accepting the new perspective and placidly holding on to the old approach.<sup>19</sup> One type of feedback (e.g. a thermostat on a heating system) regulates; and the other (e.g. when the microphone on a public address system is placed too near the loudspeaker) amplifies. The first type of feedback is termed “negative,” and the second, “positive.” These terms are not value judgements, but simply statements that new ideas will be confronted with old ideas that regulate how the new ideas will be received (“negative feedback”) or amplified, as new ideas modify old ideas (“positive feedback”).<sup>20</sup> The change in value systems may be linear or non-linear, that is, steady and logical or sudden and unexpected.

In the midst of the experience of teaching, we do not know whether any changes will take place in either our own ideas or the ideas of the students we teach. However, if change is to occur, students must grapple with how the new ideas being proposed (either by themselves or their teachers) might link to their existing understanding. For such a learning process to occur, it is essential that both teachers and students ask and answer questions. This process of questioning begins with an awareness that our present awareness might be incomplete, that there is room for us to improve our understanding, to become whole.

Consider David’s cry for teaching as an epitome (that is, a perfect example) of the learning we seek: “Make me know Your ways, O LORD; Teach me your paths. Lead me in Your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for You I wait all the day” (Psalm 24 [25]:4-5). David’s cry was highly personal: “Teach me to do Your will, for You are my God; let your good Spirit lead me on level ground” (Psalm 143:10). Ultimately, this personal desire of David to be taught, to wait for God’s truth, could only be fulfilled by Jesus Christ, who readily accepted the role of being

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<sup>19</sup> John Briggs & F. David Peat, *Turbulent Mirror* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 26

<sup>20</sup> Briggs & Peat, pp. 24-26.

“The Teacher” (John 13:13) of both men and women (John 11:28). In a very deep sense, Jesus was later to acknowledge the validity of David’s cry when Jesus told the Jews that “My teaching is not Mine, but His who sent Me” (John 7:16)—that is, the same Father to whom David had prayed guided him and continues to guide us.

Clearly, teaching is central to Jesus’ ministry; and in the Synoptic Gospels alone there are more than 50 references to teaching (in Greek, *didáskō*), often in the synagogues where the Jews gathered to worship and study (Matthew 4:23, 9:35; Mark 1:21, 6:2; Luke 4:15, 6:6, 13:10). Just as St Paul and the apostles of the early Church settled in many different places “teaching the word of God” for long enough to give their listeners a chance to respond (Acts 18:11), so today the content of what we preach and teach is that same Word. The plea of the Ethiopian eunuch to St Philip to guide him in understanding the Scriptures (Acts 8:26-39) remains relevant to us today—that we should make ourselves available to those people to whom God guides us when we are invited “to come up and sit with [them].” We *can* each learn to preach and teach the Word of God, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit; and our preaching and teaching *will* then change lives.