

the

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“Do the work of an evangelist” - 2 Tim 4:5

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Who am I to Withstand God?

by the Rev. Archimandrite Fr. Eusebius Stephanou, Th.D.

Many people in our troubled world today “pray constantly to God” (Acts 10:2), like Cornelius the centurion, in search of the knowledge of truth and redemption. Men and woman, young and old in all walks of life deeply thirst for the one true God and Him whom He sent, Jesus Christ.

Their cries of anguish rise heavenward to the Lord of hosts. Like Cornelius, they have not been evangelized or they have not been taught the fullness of God's truth. As a gentile, he was looked upon as being unclean and was not welcomed into the household of faith by the first Jewish Christians. Even Peter would have nothing to do with the gentiles. His apostolic outreach was confined to the Jews in the beginning, until God finally spoke to him.

This reminds me so much of those Orthodox who, although are admirable for their faithful adherence to the Orthodox Church as the true Church, are devoid of any concern for those outside the church. And, if and when they do receive converts, they place heavy burdens upon them with their demands for cultural readjustment. The early Jewish believers required that the gentile converts pass through a process of the Jewish customs before being admitted into the church, as for example, submitting to the Mosaic law on circumcision.

Many Orthodox today merely content themselves with preserving the Orthodox faith with occasional attacks on non-Orthodox. **They find it impossible to believe that God can work among Christians in other churches. The contention goes that**

if any of those outside were truly touched by the Holy Spirit they would automatically be led into the Orthodox Catholic Church. It's as simple as that. Since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth, they say, and was promised by Christ to lead us into all truth, then no one outside Orthodoxy can possibly have the Holy Spirit, unless he is guided in his quest to discover the Orthodox Church. The inference is that they have no relationship with the Holy Spirit, until they are prompted and, as of a miracle, led into the Orthodox Church.

God is taking many orthodox by surprise today as they behold the Holy Spirit falling on so many men and women in other churches. Like Peter, each one of us can say: “Who am I that could withstand God?” Who are we to tell God when and how to manifest His love?

God also wants to bring us to our senses. He is trying to tell us something, if only we would listen. We have been indifferent over the world's ills. Like the Judaizing Christians of the early church, we cannot adjust to the idea that those who are not Greeks, Russians, Serbians, Romanians, Ukrainians, etc. (whatever the case may be) can nevertheless be recipients of the Holy Spirit and full-fledged

members of God's household. We cannot resolve ourselves to the fact that to become a child of God in Christ does not require a preliminary process of Hellenization, Russianization, etc.

Many Orthodox oppose the charismatic Movement simply because it was not initiated within the Orthodox Church. They are not in the least impressed with the fruits which the Holy Spirit is bringing and with changed lives. They apparently feel that if they were to accept the results of the Charismatic renewal as legitimate, it would undermine the conviction that Orthodoxy alone is the true church. There is no room for mystery or paradox in their life of faith. Their understanding of ecclesiology is totally static and simplistic. Already I have been taken to task by some Orthodox publications in this country for getting involved in the Charismatic Movement, and I know, this is just a start. I am expecting much more opposition in the days to come.

Before Peter had a chance to lay hands on Cornelius and his band, the Holy Spirit fell upon his listeners. This was a sign to Peter and to the believers of the circumcision. In the clear vision of their personal faith they recognized it as such and responded in humble obedience. Scriptures states that **“when they heard this, they were silenced. And they glorified God, saying, Then to the gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life”** (Acts 11:18).

Are Orthodox willing to recognize the signs that God is working around them? Will they begin to bow in humble submission to the astonishing power of the Holy Spirit outside that seeks only to declare the reality of the Orthodox Church as the preserver of the apostolic faith? Will they honor the work of God that is visible in other churches? Peter

finally came to his senses. Will we Orthodox come to our senses and bend our necks in obedience?

I have said it before in previous articles and I state it again. I will not deny that the Holy Spirit can and will lead all charismatic Christians into the Orthodox Church at some distant date. There is much evidence of a keen interest among them in Orthodox spirituality. But such a reunion in Orthodoxy is not an immediate

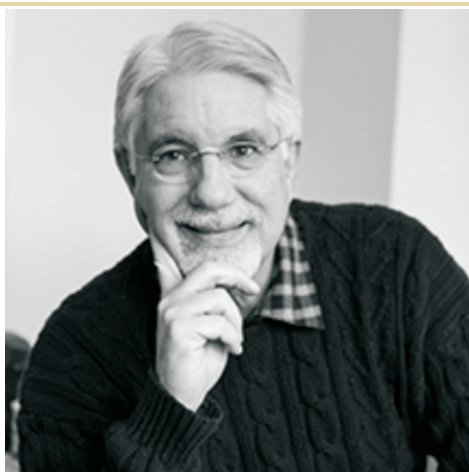
possibility. Since we have obscured the witness of Christ and encrusted His Church with practices that we have equated with divinely revealed dogma. For a long time also we have stopped concerning ourselves with suffering mankind that cries to heaven for deliverance.

If we are honest, we will admit that much of the Orthodox Church is devoid of compassion for the down-trodden, despondent, lost and disposed. But

God cannot turn a deaf ear to the pleas of sinful man forever. God is love and nothing can stand in the way of the pouring of His love upon the men of all nations who grope in darkness to find redemption. Not even the Orthodox Church can frustrate God's love for all men. ***“Will not God vindicate His elect, who cry to Him day and night? Will He delay long over them? I tell you, He will vindicate them speedily”*** (Luke 18:7).

The Dangers of 'Orthodoxy' According to St. Symeon

by Bradley Nassif, Ph.D.



Throughout the Gospels, the Pharisees of Jesus' day meticulously observed the outward rules and regulations of Judaism, but missed the very heart of the Mosaic Law. The Pharisees faithfully performed rituals, yet they had no authentic relationship with God. They outwardly obeyed the rules, but inwardly they were rigid and hard-hearted. Love was absent. In a word, they were “religious, but lost.” In Matthew 23, this is how Jesus described these religious experts of his day:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe the mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others...So

you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.”

These are frightening words for any Christian or religious professional to hear, then as now (myself included). Every bishop, priest, monk or scholar who hears these words cannot help but examine our hearts in the light of Jesus' scathing rebuke. Jesus exposes us all to the light of the gospel. He calls us to ask ourselves, “Am I simply fulfilling religious obligations? Am I more concerned with obeying the liturgical rules and canonical regulations than I am with love for God and others? Isn't it enough that I go to Church, pay my dues, say my prayers, venerate the icons, serve in the altar, make the sign of the cross, sing in the choir or chant?”

I always feel encouraged when I hear the words of a spiritual leader whose priorities are the same as those of Jesus. St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022 AD) is one of them. Symeon is one of the greatest spiritual fathers in Eastern Orthodox history. He closely followed Jesus and spoke in plain language to all who would listen. Like Jesus, he told the people of his day that the most important thing in their lives was the

need for their hearts to be right with God. A loving heart was to be first and foremost in their practice of their Orthodox faith. Interestingly, the Orthodox Church of Symeon's day was not so different from the rigid Judaism in Jesus' day. How so?

The late Fr. John Meyendorff describes the state of affairs in his book, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (chapters 4-5): Around the year 1,000 the Byzantine Empire had reached the peak of its secular power. Political expansion went far and wide. Constantinople, its capital, became very rich. The Byzantine emperor formed a political alliance with Russia, so its borders became increasingly secure. Christians became very proud of their cultural and religious heritage. The Greek language kept them connected with the ancient world of Plato, Aristotle and others philosophers of antiquity. An educational revival of Hellenistic learning occurred because of the culture's connection with the language and classics of Greek antiquity.

In addition to political and cultural developments of the 10th century, the Orthodox Church itself underwent a noticeable change in its spiritual ethos. A general attitude of self-assuredness prevailed among

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Church leaders after the age of the Ecumenical Councils. The Church had triumphed over all the heresies of past generations. Churchmen felt secure and self-satisfied about their Orthodox faith. Spiritual pride seemed to prompt leaders to boast about the glories of their religious inheritance which, like no other, kept the Orthodox faith pure and undefiled because it had triumphed over all the heresies of past generations. The Church Fathers, the seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787 AD), the liturgy and spiritual life – all this was the great glory of Orthodoxy.

Now it is easy to see why people felt this way. The Orthodox Church had previously gone through tumultuous theological debates in the preceding millennium and emerged triumphant. The Trinitarian, Christological and Iconoclastic crises shook the Church to its very core. But now, the days of the great theological controversies were over. Heresy was defeated, and Orthodoxy was established. Theologians and Churchmen, therefore, began to speak more often about the accomplishments of the great *Church Fathers and Councils* than about Jesus Christ and the apostles. A “theology of repetition” (a rote restatement of past teachings) characterized the faith of many Church leaders. Routine recitation of the past became a theological virtue. That attitude was extended to the Church's liturgical life. By this time, the many worship services had reached their final form for the most part. It seemed like everyone in the Church was reducing the faith to a litany of external behaviors, much like the Pharisees of Jesus' day. Church became institutionalized. Monks, bishops and laity were content simply with being baptized, going to Church, taking communion and fulfilling their religious obligations. In short, theology was being divorced from personal experience. Doctrine was more important than life. It was enough just to belong to the Orthodox Church without having a conscious, personal experience of God's grace in the heart. Outward religion replaced a living relationship with Jesus Christ.

That was the world into which St. Symeon was born. Although I cannot go into the details of Symeon's biography, or explore all the ins-and-outs of his doctrine of the sacraments and mystical

experience, the heart of Symeon's concerns, however, is easily captured: *“A monk thinks that it is enough for him that he merely does not miss the compulsory Offices, that is Orthros and Vespers and the Hours that are sung in common, and that by simply doing this he will attain to perfect virtue...But this is not so! God does not look on the appearance...He looks on the 'contrite and humbled in heart.'”* (The Discourses, book 4, par. 5).

It is important to note here that St. Symeon was not an anti-sacramentalist or anti-church theologian. In fact, baptism and Eucharist played a vital role in his mystical theology and became the foundation of his call to authentic Christian living. For him, there is only one essential need for every baptized Christian to experience in this life, and that need is what he calls “a conscious



awareness of the Holy Spirit.” But the monks of St. Mama's Monastery, whom he addressed, would not hear of it. For them, it was impossible for contemporary Christians to have a conscious experience of God's grace in the heart. They believed that only the great Church Fathers of Christian antiquity could have that experience. The average Church-going Orthodox Christian certainly was not worthy of it. To say otherwise, as Symeon was doing, could only be heresy. And so to these monks St. Symeon replied the following:

“Here are those whom I call heretics: Those who say that there is no one in our time in our midst who would observe the commandments of the Gospel and become like the holy Fathers (and) those who pretend that this is impossible. These people have not fallen into some particular heresy, but into all the heresies at once, since this

one is worse than all in its impiety....Whoever speaks this way destroys all the divine Scriptures. These anti-Christ's affirm: 'This is impossible, impossible!'...Do not say, then, that one can possess Christ without knowing it' ... This is a thing never impossible, my friends, but one the contrary altogether possible for those who so wish” (The Discourses, bk. 29 and Hymn 27).

In addition to his call for a conscious experience of God's grace, St. Symeon frequently venerated an icon he had made of his own spiritual father who was also named Symeon. He held an annual liturgical celebration in the spiritual father's memory which gained widespread support and enthusiasm from the people. Yet bishop Stephen of Nicomedia, St. Symeon's arch-enemy, got offended and accused him of disobedience and vainglory. Symeon's biographer tells us that the bishop was seized by jealousy and thus charged Symeon of elevating his own personal experience over the administrative hierarchy of the Church. As a result, Symeon was exiled for several years. However, the patriarch of Constantinople (not bishop Stephen) finally lifted the sentence and restored Symeon to his rightful place in the Church for the last 13 years of his life. During that time, Symeon did as he had always done. The older he got, the bolder he became. He preached the Gospel more forcefully than ever before. In one of his final messages he concluded that anyone in the Church – be it layman, monk, priest, bishop or patriarch – who lacks a conscious awareness of God in their heart is unfit for Christian service. Such people are spiritual impostors, regardless of their baptism or ordination.

Today, we ask “How can one acquire this 'conscious experience' of God in the heart”? St. Symeon tells us that it only comes through *tears of repentance!* That is his answer, plain and simple. *Repent and turn from “self-reliance” to “God-reliance.”* Seek the person of Jesus Christ himself, and not a spiritual experience. Whatever experience God gives us will be the result of entrusting our lives to him. Our responsibility is not to seek a particular religious experience, but to seek God himself by confessing the

sins of a loveless life, religious formalism and barren ritualism.

Too often in our pulpits today, we hear more about “Orthodoxy” than we do about “Jesus.” Priests frequently punctuate their sermons with constant references to “the Orthodox faith” much more than “Jesus Christ.” It is almost seems like a sick religious addiction. I realize we are living in a pluralistic age where our parishioners need to know the differences between Orthodoxy and other religious groups. But persistent references to “Orthodoxy” have turned the Christian faith into a system of doctrine more than a living relationship with Jesus Christ in his trinitarian relations. St. Symeon invites all of us,

clergy and laity alike, to ask God to forgive us for minimizing the Lordship of Jesus Christ with the an idolatrous reliance on the externals of the Orthodox faith and a prideful boasting in our great heritage, true and beautiful though it be. Symeon was convinced that the sacraments, as self-contained realities, will not get people to where God wants us to go unless the sacraments are accompanied by a heart of sincere repentance. St. Symeon points the way to genuine Christian faith: *“Do not try to be a mediator on behalf of others until you yourself have been filled with the Holy Spirit, until you have come to know and to win the friendship of the King of all with conscious awareness in your*

soul.” (Letter 1) “Without tears our dried heart can never be softened, nor our soul acquire spiritual humility.” (The Discourses, 4 par. 5).

Fr. Eusebius Stephanou of blessed memory reminded us of this message more than almost any other Orthodox leader in our generation. Through the voice of St. Symeon, Fr. Eusebius said, in effect: *“Now is the day of repentance! Turn away from cultural Christianity and liturgical legalism. Embrace the person of Jesus Christ, and his love for you. Let Christ himself live at the center of your heart through total commitment to him.”* May the memory and message of Fr. Eusebius, and his patron St. Symeon, find a home in our hearts today.

A Crisis of Faith, Not of Theology

by the late Very Rev. George Florovsky, D.D.



The “Historic Church” is always an “imperfect Church” in spite of her inherent sanctity. Every student of Church History knows it but well. The “Golden Age” of the Church – the age of Chrysostom and the Cappadocians – was an age of schisms, rifts, treason and suspicions. Did not St. Gregory of Nazianzus suggest that apparently Christ was asleep on the boat tossed by storms? Did not St. Basil describe the story of his time as that of an eclipse, when it was almost impossible – in the darkness – to tell foes from friends?

Was not St. John Chrysostom betrayed by his fellow-bishops and was to die as a “bloodless martyr”? And yet, it was, no doubt, a golden age! On the other hand, Christian preaching had been always an offense, already in the times of St. Paul. Yet, St. Paul did not think that it was permissible to “adjust” his preaching to the “capacity” of those to whom it had to be addressed. He did not hesitate “to offend” them. Why should we – in our own time – be shy at this point? And be so much concerned with the “changing times?”

There is actually no crisis of traditional theology, but there is a profound crisis of belief, of faith. Those, who are unable and unwilling to believe with the Church, still want to be counted as Christians. Then they face an alternative: to disregard all that which they do not find valid (what the majority of the actually membership in our Church is doing – without “theology”, dogmas, etc.), or to claim for a formal retraction of “traditional”, “obsolete”, “ancient”, resp. “Hellenic.” They have lost faith, and for that reason actually are in need of “changing theology”. Indeed, bad or negligent teaching in our Church has been responsible for that defection, or

ignorance. I mean, the teaching might have been deficient, but true theology was, nevertheless, true and valid. Reinterpretation may be needed, but not an adjustment. Let those who are still “feeling with the Church” – *sentire cum ecclesia* – thank God for His help and blessing, for faith is somehow always a *gift* of God, in *Spiritu Sancto*.

What we are missing now is a theology well presented. Unfortunately, one begins very often not with the Faith “as once delivered unto the Saints”, but with the alleged “Modern Mind” which is, in fact, still in flux. A Protestant friend of mine rightly suggested that actually “the Modern Man” has not yet made up his mind, and there are rather modern moods and whims.

