



DRINK YE ALL OF IT

## ***Fire & Light***

### **St. Symeon Orthodox Church**

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✠ **October 20, 2013** ✠

**St. Artemios the Great-Martyr, at Antioch (362)**

**St. Matrona of Chios (1462)**

**St. Artemius, the Child-Martyr of Verkhola (1545)**

**St. Gerasimus the New, at Cephalonia, Mt. Athos (1579)**

**St. Ignatius the New of Bulgaria and Mt. Athos (1814)**



⇒ **Parish Council Meeting Today**

⇒ **The 18<sup>th</sup> All-American Council is in Atlanta, July 2015**

## ***What is Family Happiness? ...An Orthodox Christian Understanding***

September 10, 2013 ~ Fr. Gleb Grozovsky, Russia

What is family happiness? When you hear the word "happiness," a bright feeling of the joy of living, of participation, is born in the soul from the word itself. Happiness is harmony of spirit, soul, and body. It is when the body submits to the soul, and the soul to the spirit... when the feelings and movements of the flesh are in submission to the reason. Just look at what catastrophic consequences can come from a bodily movement that is not in submission to the spirit. The body sees a beautiful woman and goes off in answer to the call of lower demands not in submission to the spirit. His reasoning says, "Family happiness is not in this..." But the body does not ask anyone for advice; it just wants something, then goes and does it, without thinking about the consequences.

In *Trinity Leaves* from the Spiritual Meadow there is a story: One day a woman learned of her husband's unfaithfulness. She cried bitter tears and asked God to forgive her husband's sin. When her husband left for work, his wife, not saying anything, with tears in her eyes, blessed her husband as she usually did. When they said good-bye, the husband could not bear it, and fell on his knees asking his wife's forgiveness—so sincerely, that he never sinned again. This was the true repentance of the husband. Thanks to the wife's long-suffering, the marriage was saved, and happiness and harmony returned to their relationship.

**Thoughts draw us in one direction, feelings in another, and the body is off to the side.**

Oh, how important it is to submit the body to the spirit in order to escape a family break-up. Today in Russia over fifty percent of all marriages end in divorce [and America is not far behind]; every second union of loving couples falls apart. Is this really love? The causes of this may be various, but the meaning is the same. Thoughts draw us in one direction, feelings in another, and the body is off to the side.

**Every day a sentence is passed on children in the wombs, who never had a chance to be born. Over ten thousand of these helpless infants are being killed ever day in Russia alone! Can happiness be built upon the blood of children?** Nevertheless, even amongst those who call themselves Orthodox are people who continue to live with an unrepentant heart, who continue to sin. And how many women are there who have to endure alcoholic husbands, smokers, and adulterers? How much violence and beating?

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**Many families today are experiencing a state of crisis.**

Many families today are experiencing a state of crisis. However, every person, in the depths of his heart, wants family happiness—this hierarchical, harmonious existence. In order to achieve this state, we have to bind our passions with good thoughts.

Let us suppose that a family has come together, it is functioning well, there were no abortions, and the husband is not an adulterer or a drunk; but there is no happiness... Is there a chance that it could be saved? I recall a story about this.

In one city lived a married couple. They lived together a long time, but always felt that something was missing in their relationship. They tried everything, and after twenty years of marriage, they broke up. They broke up so that they could find a union that would be stronger. It turns out that they had built their lives without a foundation; although they were baptized in childhood, they were not very religious. Finding themselves in an extremely unhappy state, they both went, each to his and her own church, to place a candle. There they met people who invited them to a catechism class. After the classes, they met in order to be wed in the Church, and they never left each other again.

**Without mutual love and faithfulness, it is impossible to have family happiness.**

Of course, if this couple had been taken to church from childhood they would never have had to smash their porcelain hearts in order to gather the pieces together again later. It is very important to explain to children in their teenage years the difference between love and being in love. A great example of this is the following story told by His Holiness Patriarch Kirill.

A young couple came to Vladyka to ask his blessing upon their marriage. He looked at them and asked the young man, "Do you love your bride-to-be?" The man answered that he loves her very much. Then Vladyka said to him, "Imagine that you now go home, you have received my blessing for marriage, and suddenly you have an accident. Your beloved becomes an invalid for life. Would you be ready to repeat the words you just said?" No words were needed—it was enough to see the young man's facial expression in reaction. That is how greatly love (sacrifice) differs from superficial "being in love." It is very important to bring this home to those who want to have family happiness.

One last word. Without mutual love and faithfulness, it is impossible to have family happiness.

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✠ May the Lord our God give you peace and love, for God is love. Always remember the words of the Lord, Who said: "He who keeps My commandments, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by my Father...and We shall come to him and make Our abode with him." (Jn.14:21,23). Let us love God with all our heart, with all our heart, and with all our strength, and may our works keep in step. That is, our works should be a reflection of our love towards Him. And when our works are wrought lawfully, God will repay us with divine love in our souls. He who has found love partakes of Christ every day, and thus becomes immortal. "If anyone eats of this bread, which I shall give, he will live forever," (cf.Jn.6:51) says the Holy Gospel. **Elder Ephraim**

**What does it mean to sincerely confess? To hide nothing, speak plainly and not beat around the bush.**  
~ Saint Ambrose of Optina

# The God Who Is No God

~ Fr. Stephen Freeman, July, 2013

***“We believe in prayer – but we do not pray. We believe in forgiveness – but we do not forgive. We believe in generosity – but we do not give. We believe in truth – but we lie.”***

***“...true religion is not a set of beliefs – it is a set of practices.”***

*My mind has been returning lately to this article (below) as I think about issues between Christianity and the State. It has become an increasingly common legal opinion in the Western world that religion is an inward belief, a private matter. At the same time it has used this understanding to restrict various expressions of belief. In some nations the hijab (scarf) is being forbidden in schools. Personal crosses have been banned from the work place. Roman Catholic institutions are being required to provide birth control for employees in the US. There is growing concern among some that the same development of thought might seek to punish religious groups who do not recognize same-sex unions. The essential problem is the failure to acknowledge that religion is a set of practices and not merely a set of beliefs. This distinction, in many ways, lies at the heart of the secular worldview. The separation of belief and practice is the same as having no God at all. In the US, we celebrate the independence of our nation this week. An independence that fails to safeguard religious practice is no independence at all. It is a new form of slavery to a lesser god: the State.*

*A God who remains generalized and reduced to ideology is no God at all. Only the daily encounter with the living God, with all the messiness it entails, can rise to the name Christian.*

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Belief in a true and living God is a very difficult thing, fraught with consequence. Belief in the *idea* of God can be tokenism at its very worst. This distinction between the true and *living* God and the *idea* of God goes to the very heart of the secular crisis of the modern world. There is no room in the secular world for a true and living God – while the idea of God is perfectly suited to the emptiness of the secular mind.

For the individual Christian this distinction is the great crisis of the believing life. There is a divide in our culture between the ideas we think and the lives we live – and the division is often accepted as normal. This is more than mere hypocrisy – our problem is not that we fail to live up to our ideas – our ideas frequently fail to have anything to do with the life we live.

In secularized culture, religion is not eliminated – it is placed at a remove. The remove in which religion is placed is anywhere that does not matter, anywhere that does not touch our daily lives. The secular genius of the modern world (including America) was its contention that religion and belief are the same thing. The acquiescence of believers to this arrangement was, in effect, an agreement to render their faith impotent.

The fatal flaw in this agreement can be summed up simply: *true religion is not a set of beliefs – it is a set of practices.*

We believe in prayer – but we do not pray. We believe in forgiveness – but we do not forgive. We believe in generosity – but we do not give. We believe in truth – but we lie.

Again, the manner of our failures goes beyond mere hypocrisy. The divorce between belief and practice is a cultural habit reaching far beyond religion. There is a radical division between thought and action throughout most of our culture. The frequently indistinguishable character of the contemporary Christian from the contemporary unbeliever bears witness to a deeper problem.

The *practice* of Christianity has been increasingly banned from the public square. We have agreed to *privatize* our faith. What we believe has become a matter of "conscience," rather than the offensive matter of practice. The Reformation largely erased the outward forms of the Christian life: feast days; pilgrimages; vestments, etc. The Reformers were correct that the inward life of the Spirit was far more important than the ephemeral forms in which it was exhibited. However, they failed to notice that with the disappearance of the outward forms, the disappearance of the inward life would pass without notice. Today, the outward debauchery of Mardi Gras is the legacy of an abandoned Ash Wednesday. Christian practice is reduced to drunkenness (no American city seeks to ban Mardi Gras for its religious content – the practice of drunkenness is not as offensive as a Christmas Creche).

Early Christianity was surely marked by practices: without them, there would have been no need of martyrdoms in the arenas of the Roman Empire. Early Christianity was not a set of beliefs – philosophies were cheap and plentiful in ancient Rome. It was the Christian refusal to offer worship to the Emperor and the gods of the Empire that brought them to the arena. They refused to engage in the practices of the pagan state. The radical generosity of Christians came under the abuse of the Platonist philosopher Celsus. He excoriated Christian acceptance of thieves, rogues, prostitutes, drunkards and the like while the Christian refusal to declare upstanding pagans (such as himself) as "just," was a rejection of Roman society itself. Christians were dangerous.

The closest thing to danger presented by Christians in the modern world is the insistence by some that the unborn actually have a right to life and should be protected against the actions of those who would destroy them. However, many Christians (including some who claim to be "pro-life"), accept the secular fiction of the separation of Church and state, and offer that their private beliefs should not determine the actions of others. Their private beliefs are useless – before God and man.

The American theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, commonly states that "there is no such thing as private morality." It is inherently the case that morality is a matter of behavior between people. A "private morality" is no morality at all. To believe that the unborn have a right to life but to refuse to insist that such a right be observed by all, is, in fact, to declare that there is no such right. If there is a "right," then it is immoral not to demand that everyone accept such a right.

Whatever we profess as Christians can be acted upon and practiced – or it is a useless profession. Christ's parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25 confronts Christians with their practices: feeding the hungry; visiting the prisoners; clothing the naked; giving drink to the thirsty. No mention is made of Creed. It is not that belief is unimportant – but the dogma of the faith undergirds and informs our practice of the faith. "Faith without works is dead," because it is no faith at all.

The heart of the Orthodox Faith (both dogma and practice) is found in its proclamation of union with Christ. "God became man so that man could become god," in the words of St. Athanasius. Human life was intended to be lived in union with God. In the Genesis story of the fall we learn the essential character of our brokenness: we severed our communion with God and turned towards the path of death and destruction. The nature of sin lies precisely in its movement away from union with God. The path of salvation is precisely the path of union with God. This is made possible by Christ's union with humanity. He took our broken condition upon Himself – trampling down death by death in His crucifixion and descent into Hades – He raises us up in His resurrection to the path for which we were created. From glory to glory we are changed into His image as we live in union with Him.

This is more than a doctrinal story – it is also a description of the practice of the Christian faith. We love because we live in union with Christ, "who loved us and gave Himself for us." We feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner because in doing so we do this to Christ. Every practice of kindness and mercy is an act of union with Christ. The Church's life of feasts and fasts, sacraments and services are the practice of worship – the life of union with Christ. They are not religious

entertainment nor mere educational events: they are the visible manifestation of the inner life of God in man.

Christians in this world are “as the soul is to the body,” in the words of a second-century Christian writer (*Epistle to Diognetus*). As such, they are the life of this world. The presence of practicing Christians is properly the presence of the Kingdom of God. The in-breaking of the Kingdom in this world is a disruption of the culture of death initiated in the fall. The world’s love affair with death is and should be threatened by the manifestation of the Kingdom. This is only true as Christianity is practiced. That Christians “believe” something is no threat whatsoever unless that belief is made manifest in practice.

The proposed constitution of the European Union (to give an example) offers religious freedom to individuals. Orthodox Christians have complained that such “freedom” was guaranteed under Communism – but that in the name of protecting individuals, parents were forbidden to teach the faith to their children. The Christian faith is practiced as a community. An agreement to define the faith as an individual matter is an agreement to destroy Orthodoxy. The world’s onslaught of Christian practice is subtle and relentless. Christians would do well to *practice* their faith and refuse devil’s bargain offered by modern states.

We are called to a life in union with the true and living God. That life infuses every action of the day – every breath we take. Anything less is an agreement with the enemy to place our God at arms length and to serve a god who is no God.

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## **The Incarnate God and Secularism ~ Fr. Stephen Freeman**

Our secular culture... holds most things in equal contempt. Things are only things within our culture, and any value it may have is imputed and not inherent.

I have written elsewhere that secularism breeds atheism. The guilty secret that stalks us all is nothing more than the suspicious voice of secularism whispering, “There’s nothing and nobody there.” The life we are called to live as Christians is not one long argument with the voice of secularism. The voice of secularism is not the sound of our own doubt, but **the voice of the evil one**. He has always been a liar.

The essential question for us is clearly stated by St. John:

**“By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.” (1John 4:2-3)**

It is the question of Christ’s Incarnation – but, in turn, it is also the question: “Is the flesh capable of bearing the Spirit?” Do we live in a world that is capable of God? **There are many, who have partaken of a semi-gnostic spirit within modern secularism, who are not comfortable with Spirit-bearing material.** Christ is someone whom we have fenced off, demarcated as a unique event such that He alone bears Spirit. He is the God who became incarnate in a world that was, by nature, secular. His Incarnation would thus be a sign that does not confirm the world in any way, but by its very coming condemns all flesh.

This, according to St. John, is the spirit of the Antichrist. It is as though the evil one had said, “Fine. Take the flesh of this child born of Mary, but everything else is mine, and tends towards nothing.” The Incarnate Christ is not only God with us, but reveals the true reason for all creation. “Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory.”

## This and That

When teenage thugs are called “troubled youth” by people on the political left, that tells us more about the mindset of the left than about these young hoodlums.

Seldom is there a speck of evidence that the thugs are troubled, and often there is ample evidence that they are in fact enjoying themselves, as they create trouble and dangers for others.

Why then the built-in excuse, when juvenile hoodlums are called “troubled youth” and mass murderers are just assumed to be “insane”?

At least as far back as the 18th century, the left has struggled to avoid facing the plain fact of evil – that some people simply choose to do things that they know to be wrong when they do them. Every kind of excuse, from poverty to an unhappy childhood, is used by the left to explain and excuse evil. All the people who have come out of poverty or unhappy childhoods, or both, and become decent and productive human beings, are ignored. So are the evils committed by people raised in wealth and privilege, including kings, conquerors and slave-owners.

Why has evil been such a hard concept for many on the left to accept? The basic agenda of the left is to change external conditions. **But what if the problem is internal? What if the real problem is the cussedness of human beings?**

Rousseau denied this in the 18th century and the left has been denying it ever since. Why? Self preservation.

If the things that the left wants to control – institutions and government policy – are not the most important factors in the world’s problems, then what role is there for the left?

What if it is things like the family, the culture and the traditions that make a more positive difference than the bright new government “solutions” that the left is constantly coming up with? What if seeking “the root causes of crime” is not nearly as effective as locking up criminals? The hard facts show that the murder rate was going down for decades under the old traditional practices so disdained by the left intelligentsia, before the bright new ideas of the left went into effect in the 1960s – after which crime and violence skyrocketed.

What happened when old-fashioned ideas about sex were replaced in the 1960s by the bright new ideas of the left that were introduced into the schools as “sex education” that was supposed to reduce teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases?

Both teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases had been going down for years. But that trend suddenly reversed in the 1960s and hit new highs. ~ Thomas Sowell

The conversion of Europe ushered in a new reverence for life. If Christianity subsides, what will replace it is not, as Dawkins and other atheist proselytizers imagine, an Enlightenment paradise where reason banishes the cruel power of superstition, but a rebirth of barbarism, never fully extirpated from the human heart, now free of its cultural fetters to devour society’s most helpless. As the Lord of Life is denied, the culture of death fills the void – or rather pulls the world into the abyss. And the Left’s veneration of abortion cheapens the sanctity of all life, preborn, elderly, infirm, “defective,” or healthy.

–Internet comment

## Pearls of the Holy Fathers {13 – Part 2}

God judges our repentance, not by our labors, but by our humility. St. John Climacus

It is necessary to take great pains, and anyone who does not do so, cannot come to his God. For He Himself was crucified for our sake. Abba Elias

Mourn, weep, do not seek to be regarded as somebody, do not compare yourself to others in anything. Leave the world, mount the cross, discard all earthly things, shake the dust from off your feet, 'despising the shame' (Heb. 12:2).

St. Barsanuphius the Great

Confess your guilt if you wish to be pardoned.

St. Braulio of Saragosa

Winter passes and spring approaches. You can regard this as a resurrection of all nature which died by frost: bless Him Who thus appointed it.

St. Tikhon of Zadonsk

We fast meditating on death, that we may be able to live.

St. Athanasius the Great

And why am I daily forced to drink bitter things, when I can hasten to the sweet? What therefore remains except to give thanks with tears amidst the scourges we suffer for our sins? For the very One Who created us is also made our Father through the spirit of adoption whom He has given. Sometimes He nourishes His sons with bread, other times He corrects them with the scourge, since through sorrows and wounds and gifts He trains them for their eternal inheritance.

St. Gregory the Great

Who first cried that he should not be led to the punishment, afterward begins to cry more bitterly since he is delayed from the Kingdom. For the mind contemplates what the choirs of angels, the very society of saints, and the majesty of inward vision of God might be like and it laments more being removed from these everlasting blessings than it cried earlier when it feared eternal punishment. So it happens that when the compunction of fear is perfect it draws the soul to the compunction of love.

St. Gregory the Great

Those things which are of secondary importance, such as fastings, vigils, withdrawal from the world, meditation on Scripture, we ought to practice with a view to our main object, that is, purity of heart, which is charity, and we ought not on their account to drive away this main virtue.

St. John Cassian

The trees which in winter nearly all look alike under the snow, blossom in spring. So shall it be with our bodies when they rise again. Now we do not clearly distinguish between good and evil, but in the resurrection all things will be clear.

St. Tikhon of Zadonsk

This alone is the fruit of the Communion of the Body and Blood of Christ, that we pass over into That which we receive, and bear with us in all things, both in our soul and in our body, Him in Whom we have died, been buried, and risen again.

St. Leo the Great

# The Mountain of Your Ego

*Fr. John Wallace, St. Nectarios Church, Charlotte, NC*

Do you believe in God? Good. Do you confess Jesus Christ as Son of God? Excellent. Your challenge now is to acquire and grow in the Holy Spirit producing the fruits of faith. Your heart is like a garden which is warmed by the sunshine of the Father and into which the seed of faith in Christ is planted. Your faith, however, will not grow, strengthen, and mature unless it is watered by the grace of the Holy Spirit. This grace not only softens our heart for humbly accepting faith in God, it nourishes it to keep it strong. (over)

Like any garden, your heart needs to be tended. It must be fed, watered, protected and pruned in order to bear fruit. If you truly believe that the Eucharistic cup holds the mystical Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, your faith will be fed. The blessed Holy Spirit will water your faith in worship as it pours down from heaven upon those who worship God in spirit and truth. The garden of your heart is protected by the loving boundaries set by the Church for healthy and righteous living. And the pruning of your garden is effected by your honest repentance whereby you seek to cut-back if not uproot the sinful weeds that threaten to choke your faith. If tended carefully and well, the garden of your heart will grow and mature and reward you with much spiritual bounty.

However, this is not an automatic process. You cannot take it for granted. You cannot go on "autopilot." You must constantly strive to not only maintain the faith you have, but increase it with love and glory for God. Do you only come to Church when it is convenient? Do you only pray to Christ when you need help? Do you practice personal prayer and devotion outside of Church? Do you have a personal prayer rule you try to follow? Perhaps you could use the daily readings of the Church in combination with your heartfelt prayers as a first step to getting started. A few quiet minutes before your icons and candles is a blessed way to begin and end the day.

If you do not tend the seed of faith that wants to grow in your heart, the weeds of ego will slowly, silently, and surely begin to crowd it out. Instead of fruits of righteousness, your heart will become a bed of wildness. Given a brief opportunity, the thorns of pride and greed will flourish, not to mention lust and anger. When these have firmly taken root, their fruit of doubt and despair, hopelessness and fear will burst open with all manner of foul expression. As if this were not bad enough, the rot enjoins gluttony, envy, and sloth to seek their company making the later condition of disorder worse than the first.

But it does not have to be this way. A tended garden produces the fruits of the Holy Spirit in ever increasing abundance; fruits such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are good, true, and healthy. They grant purpose, direction, and hope to those with faith in Christ.

A priest wrote in his bulletin: "Let me ask you a question. Do you give more money each month to your cell phone provider that you do to the Church? No. What about to your cable TV or internet provider? You don't know. Well, find out. Do you show them more "love" than you show the Church? If so, what's up with that? And don't get mad at me. That anger you feel, if any, because I'm talking about money, is the Holy Spirit convicting you that you could and should do more for the Church."

*~ Fr. John Wallace, Charlotte, NC*