



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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✠ **November 29, 2015** ✠

Advent: The Nativity Fast

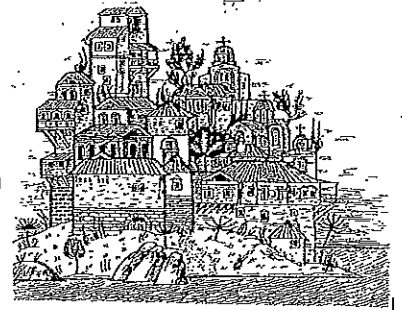
Martyr Paramon and 370 Martyrs at Bithynia (250)

St. Acacius of Mt. Sinai (6th C)

St. Pitirim of Egypt (4th C) St. Brendan of Ireland (571)

Find a place in your heart
and speak there with the Lord.
It is the Lord's reception room.
Everyone who meets the Lord
meets Him there. He has fixed
no other place for meeting
souls.

~ St. Theophan the Recluse



✠ **Tomorrow: Inquirer's Class – 6:30pm - No Wednesday service**

The sin in the Garden was not only breaking the commandment, but eating the only thing in the Garden for which they could not give thanks, since it had not been given to them. Thus, they ate with no regard for God, but only for the sensible object. – Fr. Stephen Freeman

Living in the Real World ~ Fr. Stephen Freeman, *Glory to God for All Things*

Nothing exists in general. If something is beautiful or good, it is manifest in a particular way at a particular time such that we can know it. And this is our true life. A life lived in a "generalized" manner is no life at all, but only a fantasy. However, this fantasy is increasingly the character of what most people think of or describe as the "real world."

A monk lives in a monastery. He rises early in the morning and prays. He concentrates his mind in his heart and dwells in the presence of God. He will offer prayers for those who have requested it. He will eat and tend to the work assigned for him to do. And so he lives his day. He works. He prays.

And someone will say, "But what does he know about the *real* world?" But what can they possibly mean? He walks on the earth. He breathes the same air as we do. He eats as we do and sleeps as we do. How is his world any less real than that of anyone else on the planet?

A man lives in a city. He wakes in the morning, turns on the TV as he gets ready for the day. He dashes out the door (he's running late). He gets to his car, listens to the news on the radio, takes a couple of calls on his cell phone. He gets to work and for every minute he does something that he thinks of as "work," he spends at least another checking his email, looking quickly at Facebook, and maybe checking the news. He gets into an argument at lunch about what should be done somewhere else in the world and who should do it. Angry and distracted, he is frustrated with himself because he swore he was not going to have that same argument today. He goes back to work with the same routine. After work he drops by a bar, has a couple of drinks and decides to stay and watch some of the game. He gets home late and heads to bed.

Who is living in the real world? The man-in-the-city's life is "real," it actually happens. But he is distracted all day from everything at hand. He never notices himself breathing unless he's out of breath. He swallows his food as quickly as possible. Even the beers he has at the bar are as much for the buzz as for the taste.

If the man refrained from these things his friends might taunt him, "What are you? Some kind of monk?"

What is the "real" that we should live in?

Increasingly, the modern world lives in distraction. But on account of the dominance of shared media experience, that "distraction" is treated as somehow "real." The daily, sometimes non-stop, attention to this distracted "reality," creates a habit of the heart. It is a common experience for someone "cut off" from this shared media experience to feel isolated and alone. Of course, three days of no media changes nothing. My attention to the distraction is not at all the same thing as attention to the world itself. For whatever reality might be, it is decidedly not the distorted snapshots presented in our newsfeed.

The experience of "reality" that is media-generated has the character of "things in general." The habits that form within us as we give attention to this abstraction are themselves vague and ill-defined. We "care" about something, but we have nothing in particular that we can do about it. We are angry over extended periods about things that are greatly removed from our lives. Our attention itself becomes a passive response rather than a directed movement of the soul. Our lives largely become an experience of manipulation – only it is we ourselves who are being manipulated.

Against this is the life of Christian virtue. It is little wonder that frustration accompanies our efforts towards acquiring the virtues. The soul whose habits are formed in the distracted world of modernity cannot suddenly flip a switch and practice prayer of the heart. We sit still and attempt to pray and our attention wanders. It is little wonder that our attention wanders. It has been trained to be passive and follow a media stream. In the stillness of the soul, there is no media stream and our attention feels lost and empty.

This is the reason for the life of the monk. He lives as he does in order to be attentive to reality – to see and hear, taste and touch what is true and at hand. It is not so different than most human lives 200 years ago, before the rise of mass culture. And it is *real*. Deeply real.

It is also the basis of the sacramental life. God gives us Himself, His life-creating grace, in very concrete and particular ways. The reason is simple – we were created to live in a concrete and particular way. The life of abstraction is alien to the life of grace. There is no sacrament of the abstract, vague or general. The only Presence is a real presence.

If we want to pray, then we will have to live as though we are praying. We cannot live in the abstract and suddenly attend to the real. We cannot "care" and then turn to love. "To live" is an active verb. The passions of mass experience are something else.

Live. Love. Eat. Breathe. Pray.

On the physicality of Orthodox worship: It is what I observed in Isaiah, Hebrews and Revelation long before coming to Orthodoxy. It makes Christ's Incarnation and blessing of the material world so much more tangible. I need my faith fleshed out, as it were. God can indeed be worshipped in body and soul.

– Internet comment

Addicted to Speed

Life Transfigured, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Spring 2006



We are living in an age in which we can have almost anything we want in an incredibly short amount of time, and we can acquire global knowledge immediately. While this presents us with many opportunities and apparent blessings, there is a price to pay. We often expect our spiritual life to be equally as easily attained. Relationships with our families and others can also be harmed by the speed at which we live. The instant availability of so many things can even make sin much easier to commit.

Consider for instance the foods available to us. We can buy almost any food, whether or not it is in season. Most of us have no concept about how long it took to produce a particular food, or the work that went into growing it. We can microwave food in a matter of minutes. Faster yet, we can go through the drive-in, buy and eat a meal without getting out of the car. Sweets and treats that just a generation ago were reserved for special occasions or feast days can be found in great quantity and selection. Some of us remember the time and preparation our grandmothers put into gathering the ingredients—not so readily available then—and lovingly preparing special treats for feast days. These foods were made for celebrations, they were not an everyday food item.

As another example, we can now receive global news immediately via the TV or internet. We are constantly bombarded with news happening nearby as well as events around the world. The demand for instant reporting often leads to news reports being written in haste, causing mistakes and therefore much damage both to the victim and to the reader. We can be given both good and bad news within a few seconds, which does not allow us time to appropriately respond either mentally, emotionally, or spiritually. This can leave us in a state of anxiety due to situations out of our control, no longer able to respond to either the amount of material or its content. A further challenge today is the increasing weight given to blogs, which, since they are often just someone's opinion, contribute to our confusion. What is reality?

Likewise, in the spiritual realm where so much spiritual reading and information is now available, the concept of instant spirituality is also a problem. It is easy to read quickly through spiritual material, much as one would read a novel, without giving much thought to it or seeking spiritual guidance as to how to apply it to our own lives. How many people own numerous spiritual books, without ever reading them—let alone practicing the teaching in them? Or we may be busy “learning about God,” or “doing for God” through many church activities without actually taking the time to know Him. However, prayer, meditation, and getting to know God take much patience, time, and effort. The Desert Fathers tell stories of monks praying sometimes many years without any obvious achievement. Most of us have trouble just making it to church on time and being attentive to the service.

The speed of our society affects our family, our culture and our spiritual lives deeply. We lose the ability to respond to each other or to stop and think about what we say to one another. Our reality is distorted and reprogrammed with an improper response. By being able to satisfy instantly all our earthly and fleshly desires, with entertainment, food, sex, and thrills, we lose all the benefits of ascetical effort. We must learn to say no to ourselves and yes to God. A Christian should be an athlete, in training to die to the self for the love of Christ and neighbor.

How can we stop this speed which infiltrates all the areas of our lives? There is a way. It starts with each of us as individuals saying no. We can stop the insanity one by one, little by little. Like an addict fighting to come off a drug, we must do the same kind of work to come clean from our “speed

society.” The insanity can be stopped only by reconnecting with God. Here are some practical suggestions to which we can commit ourselves:

✠ **Reading of Scriptures:** This can include a chapter a day from the Epistles and Gospels, and the Psalms. Attentive reading is sufficient, as the Fathers teach that even if we do not understand all that is written, the devil does and will flee from us.

✠ **A Daily Prayer Rule:** These prayers can come from Orthodox prayer books, or from a rule given to us by a priest or spiritual father or mother. Also it is beneficial to pray in our own words to our Lord, the Theotokos, our guardian angel, and our Patron Saint.

✠ **Spiritual reading:** For example, the Lives of the Saints are helpful in teaching us how to live as Christians. Their examples help us know how to confront doubts and temptations, and to grow in virtue. Set time limits for use of TV, the internet, and cell phones: This can allow more time to spend with family, as well as helping us to keep our minds free from vain and evil thoughts. By following these recommendations, you will become one of the few who are willing to give up the addiction to speed in favor of a God-centered, balanced life.

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Truth and Beauty - Rod Dreher

“Our pursuit of truth required an initiation into beauty...”

The Roman Catholic Bishop James Conley, who came into the Catholic Church while a student, reflects on how being introduced to beauty — a fruit of culture — by Professor John Senior opened his mind and his soul, and transformed them both. Excerpt from the Conley essay generously shared by a reader (quoted by Dreher):

As I mentioned, I am a convert to the Catholic faith. I entered the Church in 1975, under the guidance of one of the 20th century’s great teachers—the late John Senior, co-founder of the Integrated Humanities Program at the University of Kansas. John Senior was my godfather, and his ideas about faith and culture are a continuing inspiration to me.

My godfather loved beauty—not for its own sake, but for the sake of Jesus Christ, the creator and redeemer of beauty. Senior saw the beauty of this world in the light of eternity, and he helped others to acquire the same transcendent vision.

John Senior was not an evangelist, in the traditional sense of the word: he did not preach from a pulpit, or write works of apologetics. His goal in the classroom was not to convert us, but to open our minds to truth, wherever it might be found. And he did that primarily through the imagination. In his own unusual way, Senior was a remarkably gifted evangelist. He had a deep love for the Church, and for the beauty of historic Christian culture. And that love was infectious. There were literally hundreds of converts to the Catholic Church at the University of Kansas in the 1970’s. The Integrated Humanities program ran from 1970 to 1979, a decade that, with the exception of some really great rock and roll, was a cultural wasteland.

When I began the program, there was little of Christendom's rich history in my cultural formation. At the University of Kansas, my fellow students and I had very little sense of our own cultural inheritance. We were ignorant of Western civilization's founding truths, and we had only a passing acquaintance with the beauty they had inspired.

Our lives had largely been shaped by the crass appeals of the mass media, and the passing fads of popular culture. There was a lack of truth in our lives, certainly; but there was also a profound lack of beauty. Our souls were starving for both, and we did not even know it. But John Senior knew what we were lacking. His fellow professors, Dennis Quinn and Frank Nelick, also knew. They knew that students had to encounter beauty, and have their hearts and imaginations captured first by beauty, before they could pursue truth and goodness in a serious and worthy manner.

Truth was the ultimate goal. But the search for truth involved certain habits of mind, and habits of life, which we—as students—did not have. Our pursuit of truth required an initiation into beauty: the beauty of music, visual art and architecture, nature, poetry, dance, calligraphy, and many other things.

Through these experiences of beauty, we gained a sense of wonder; and that sense of wonder gave us a passion for truth. The motto of the IHP was a famous little Latin phrase: *Nascantur in Admirazione* ("let them be born in wonder").

The experience of beauty changed us. When we studied the great philosophers and theologians, we were open to their words. We no longer assumed that truth was found in the dictates of popular culture—just as we no longer saw modern fads and fashions as the pinnacle of beauty. Truth is perennial and beauty is timeless.

As I mentioned, a large number of students became Catholic through the Integrated Humanities Program. But this was not the result of proselytism in the classroom nor was it engaging in apologetics. It occurred because we became lovers of beauty, and thus, seekers of truth. Beauty gave us "eyes to see" and "ears to hear," when we encountered the Gospel and the Christian tradition.

Bishop Conley says that Catholics (and, I think he would say, all Christians) have to pay attention to culture, because to be true to their faith, they must be concerned with more than personal sanctification. They must seek to renew the world. And it starts with beauty. Here's the bishop:

To renew Catholic culture, and evangelize our contemporaries, we must restore beauty to the sacred liturgy. If we cannot restore beauty and holiness to our sanctuaries, we will not be able to restore it anywhere else.

This is true too. Maybe it's just me, but the breathtaking beauty of the Orthodox liturgy we celebrate not in the Hagia Sophia, but in a converted workshop on Highway 61, is doing the work of cultivation inside me. It's not something you can adequately explain in words. You have to come and hear and see.

This and That

Love and Truth

Love in the life of the Church can never be separated from Truth. After all, one of the rallying cries of certain groups in our society is "Love Wins." Those groups are not only in opposition to the Truth, but are coming to the point of persecuting the Truth. And their arguments certainly have little to do with "love."
- Fr. John Dresko

When thoughtful Christians try to argue their case for traditional sexual morality in the public forum, their argument doesn't get very far. That is, I submit, because a dialogue is not actually occurring. The other side is not listening. They are simply talking to themselves. If this continues to be the case, it is best to recognize this sad fact and cope with it. What does coping with it involve? Well, in the early Church it meant taking canonical action...

Our task is to remain faithful to our inherited apostolic Tradition, and to argue for it as irenically (peacefully) and persuasively as we can. But if it at length becomes apparent that there is no possibility of convincing the other side with reasoned argument, the Church has little choice if it would remain faithful to its timeless Tradition. The time will have come to draw our canonical line in the sand over this and declare that those who insist on contradicting the Tradition are outside the Church.

Obviously we will continue to love them, as we love everyone else who is outside the Church. But the line in the sand must be drawn. – Fr. Lawrence Farley

I think (Pope) Francis accepts uncritically the social justice movement in the Catholic Church, which, although often well-intentioned, adopts the intellectual and moral framework of secular progressivism—which is, I think, anti-metaphysical and easily manipulated by the powerful to serve their own ends.
R.R. Reno, *First Things*

"The best argument for traditional marriage is a thriving traditional marriage."

We can't defend marriage without talking about God Who joins a man and woman; we shouldn't try. And we might as well say it plainly: We oppose gay marriage because we believe homosexual acts are sinful, and we believe that for biblical and theological reasons. Unbelievers already know it. Let's admit it.

Churches must take responsibility for marriages and families. The argument that we need to protect marriage for children is true in principle, laughable in practice. In sections of America, marriages aren't steady enough to protect anyone. The best argument for traditional marriage is a thriving traditional marriage.

Attending to our own house is now our best strategy for evangelization and Prophetic witness. It's also the way of peace, perhaps the only way of peace remaining. Peter Leithart

The greatest gift in life is living by faith. – Francoise

Asking God to live by the Spirit allows you to be free. It's so interesting to me that freedom in every sense of the word can be achieved truly when we surrender our lives to God. When you decide to live by faith you don't worry but accept what is given to you. God leads our lives, and we should search for Truth in the world. The Truth that is inside of all of us. Life to me is not worth living unless God is somehow apart of it. I can't imagine my life without God as the center.

The true meaning of our lives is living. When we live everything naturally comes after. Living and existing each day, believing that what we seek the most is right there for us to find. I believe in God. Living by faith, living with the hope that God will inspire, lead, and reveal my path gives me hope. A hope that is stronger than anything the World has to say.

Mark Twain observed that "If elections really changed anything, they wouldn't be allowed."

Man, Woman & the Mystery of Christ

An Evangelical Protestant Perspective

by Russell D. Moore

Part 2

Encountered "Where She Is"

In the Gospel of John, Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman by Jacob's Well. The account of their meeting immediately follows the account of his encounter with a religious leader named Nicodemus. The contrasts could not be more striking. Nicodemus was a son of Israel, while the woman was of despised Samaria. Nicodemus was a moral exemplar (or else he wouldn't hold the teaching office); the woman was a moral wreck of indiscretions. Nicodemus came at night; she came at noonday. Jesus encountered both with the gospel, a gospel that is filled, as John put it, with both "truth and grace" (1:17).

The woman wanted to speak of many issues, from biblical arguments about Jacob to theological arguments about temple worship, but Jesus said to her, remarkably, "Go get your husband and come here" (4:16). Both parts of that sentence were necessary. Some would suggest that Jesus should not have addressed the question of her marital status, of her sexual immorality. He should, they would say, have reached her "where she is." But Jesus recognized that this indeed was "where she is." Without addressing the issue of sin, he could not extend the invitation to mercy. The gospel, he told us, comes to sinners only, not to the righteous.

Both Truth & Grace

Many would tell us that contemporary people will not hear us if we contradict the assumptions of the Sexual Revolution. We ought to conceal, or at least avoid mentioning, the specifics of what we believe about the definition of marriage, about the limits of human sexuality, about the created and good nature of gender, and speak instead in more generic spiritual terms.

We have heard this before, and indeed we hear it in every generation. Our ancestors were told that modern people could not accept the miraculous claims of the ancient church creeds, and that if we were to reach them "where they are," we should emphasize the

ethical content of the Scriptures—the "golden rule"—and deemphasize the scandal of such things as virgin births and empty tombs and second comings. The churches that followed that path are now deader than Henry VIII. It turns out that people who don't want Christianity don't want almost-Christianity. More importantly, those churches that altered their message adopted what Presbyterian theologian J. Gresham Machen rightly identified as a different religion.

The stakes are just as high now. To jettison or to minimize the Christian sexual ethic is to abandon the message Jesus handed to us, and we have no authority to do this. Moreover, to do so is to abandon our love for our neighbors. We cannot offer the world the half-gospel of a surgical-strike targeted universalism, which exempts from God's judgment those sins we fear are too fashionable to address.

The union of truth and grace is the same biblical tension from which a thousand heresies have sprung. The gospel tells us that God is both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" ([Rom. 3:26](#)). The gospel tells us that, left to ourselves, all of us are cut off from the life of God, that we all fall short of the glory of God. The gospel tells us that our only hope is to be joined to another, to be hidden in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, crucified for sinners and raised by the power of God, received through faith. There are always "almost gospels" that seek to circumvent either God's justice or God's mercy.

On the one side, there's the airy antinomianism of those who would seek good news apart from the law and righteousness of God. But such a gospel, severed from the justice of God, is no gospel at all. Indeed, this view suggests that we can approach God without repentance, that we can approach Jesus as a vehicle to heaven but not as Lord, that we can continue in sin that grace may abound ([Rom. 6:1](#)). The biblical response couldn't be much stronger: "God forbid!"

On the other side, there is the equally perilous temptation to emphasize the righteousness of God without the invitation to mercy. The

Christian gospel tells us that there is life offered to any repentant sinner, and with that life there is a household of belonging, with brothers and sisters, and a place at the table of a joyous wedding feast. That's why Jesus said to the woman both "Go get your husband" and "come here." So must we.

Water for Samaria

Jesus intentionally went to Samaria. His disciples James and John wanted, elsewhere in the Gospel of John, to vaporize the villages there with fire from heaven. But Jesus spoke of water, of living water that could quench thirst forever. Thirst is a type of desperation, the sort of language the Psalmist uses to express the longing for God, as for water in a desert land. We live in a culture obsessed with sex, sex abstracted from covenant, from fidelity, from transcendent moral norms, but beyond this obsession there seems to be a cry for something more.

In the search for sexual excitement, men and women are not really looking for biochemical sensations or the responses of nerve endings. They are searching desperately not merely for sex, but for that to which sex points—for something they know exists but just cannot identify. They are thirsting. As novelist Frederick Buechner put it, "Lust is the craving for salt of someone who is dying of thirst."

The Sexual Revolution cannot keep its promises. People are looking for a cosmic mystery, for a love that is stronger than death. They cannot articulate it, and perhaps would be horrified to know it, but they are looking for God. The Sexual Revolution leads to the burned-over boredom of sex shorn of mystery, of relationship shorn of covenant. The question for us, as we pass through the Samaria of the Sexual Revolution, is whether we have water for Samaria, or if we only have fire. In the wake of the disappointment sexual libertarianism brings, there must be a new word about more permanent things, such as the joy of marriage as a permanent, conjugal, one-flesh reality between a man and a woman. We must keep lit the way to the old paths.

Common Grace & Gospel Mystery

This means that we must both articulate and embody a vision for marriage. We cannot capitulate on these issues. To dispense with marriage is to dispense with a mystery that points to the gospel itself. But we must also create cultures where manhood is defined, not by cultural stereotypes, but by an other-directed, self-sacrificial leadership on behalf of one's family and one's community. We must create cultures where women are valued not for their sexual availability and attractiveness to men but for the sort of fidelity and courage that the Apostle Peter wrote of as that of a "daughter of Sarah" (1 Pet. 3:6). We must work for the common good, in contrast to the sexually libertarian carnivals around us, to speak of the meaning of men and women, of mothers and fathers, of sex and life. We must stand against the will-to-power that reduces children to commodities to be manufactured and as nuisances to be destroyed.

And, as we do so, we should speak publically of what's at stake. Our neighbors of no religion and of different religions do not recognize a call to gospel mystery. Marriage is a common grace, and we should speak, on their own terms, of why jettisoning normative marriage and family is harmful.

But as a Christian, I am compelled to speak also of the conviction of the Church that what is disrupted when we move beyond the creation design of marriage and family is not just human flourishing but also the picture of the very mystery that defines the existence of the people of God—the gospel of Jesus Christ. With this conviction, we stand and speak not with clenched fists or with wringing hands, but with the open hearts of those who have a message and a mission.

And as we do so, we will remind the world that we are not mere machines of flesh, but rather, we are creatures, accountable to nature and to nature's God. We must do so with the confidence of those who know that on the other side of our culture wars, there's a sexual counter-revolution waiting to be born—again. •

Russell D. Moore is the author of Adopted for Life: The Priority of Adoption for Christian Families and Churches. He lives with his family in Louisville, Kentucky, where he serves as Dean of the School of Theology.