



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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✠ **March 20, 2016** ✠

Sunday of Orthodoxy

Martyr Photini (Svetlana), the Samaritan Woman

St. Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne (687) New Martyr Priest Nicholas (Holz) of Poland (1944)

St. Luke the Blessed Physician, Archbishop of Simferopol, Crimea, *Glorification, 1996*

We venerate Thy most pure image, O Good One! and ask forgiveness of our transgressions, O Christ our God! Of Thy good will Thou wast please to ascend the Cross in the flesh and deliver Thy creatures from bondage to the enemy. Therefore with thankfulness we cry aloud to Thee: Thou hast filled all with joy, O our Savior For Thou didst come to save the world!

Second Week of Great Lent

- ✠ **TONIGHT – 5:00pm ~ Sunday of Orthodoxy Vespers**
- ✠ **Wed. March 23, 6:30pm Presanctified Liturgy**
- ✠ **Thurs. March 24, 6:30pm Great Vespers w/ Litiya – Feast of the Annunciation**
- ✠ **Fri. March 25, 10:00am Divine Liturgy for the Annunciation**

➤ **Looking Ahead: April 9 ~ Children's Lenten Retreat / April 16 ~ Adult Lenten Retreat**

For Sunday of Orthodoxy

✠ There are three things I cannot accept: non-dogmatic faith, non-ecclesiological Christianity and non-ascetic Christianity. These three – the Church, dogma and asceticism – constitute one single life for me. ~ Elder Sophrony of Essex (+1993)

➤ *What is Truth?* In the Orthodox Church, the purpose of theological discourse is not originality, popularity, or novelty. Our goal is not innovation or abandoning centuries of faithful witness. On the contrary, our goal is to see ourselves united with the Mind of the Church as She is and always has been. ~ Gabriel Martini

The Time for Repentance

The ancient Christian Church - the Orthodox Church - reminds us, its faithful, that it is that time in its yearly liturgical and sacramental cycle to prepare to look deeply into oneself to assess his/her spiritual condition and how it governs his/her life and influences the lives of others. Great Lent or the Great Fast, as it was known and practiced in the Church (and is still practiced today) was and is a spiritual journey in preparation for the Resurrection of Christ (Pascha). Its main intent being to humbly, honestly and sincerely search one's soul (especially into its deepest and 'darkest corners') in an ascetically disciplined manner in order to see oneself as he/she truly is. By honestly recognizing one's sins (the definition of sin being to "miss the mark") and through prayer, worship, reading of Scripture, almsgiving and especially forgiveness and love, change the direction of our lives.

Repentance (or 'metanoia' in Greek) means a change of mind and spirit - a turning around. In this way we begin to gain control over the things that have controlled us or badly influenced us that need to be 'turned around'. All this leads to the experience of a spiritual resurrection and renewal of one's Baptismal commitment (Romans 6:3) coinciding with Christ's Holy Resurrection - Pascha! Pascha (Holy Saturday) was the time for Baptisms in the early Church.

Thoughts at the Beginning of the Fast

Members of the One Spiritual Body

✦ In relation to one another — being members of the one spiritual body — we are obliged to help one another. Just as bodily parts, directed by the soul, make one another complete, so must we, directed by the Spirit of God, serve one another without envy. Under this disposition, the surpluses of all those carrying out prayers will supply the lack in prayers of those carrying out obediences and conversely, the abundance of labors performed by those doing obediences will compensate for the lack of those abiding in prayer, so that in the words of the Apostle, there may be equality in everything. May only simplicity, love, humility and absence of envy grow among the brothers. To what extent a person believes, loves and labors, is measured by his daily accomplishments that make him worthy of the Heavenly Kingdom. This is the true Angelic life: when we unite with one another without envy, with simplicity and love, with peace and joy, when we regard a neighbor's achievement as a personal gain, while his weaknesses and sorrows as personal detriment. After all, it is said: "Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others" (Philip. 2:4).

- St. Ephraim the Syrian

The True Mind of the Father

✦ I want you to know this, that Jesus Christ our Lord is Himself the true Mind of the Father. By Him all the fullness of every rational nature is made in the image of His image, and He Himself is the head of all creation, and of His body the Church (Col. 1:15-18). Therefore we are all members one of another, and the Body of Christ, and the head cannot say to the feet, 'I have no need of you'; and if one member suffers, the whole body is moved and suffers with it (Eph. 4:25).

But if a member is estranged from the body, and has no communication with the head, but is delighted by the passions of its own body, this means that its wound is incurable, and it has forgotten its beginning and its end. And therefore the Father of creatures, moved with compassion towards this our wound, which could not be healed by any of the creatures, but only by the goodness of the Father, sent forth to us His Only-begotten, who because of our bondage took upon Himself the form of a bondservant, and gave Himself up for our sins; for

our iniquities humbled Him, and by His wounds we are all healed; and He gathered us out of all regions, till He should make resurrection of our hearts from the earth, and teach us that we are all of one substance, and members one of another. Therefore we ought greatly to love one another. For he who loves his neighbor, loves God: and he who loves God, loves his own soul. - St. Anthony the Great

Do Not Rely on Your Knowledge

✦ "An elder said: Do not rely on your knowledge. For the divine knowledge to settle in your heart, worldly knowledge must be erased. Become as a little child. Do not boast of your knowledge, for 'knowledge makes one proud' according to the Apostle Paul. Put yourself lower than everyone else. Degrade yourself. How much was the Lord humiliated on the Cross? What a disgrace, naked, abandoned, insulted, and then He was glorified. The same way you ought to reach the utmost humility and then you will be glorified."

- Athonite Gerontikon

The Devil Never Sleeps

✦ "The devil fasts; he never eats; he lives in virginity since he never marries; he keeps vigils. Have you ever heard of the devil sleeping? You work, but do you think he just sits around? He cannot just sit around. Do you think you could outrun him if you started running? In a split second he can be at the other end of the world. There is only one way in which you can surpass him, and that is for you to say to yourself, 'I am nothing but dust and ashes. I am a sinner and can do nothing. I am not worthy even to live on this earth!' Humility is the only thing the devil fears. He is not afraid of anything else, not even if you were the most ascetic person on the earth! If you do not ask others for forgiveness you are in his hands for him to mock as he pleases."

+Elder Cleopa of Sihastria

The Psalm

✦ The Psalm is the tranquility of souls, the arbitrator of peace, restraining the disorder and turbulence of thoughts, for it softens the passions of the soul and moderates its unruliness. A Psalm forms friendships, unites the divided, mediates between enemies. For who can still consider him an enemy with whom he has set forth one voice to God? So that the singing of Psalms brings love, the greatest of good things, contriving harmony like some bond of union and uniting the people in the symphony of a single choir. - St. Basil the Great

SUNDAY OF ORTHODOXY: THE FIRST SUNDAY OF GREAT LENT

A sermon by Archbishop Averky of blessed memory, Sunday of Orthodoxy 1971.

This is the Apostolic faith, this is the faith of the Fathers, this is the Orthodox faith!



Beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord, you will hear these solemn and significant words in the Rite of Orthodoxy which the Holy Church has established to be served on this day. The first week of Holy and Great Lent has ended a week of intensified prayer and ascetic repentance. Now the Holy Church, desiring to encourage and console us, has established for us in this first week of Great Lent, on its first

Sunday, a spiritual celebration, one most dear and close to our hearts—The Triumph of Orthodoxy.

This celebration was first performed in 842 in Constantinople in the presence of the Blessed Empress Theodora by His Holiness Patriarch Methodius, in memory of the overthrow of the last terrible heresy to shake Christ's Church, the heresy of iconoclasm. But in this celebration the Holy Church marks the triumph of the holy Orthodox faith in general, her victory over all impious heresies, false teachings and schisms.

Our Lord Jesus Christ the Saviour founded His Church on earth so that all belonging to her could be saved, could elude the nets of the devil and enter into the Heavenly Kingdom prepared for them.

The devil exerted all his strength to overthrow and destroy the Church of Christ and, through this, to hinder the salvation of men. At first he raised up terrible persecutions against the Church on the part of the Jews and pagans. For almost three centuries, the blood of Christian martyrs flowed without ceasing. But the devil did not succeed in his task. The blood of the martyrs, according to the apt statement of the Christian apologist Tertullian, became the seeds of Christians. Christianity triumphed over its persecutors. The meek lambs of Christ's flock transformed the wolf-like rage of their persecutors into lamb-like meekness.

But the devil did not resist after the defeat he suffered at the hands of the martyrs. When the Church of Christ triumphed in the world, he raised up a new, even more dangerous persecution against her: from within the Church, as the Holy Apostle Paul had foretold in his conversation with the Ephesian presbyters: *men arose speaking perverse things*. Paul called such men *grievous wolves*. [Acts 20:29,30]. These were so-called heretics who tried to pervert the true teaching of Christ concerning faith and piety in order to make this teaching ineffective for men.

When this happened, the Holy Church, in the person of its best servants, took up arms against these heretics in order to defend its true, undistorted teaching. There began to be convoked first local and then ecumenical councils. Bishops came together from all the corners of the earth and through the Holy Spirit they gave voice to the pure and undistorted Truth, following the example of the First Apostolic Council of Jerusalem [Acts 15:6-29]. They also cut off heretics from the Church and anathematized them.

This was in accordance with the clear commandment of Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself who said, *If he neglect to hear the Church, let him be unto thee as a heathen man and a publican*. [Mt 18:17]. And in accordance with the commandment of the Holy Apostle Paul, that great apostle to the nations who said, *But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed*. [Gal 1:8]. And in another place he states: *If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema Maranatha*. [I Cor 16:22].

Thus our moving, majestic and solemn Rite of *Holy Orthodoxy* takes its beginning from our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and from his great Apostle, called by Him to be the apostle to the nations, i.e. of the whole pagan world. From the ninth century on the Holy Church has established that this rite should be served on the first Sunday of Holy Great Lent and that it be named Orthodox Sunday. The rite, brothers and sisters, is particularly important and significant in the evil times we are experiencing, times in which the Orthodox faith is wavering and shaking.

This wavering and shaking of the Orthodox faith is due to those very persons who ought to be strengthening and supporting it in the souls of the faithful. Those who should be pillars of *Holy Orthodoxy* high ranking hierarchs, including the heads of certain Local Churches, are departing from the Truth of *Holy Orthodoxy*. It is terrible to have to say that even the head of the Church of Constantinople, which is known as the Ecumenical Church, the man considered to be the first hierarch of all Orthodoxy, has set out this path! On all of this there undoubtedly lies the print of the Apostasy about which the Holy Apostle Paul foretold [II Thess 2:3] the apostasy of Christians from Christ: *Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition*.

We are now face to face with this Apostasy. The major threat to true Christian faith, the Orthodox faith, is the so called "Ecumenical Movement," headed by what is known as the "World Council of Churches," a body which denies the doctrine of the unity and infallibility of the True Church of Christ. This "Council" is attempting to create from all the presently existing and faith-distorting "branches" of faith, a new false Church which, from our point of view, will without any doubt be the Church of Antichrist, that false church

which the Antichrist, whose coming is now being rapidly prepared in the world, will head.

From the teaching of the Word of God and the Holy Fathers of the Church we know that the Antichrist will be both the religious and political leader of all humanity: he will stand at the head of a new universal false church which the Antichrist, whose coming is now being rapidly prepared in the world, will head. He will also be the director of one new world government and will attempt to submit all to his absolute power.

Our *Holy Orthodox* faith is the one and only faith of the Apostles, the faith of the Fathers; it is that faith which the Apostolic Fathers, the direct disciples of the Holy Apostles, and the Holy Fathers and Teachers of the Church and their lawful successors, established by the Holy Spirit, interpreted for us in their marvellous and inspired writings. Brothers and sisters, we must hold this faith steadfastly if we desire eternal salvation!

Now we shall perform with you this deeply instructive, moving and highly solemn rite which consists of two parts: the first part is the prayer of the Holy Church for all those who have gone astray or fallen away from the true Orthodox faith; in the second part the Holy Church pronounces dread anathema against all false teachers, heretics and schismatics who have grown stubborn in their malice and who do not wish to reunite with the true Church of Christ but instead struggle against her.

Then we shall sing Eternal Memory for all departed defenders of Holy Orthodoxy and Many Years for those defenders of the Holy Orthodox faith and Church who are still among the living. Amen.



Have you not heard that God is Judge of the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb 4:2)? What does our Lord say? *He who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* (Mt 5:28). Do you see how he who looks at someone's face with lust is judged as an adulterer? Know then for sure, O man, that he who is ruled by lust of money is judged covetous, even though he possesses nothing at all. He who lusts after many costly dishes is a glutton, even though he on account of poverty feeds on nothing but bread and water. He is a whoremonger who attaches himself to his imaginations and so is defiled, even though he has never seen the face of anyone. So too he who says in his heart, "This has been badly done, and has not turned out right," and "Why has this and that happened," and "Why did that not happen?"—let him not deceive himself. He is a slanderer and will be judged as one who condemns, even though he utters not a word with his tongue and no one hears his voice.

St. Symeon the New Theologian

BID FAREWELL TO THE THINGS OF THE WORLD

By St. Cyril of Alexandria, from his "Commentary on the Gospel of Saint Luke."

No man putting his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God. For just as the husbandman, who has begun to break up his land by the plough, if he grow weary, and leave his labour half done, sees not his field thick set with ears, nor his threshing-floor full of sheaves, and suffers of course the loss which is the natural result of idleness; the absence, I mean, of produce, and the consequent penury, and incurs also the ridicule of those that see him: *so he who wishes to cleave unto Christ, but does not bid farewell to the things of the world, and abandon all love of the flesh, and even deny his earthly relatives, is not fit for the kingdom of God.* One who cannot attain to this resolution, because his mind is fettered with indolence, is not acceptable unto Christ, nor fit for His Company, and necessarily is refused permission to be with Him.

Such were those of whom Christ spake, when forming that similitude in the Gospels. For He said, *A rich man made a banquet for his son; and sent therefore his servants to call them that were bidden, saying, My oxen and my failings are killed, and every thing is ready: come to the banquet. But they, it says, would not come: but one said, I have bought a field, and I cannot come. And another, I have bought a yoke of oxen: and another, I have taken a wife, hold me excused.*

Thou seest that they were called, and while it was in their power to partake of the feast, they excused themselves, and gave themselves up without restraint to those temporal and earthly matters, which rapidly fade, and the possession of which must quickly be abandoned. And yet surely it was their duty rather to have understood, that a wife and lands, and those other possessions, are but finite pleasures, short in duration, and fleeting like the shadows, and, as it were, a bitterness mingled with honey. But to be members of the church of God, from which they, I know not how, foolishly fled, would have procured for them an eternal and unchanging joy. *Whoever would follow Christ, let him be thoroughly constant, and intent solely upon this end; let him not be divided; let him not be possessed by timidity and slothfulness; let him be free from all carnal lust, and prefer nothing to his love unto Him.* But if he be not so disposed, nor so affected in his will, even if he do draw near, he will not be accepted.



If but ten among us lead a holy life, we shall kindle a fire which shall light up the entire city.

St. John Chrysostom

Behold, Now is the Day of Salvation

by Father Tom Zaferes

It has been often said that today's mankind lives in a very complicated and fast paced society. We live our life with a constant sense of urgency to accomplish the many tasks we have set before ourselves. This urgency surrounds us at every turn; we rush to get to work, take the kids to school and to their many and urgent activities, we are on the run hurrying to and fro and never seem to get done with all the things we must. Then, in addition, we pressure ourselves by setting and meeting certain deadlines on the most important things. Since it is impossible for us to accomplish these many urgent things, we establish a list of priorities: certain things are done immediately and other things are relegated to the "back-burner" until time is found or until time runs out. Two questions: What are our priorities? What are the many urgent things that need to be accomplished? If you really are interested, put down this article for five minutes and answer both questions. Look at your answers, our conscience perhaps tells us that the Church, our family, prayer life should be urgent and important, but the practical side of us quickly reminds us that other things need to be done first. So we do the "practical" things first and put off the spiritual until such time that we become too tired or time runs out and they become neglected.

If we examine Scripture, the Fathers, the teachings of our faith, our entire Holy Tradition there is always a real sense of urgency about one thing and one thing only, salvation. In the gospel according to St. Luke when John the Baptist was asked what the people should do concerning the coming of the Messiah replies that they should begin now to change their lives and the way they live. To become more charitable and loving. (Luke 3:10-18). Jesus begins his public ministry in the gospel of St. Matthew by proclaiming, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." (Matthew 4:18). In St. Mark's gospel our Lord is quoted as saying, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1:14). These statements by our Lord are urgent, now is the time to do something, now is the time to respond and act on this good news! Bishop Gerasimos of Abydou in his book entitled **Orthodoxy: Faith and Life** states the following concerning the beginning call of Christ:

The time has been fulfilled; the determined by God has come and the kingdom of God is near, very soon it will become a reality. "Repent and believe the good news!" For the kingdom of God to become a reality, it is necessary for man to cooperate with God! It is necessary for man to repent... To turn toward God with all of his heart... This is what Christ came to tell us and to instill in our hearts. This is salvation...

We all must respond to the proclamation of our Lord now and not delay.

St. Paul says in his second Letter to the Corinthians: "'at the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation.' [Here he quotes Isaiah 49:8] Behold now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." (II Corinthians 6:2). Quoting Isaiah, St. Paul reminds his readers that God promised that the day would come, "the day of salvation"; and that this day would come "at the acceptable time". Christ has come into the world, he has taken on flesh, walked upon the earth, taught precepts of salvation, he suffered the Passion and he was resurrected. Because of all this St. Paul is able to say the time is now! "Now is the acceptable time" refers to the fact that God would enter history at the proper time for the salvation of the world. This "acceptable time" was 2,000 years ago and therefore salvation has begun. "Now is the day of salvation", not tomorrow or the next day, but NOW! St. Paul writes this as Christ preached the gospel, with urgency. Biblical scholars teach that the reason Paul's message was so urgent was because he believed that Jesus Christ would return in his lifetime; therefore there was no time to delay since the second coming of Christ was so close at hand. As we all know, Jesus did not return during St. Paul's lifetime, but his words are still very true, timely and have a very deep message. That message for us is: there is

no time like the present, salvation is now! We do not know the hour of the Lord's return or the hour of our own death, so we must be ready. Tomorrow could be too late. Remember the parable of the rich farmer in Luke 12:16-21? Here the rich fool has so many crops he must tear down his barns to build larger ones. He then says to himself: "And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry." That very same night the rich man dies; what happens to all those worldly riches? Whose will they be? And what about the rich fool? Where will he spend eternity? The gospel is urgent and we must respond now.

This urgency for our salvation is also true for another important reason. Salvation, though a gift from God, is something we must continually grow into and mature. It is not enough to simply confess Christ but we must act on that confession. In other words salvation is a process; a process of growth in Christ. The more we seek after God the more we know God, and the closer we come to God leads to our final goal of salvation which cannot and must not end. Fr. Anthony Coniaris in his book, **Introducing the Orthodox Church** relates the following story concerning salvation: A young girl asks a bishop, "Bishop are you saved?" The bishop, a very kindly man, smiled and said, "My dear friend, might I just inquire a little more exactly as to what it is you are asking me. Are you asking me have I been saved? Or am I being saved? Or are you asking me, shall I yet be saved?" Well, that pretty much flustered the young girl. She didn't respond. "Honey," said the Bishop, "all three are true. I have been saved. I am being saved; and I shall yet be saved." Fr. Coniaris goes on to explain that salvation is comprehensive. Our past, present and future all come into play in this process.

At baptism we are given back the potential to return to God, to begin down the road of salvation. The next step is to actually travel down that road. To walk "in the newness of life" that only Christ can offer. To journey each and every day into a deeper relationship with God. This is being in the process of salvation which our Church also calls sanctification or, in Greek, Theosis (godliness). As St. Peter says in his second epistle: "Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of persons ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness..." (II Peter 3:11). Our lives must be ones that we are constantly in the process of becoming more and more god-like and holy. And if we are to have any chance at our salvation we must do it urgently. This is our final goal, heaven (the third stage of salvation) also called glorification. Again, to reach this goal we must begin and as St. Paul said it must begin today. Salvation is now, the acceptable time is now. Do not put off your salvation for a later date. It could easily be lost and forgotten by both you and God! Begin today to grow in Christ and receive the great grace of God that he offers to all, salvation.

From the Holy Fathers . . . ON JUDGING

Judge not, that you be not judged. Matt. 7:1

When thoughts incite us to judge others, even if for a seemingly good reason, we should control ourselves, especially by means of the Gospel saying which the Judge of the living and the dead pronounced while on earth: Judge no one. It is clear that this saying was uttered by the Lord as a precaution against that boldness which inclines us to judge others quickly even when it is for the smallest causes.

....Elder Ambrose of Optina

Do you not mock at the faults of your neighbour; do you not despise him; do you not nourish hatred against him on account of them? Charity beareth all things. Remember this and bear with the faults and iniquities of your brother, that God may bear with yours. Have patience with the infirm members for we are all one body in the Lord.

....St. John of Kronstadt

Those who want to be saved scrutinize not the shortcomings of their neighbor, but always their own and they set about eliminating them. Such was the man who saw his brother doing wrong and groaned, 'Woe is me; him today--me tomorrow!'

....Abba Dorotheus of Gaza

Why you can't divorce Jesus from Religion or the Church

Joel J. Miller, pravoslavie.ru - February 11, 2016

Like all divorces, this one is going to be messy. The complainant files papers saying she's trapped in a loveless marriage. There's neglect and even some abuse. What's more she wants full custody of the kid and certain rights and privileges to the house and the bank accounts—none of which would exist if the plaintiff hadn't built them in the first place.

Oh, I forgot. You're the judge in this case. What do you do? It's an important question because this is roughly where Christians sit today as people try divorcing Jesus from religion.

The complainant is the solitary Christian, burned out and disenchanted with religion, which the Christian accuses of abandonment and worse. This Christian wants total custody of Jesus, no strings attached, and rights to handle marital assets like doctrine, scripture, and the sacraments any way desired.

But this is where it gets messy. Divorcing Jesus from religion is harder than it looks.

What Jesus and the Apostles did

It's hard to see Jesus as an enemy of, or even disinterested in, religion when He taught doctrines, interpreted scripture, instructed His disciples to pray, appointed leaders within His movement, instituted ritual sacraments like communion and baptism, allowed his followers to call Him rabbi ("teacher"), and said things His followers wrote down and revered as scripture. Sounds pretty religious to me.

Alright, what if we only go that far? What if we allow that Jesus embodied and taught something we might begrudgingly call religion. Shouldn't we be able to separate that from "institutional" religion? Maybe we need to amend the complaint and divorce Jesus from the Church. Yeah, I'm afraid that's just as messy.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, His Apostles assumed control of what exactly? The New Testament writings assume an institutional Church. The Apostles and others in leadership clearly exercise authority. Look the courtroom-like setting of the story of Ananias and Sapphira.

Or look at the Jerusalem Council and the presidential role played by Jesus' own brother, James the Brother of the Lord (see Acts 15). As bishop over the city, his determination regarding how the faith should be practiced was considered binding.

Paul and Peter and the other Apostles carried this model wherever they established the Church—appointing bishops, empowering elders (presbyters), writing that Christians in their community should submit themselves to their authority: "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God ... Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls" (Heb 13.7, 17).

We get some pictures of this in action: If the body at Corinth had no institutional authority, for one example, Paul's direction to excommunicate one of its members (and later direction to restore him) would make no sense.

Let no one put asunder

None of this is to say that religion cannot be distorted or that its leaders cannot abuse adherents. Happens all the time. In the face of distorted and abusive expressions of religion, it's tempting to think that we can simply separate Jesus from that mess and have Him all to ourselves. But it doesn't and cannot work that way.

You can't divorce Jesus from the Church and keep the New Testament because the New Testament becomes a mess of self-contradiction if it doesn't pertain to a religion that has an institutional expression.

The Church is mixed body, wheat and tares till the end. But the reality of our sinfulness doesn't preclude obedience and submission as we grow; it's part of our growth. Extreme circumstances might necessitate disengagement, but they don't justify abandoning the relationship—even the concept of that relationship—altogether. That's something worth standing and fighting for.

Divorcing Jesus from religion tears the whole thing apart. No one will walk out of the courtroom the winner.

The Good Society

I once read a remark ... that defined the "good society" as a society that makes it easier to be good. By that standard, we should structure our society, including our economy, in ways that make it easier for people in it to be good, to do the right thing.

A society in which Individual Choice is the highest good, not what is chosen, is one that cannot do anything other than fragment.

Last week, a high-school honors teacher at [a very upscale school in the reader's area] discovered his honors students—nearly all of them—were involved in a cheating ring. The administration arranged a sit-down with all of the students and the teacher who had uncovered the cheating conspiracy. Rather than dressing down the students and devising a punishment and process for restitution, the administration invited the students to tell the teacher how they felt after having been found out. Of course, this turned into a free-for-all roast of the teacher—he was too tough, they were driven to cheat by his unrealistic expectations, etc.—after which the students felt much better and "relationship was restored." And their parents, apparently, were pleased with how the administration handled the crisis.

To borrow a phrase from Chris Rawlings, that rich school, and that wealthy community, has become "an odious farce, devoid of anything substantive and transcendent enough to inspire people to cultivate and safeguard it."

What kind of children are those wealthy parents and the administrators of that school raising? If my children were attending that school, I would do everything possible to get them out of it, because I would not want them corrupted by the values of the students and parents who make up that community. It takes a village to raise a child — and when the village has gone bad, all the money and appearances of bourgeois stability in the world will not save it.

What is a good society? What are we prepared to do to defend it, and pass it on to our children? Hard choices are upon us, and they're going to get harder.