



## 55 Years of Ministry

**It is only proper that we reflect upon the anniversary of this ministry and what has made it “different and distinct from any other renewal endeavors in the Orthodox Church” (to quote Fr. Stephanou).**

It could never have lasted through these many years without those who have supported the ministry, and who have had a special hunger and desire above and beyond routine religious observances. I think you will agree with me, that Fr. Stephanou’s book: *“A Manual of the Basic Principles of Orthodox Renewal”* directly points out the importance and mission of this ministry. The following article are excerpts from this book. Sincerely, *Joseph Abbate*

Orthodox renewal does not come with human effort and religious resourcefulness. If it is to be genuine and lasting, it must be the work of supernatural grace. Simply put, renewal comes “from above” (Gk. *anōthen*). Since it starts with rebirth (John 3:3). Ultimately, a change of heart is involved – not the intellect. Renewal is a heart experience. After being tested in the crucible of personal growth pains over a period of time, I discovered that Christ does the work of renewal in us to the extent we cleave unto Him (1 Cor. 6:17). Renewal basically is living with a personal intimacy with our Savior and divine Spouse in preparation for the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

### What Makes the Difference in Renewal

Often those who are new to St. Symeon’s Brotherhood thankfully are fired up for the Lord. But too often they are driven to become active and

to take initiatives prematurely, that is, without first having an adequate grasp of the fundamentals of renewal. Some are eager to fill leadership roles. Their enthusiasm is admirable and such persons should be encouraged.

It is of vital importance, however, that the one who is new to St. Symeon’s be a learner first and a disciple. A teachable spirit is a basic requirement. Learning comes before teaching. Allowing ourselves to be tutored comes before leading others. A disciple’s heart attitude is basic to spiritual growth. It is a sign of humility, and, only the humble are endowed with the grace of the Holy Spirit for ministry. “The Lord giveth grace to the humble” (James 4:6). In this regard, our illustrious Church Father St. Symeon the New Theologian cautions: “We seek to exercise leadership over the royal flock as shepherds without first becoming lambs” (Catechesis 28).

The first principle to be considered here is the fact that renewal should be viewed within an Orthodox framework. This means that care must be taken to relate renewal to the familiar forms of worship and the sacraments of our Church. The sacraments aim at spiritual renewal. Indeed, they look to sanctifying the heart and life of the believer. The one sacrament that is probably most relevant and significant in this regard is the Holy Eucharist, commonly

known as the Divine Liturgy.

Each Liturgy we conduct is, in effect, a Renewal Conference. Consequently, we can logically infer from this that any renewal activity or renewal movement is unnecessary and superfluous. Can anything improve on the renewing power in the Communion of the Body and Blood of Christ? Perish the thought! On the other hand, the fact remains unmistakable, but, at the same time, puzzling, that somehow the frequent Communion and the Sacraments in general do not see, to have a life-changing effect on the communicant as a whole. This is not to deny the efficacy of the Sacraments. The cause of this situation does not lie in the sacraments. It must be traced to the communicant’s lack of an adequate relationship with God. Sacraments certainly do not work like religious magic.

What makes the difference is a threshold experience of rebirth, often called “regeneration” or a state of being “born again”. “He that lacks awareness of his baptism,” teaches St. Symeon the New Theologian, “accepting it only faith and having effaced it by sins, but refuses the second one – I mean the baptism in the Spirit, given by God in His love to those who seek it in repentance – how can he possibly be saved? Not in the least” (Catechesis 32).

Jesus in unmistakable language declared: “If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink. “He that believeth on me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water” (John 7:37f). The “living water” is the Holy Spirit that stirs the inside of the believer and accomplishes in the depths of the believer a work of regeneration (rebirth).

The Lord is not looking for those who are perfect to bestow upon them the rebirth in the Holy Spirit. He is

looking for those who confess their thirst for the living water He alone can give. They are the ones who are ready for rebirth and not those who go to Jesus with a sense of already being filled. Church members who are self-righteous and feel they already have everything they need from God end up having nothing. “He has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich He has sent away empty” (Luke 1:53).

### An Apocalyptic Phenomenon

To the distinguishing characteristics of authentic renewal already mentioned, I now add the principal that it is apocalyptic in terms of its ultimate objective. If the renewal is to be viewed as truly urgent and of critical importance – and not simply as some religious pastime – then it must be connected to the Second Coming of Christ in glory. It must be understood in an eschatological dimension.

Then, and only then, does the renewal become relevant and truly effective. Simply put, it must be accepted as an apocalyptic phenomenon. The timing of the current renewal is extremely relevant and warrants considerable attention and study.

The first renewal, in one sense, occurred at the River Jordan with John the Baptist publically announcing the arrival of the Lamb of God. He challenged the multitudes that had gathered from Jerusalem and all of Judaea with “repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”.

The eschaton is proclaimed. The appearance (epiphania) of the Messiah at the Jordan marks the beginning of the Last Days. Today, renewal is basically the preparation for the appearance of Christ again, this time in glory to finally usher in the kingdom – no longer only in the hearts of the believers, but visibly in the physical world. He will then restore the fallen natural world back to its initial state

at which time God will exercise dominion and man through the God-man, the last Adam, will reclaim his dominion over the physical world.

When Jesus embarked on His earthly ministry, he thundered the identical message of John the Baptist: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 4:17). In the Great Commission delivered to His disciples the Lord began with: “Preach, saying the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 10:17).

The inference logically inherent in such a proclamation is that time is running out. The message is in effect prophetic. There is coming a



day when there will be no opportunity to repent. It means that the Day of the Lord is fast approaching – the day and the hour unknown. There is an element of warning in such a message. It is urgent for men to repent now. There is a deadline ahead to meet. Repentance after the day of the Lord will be to no avail. That is what makes Hell Hell. The futility of repenting when you pass the deadline – the return of Jesus in glory to execute judgement upon those who rejected the Gospel and His call to repentance.

What makes renewal an apocalyptic phenomenon in our day and age is the fact that it originates from heaven. Renewal does not come with man’s initiative and effort. It

has been tried in the past with little, if any, success. It ends up being an imitation renewal that soon fizzles out. It is not lasting. An individual and collective acknowledgement is a necessary condition for authentic renewal. Renewal requires Spiritual power that comes from above. It is the Holy Spirit that assures us of authentic renewal. Renewal committees are useful but without direct divine life-changing power, they are doomed to failure.

Renewal is an apocalyptic phenomenon not only because it is **God’s work of sovereign intervention**, but because of the timing of such renewal. It not only comes in “The Last Days,” but it was foretold by the Prophet Joel before Christ that the Father would sovereignly intervene in divine grace and mercy to restore the people called by His name. We are assured in prophecy that God would visit His people in a very special way at the end of the age. He would step into the affairs of the church and deliver it out of its impasse, out of its state of **desolation** into a state of **restoration**.

The church has reached an impasse today. Like natural Israel, it has lost its vibrancy and power to impact the world around it. The salt has lost its savor. The church has held to “*the form of religion, denying the power thereof*” (2 Tim. 3:5). St. Paul cautions us that; “*in the last days perilous times shall come*” and religious formalism will banish any concern for the power of the Holy Spirit. He is referring to religious routine that excludes spiritual life-changing power. It is going through the motions of religion and never experiencing the supernatural power of God. It is a caricature of true Orthodoxy. Remember the warning of Jesus: “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees” (Matt. 16:6). They represent those believers who are more interested in religious externals rather

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than in a heart relationship with God.

In the word of God it is predicted that in the last days the increase of evil and godlessness will flood the world and apostasy will even infiltrate the church. Jesus foretold: "As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of Man" (Luke 17:26).

In Genesis 6:5, we have a description of the moral decadence that filled the earth in the days of Noah: "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." As the day of the Lord's return draws closer, rebellion and ungodliness will be on the increase. Jesus Himself predicted: "Iniquity shall multiply for the love of many shall wax cold" (Matt. 24:12).

### Confronting Satan's Master Plan

Before we can fully understand the apocalyptic dimension of renewal to this end time, it is needful to be aware of the apocalyptic meaning of sin and disobedience reaching their culmination, as the day of the Lord draws near. God will be faced with a world and a church in a state of desolation. It will peak with the emergence of two global leaders, one political, the Antichrist, the other religious, the False Prophet.

St. Paul explicitly points to Satan's program for ultimately gaining dominion over the entire world, including the church, as this age draws to a close. He speaks of it as the "mystery of iniquity" that Satan put into motion from the moment of the Fall of Adam and which has been speed up since the time of Christ's atoning death upon the Cross. St. Paul makes it clear that "the mystery of iniquity doth already work" (2 Thess. 2:7). It takes a little imagination to grasp how far it has come after two thousand years, and how far Satan has come in his master plan to control the world and to gain the universal worship of mankind. The fury of Satan has peak-

ed in our day, "for the Devil is come down to you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time" (Revelation 12:12).

The Jews heard Jesus verify: "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate" (Matt. 23:38). This corresponds to the Lord's indictment on the apostate church: Thou has a name that thou livest, and are dead" (Revelation 3:1).

### Divine Intervention and Restoration

It is the hour of God's intervention. The response to the desolate agenda of Satan comes from heaven. Man is incapable of handling it. It is too formidable – too cosmic. He recognizes that His covenant people have reached an impasse. God com-



forts His besieged people. It is His appointed hour to bring restoration to His defeated people related to Him by covenant. The prophet Joel trumpets the word of hope and encouragement. "Fear not O land. Be glad and rejoice, for the Lord will do great things" (Joel 2:21).

"The thief cometh not but to steal," and he stripped God's covenant people of their inheritance. However, now the Lord assures them that everything Satan robbed them will be restored. "And I will restore to you the years that the locust has eaten, the cankerworm..." (Joel 2:25). The insects symbolize the invading demons, as was stated above. The ultimate purpose of God's intervention of mercy is to demonstrate His lordship in the midst of His people. Then finally

Joel spells out in clear-cut language the Lord's supreme visitation.

"And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions" (Joel 2:28). As St. Peter verifies for us, Joel's prophecy was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost. His only explanation to the multitudes of the supernatural happenings in the Upper Room was to refer directly to this prophecy. "But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16). Then he follows with the prophecy in its entirety, including the cosmic signs that will appear in the sky and on earth, very likely eluding to the natural disasters that are to come at the close of the age.

Pentecost marks the Father's outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Most of us are familiar to this event, which we associate with the birthing of the Church. The Apostles and the others among the one hundred and twenty were filled with the Holy Spirit which manifested supernatural signs. Fear and timidity were replaced with fearlessness and an inner drive to proclaim the Gospel, as well as signs and wonders. The Apostolic Church operated in the supernatural.

Where are our Orthodox visionaries and initiates of the Holy Spirit? Are our church leaders ready to take courageous action in response to the extraordinary move of the Holy Spirit in this last hour? God save us if we believe that the Church Fathers of the distant past exhausted the mystery of the Christian dispensation. Then we are truly guilty of boxing up the Holy Spirit! Then truly we have engraved Orthodoxy on tablets of stone! The Laodicean Church did not recognize the absence of God from her midst! (Revelation 3:14f).

That which needs to be made clear at this point is that the cosmic signs linked with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, including Joel's prophecy, were not in evidence. His prophecy was not fulfilled in its

entirety. This leads us to believe that there will be a time in the future when the prophecy will be totally fulfilled. At Pentecost it was partially fulfilled for reasons already explained.

The “Last Days” spoken of by Joel the prophet began with the coming of Christ (Hebrews 1:2). In other words, the period of the last two thousand years can be called a period of the “last days.” However – and this needs to be emphasized – there are the “last days” of the “last days.” As the return of Christ draws closer, what could be called the eve of the Second Coming, many Christian believers view as the “last days” in the strict sense of the words. This means that while Pentecost is the partial fulfillment of Joel 2:28, the end time outpouring of the Holy Spirit will signal the complete fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy.

### **A New Pentecost**

As a matter of fact the Holy Spirit is being poured out literally “upon all flesh,” that is, upon all the continents of the world in contrast to only the one hundred twenty who experienced Pentecost in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. The Pentecost movement is spreading like wildfire to many nations and igniting fires of revival in the mainline churches, usually referred to as the “charismatic renewal.”

It is a new Pentecost. Then God will “show wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood....” (Joel 2:30). The

prophet Joel is the key to any true renewal built on sound foundations and that is lasting and in harmony with the word of God. Only when Joel’s prophecy is taken into account can renewal truly be part of God’s end time program for the church, the Body and Bride of Christ.

Renewal will be taken by the Orthodox Church seriously as the mandate of Christ, only when it is viewed as the Lord’s sovereign intervention in the preparation of His beloved Spouse for His return in glory to receive her “not having spot, or wrinkle”.... holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:27).

### **Legally but Not Experientially**

It is paradoxical that Christians should be looking for Pentecost as if it were a thing of the past, forgotten and irrelevant to the present life of the Church. It is an unmistakable sign of the bankruptcy of the church. It is evidence that the apocalyptic apostasy is already upon us!

As I pointed out above, Pentecost should normally be with us as a daily experience of the Holy Spirit. Theoretically, the very life of the church is Pentecostal and charismatic. But while our theology says one thing, the facts tell us something quite different. It is admirable to be concerned about saving our doctrines, I’m all for it. It is, however, much more admirable to be concerned about saving souls.

It is not only Orthodoxy. All the mainline churches have felt the need for a new Pentecost. The only difference is that the non-Orthodox are

more vocal in expressing the need for a move of God in their denominations. We Orthodox have Pentecost legally but not experientially. We could use more humility in admitting that we are not enjoying the fullness of our spiritual inheritance.

Personally I have no problem with the Azusa Street revival. We cannot box the Holy Spirit with our Orthodox self-righteousness and be blinded by our lingering infatuation for Byzantine imperial splendor.

How obscure, humble and base are the physical surroundings of the new Pentecost! In a day when blacks were looked down at as inferior and were kept segregated from the whites, God singled out William J. Seymour, a black, blind in one eye, to be the central figure of the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles in April 1906. He was the vessel chosen of the Lord to spark the worldwide Pentecostal revival.

I feel inspired and fascinated at the wonders of God, as I read the account of this new Pentecost that came not only to Los Angeles, but also to all the cities and nations of the world. It is very simple – I rejoice to see Jesus proclaimed and exalted! And, when He is, it has to be the Holy Spirit that does it, whether in the Orthodox Church or outside the Orthodox Church, whether in familiar ways or unfamiliar ways.

We would do well to remember the teaching of St. Paul in this regard: “Whether in pretense, or in truth, Christ is proclaimed. And I therein do rejoice, and will rejoice” (Philippians 1:18).

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