



Is Jesus Your Beloved?

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

"I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine" (Song of Solomon 6:3). Christ warns us to *"beware of the leaven of the scribes and of the pharisees."* He is able to reach the sinner who confesses his sinfulness, but not the self-righteous man or

woman who is too religious to admit to sinfulness.

The *"leaven of the scribes and pharisees"* which is self-righteousness separates us from God now and for eternity.

It is easy for the self-righteous person to harden his heart when he enjoys the esteem and respect of the religious community in which he functions, indeed, even outside his narrow religious bounds in the secular world. The respectability he enjoys by reason of his religious rank reinforces the false sense of his spiritual adequacy.

Religious Smugness Reinforced

Even the conscience can be dulled by such a false feeling of spiritual adequacy. That feeling is reinforced by the superior's approval as well as the acceptance of the people. The religious passiveness of the laity also matures such a feeling: "I must be doing well. I'm accepted by the people and officially appointed by my superiors. I am adequate in the performance of my religious duties."

The laity is usually conditioned to content itself with religious formalism – the minimum of God's grace in the Church. They are satisfied with the priest's performance of his formal duties and routine worship services.

Such an attitude of the laity can foment religious smugness in the priest and contentment with perfunctory ministrations.

It provides the proper climate for controlling the religious lives of his people.

Such a religious control is the very ground of inner security for many priests. This explains why he feels threatened the moment his laity show signs of spiritual freedom and independence. It is for this reason spiritual renewal in the Church unsettles many priests and even bishops.

The laity begin to show a little initiative in religious matters. They start raising their spiritual sights. They want more from God for their lives. They start expecting more from their priests. They hunger for more of God's word. They seek more teaching and more prayer meetings.

Christ becomes a full-time preoccupation for the spiritually reborn men and woman in the Church. They honor and observe the familiar traditional services. But they seek opportunities for spontaneous expressions of faith, love and praise of God.

Uniformity and structured forms in worship are necessary in the Church. But when taken to extremes to the exclusion of some measure of spontaneity, which includes extemporaneous prayers, liturgical rigidity quenches the Holy Spirit. Scripture cautions us against the *"letter of the law which kills"* and separates the soul from God, banishing it to eternal perdition.

"I Know You Not"

Let us examine more closely Christ's response to those who wondered why they were refused entry into His kingdom. Despite all their active religious involvement, they were cast away.

Why? For what reason did they lose their portion in the kingdom of God? Why were they condemned to eternal separation from Christ? Why such a severe punishment on men who, after all, were ministering most of their lives in His divine authority and in His name?

The reason is clear and simple: **The Lord did not know them.** Matthew quotes Jesus in saying: *"I tell you, I know you not whence you are" (13:27).*

It is the same response the five foolish virgins heard from the Lord when they knocked on the door of the marriage chamber: *"Verily I say unto you, I know you not" (Matt. 25:12).*

What does it mean that Jesus did not know them? He had no relationship with them during their lifetime despite their activity in religious affairs.

How else can the Lord know us except He be in close relationship with those religiously active men? Because they did not respond to His love in obedience by following Him and putting Jesus first in their life. They did not know Him in a personal relationship, and, as a result, neither did Christ know them in a personal relationship.

Some priests and bishops fit this category. They minister in the name of Christ, but they have never known Christ in an intimate relationship. They have studied Trinitarian theology and Christology, but they still do

not know Christ. They only know about Him.

Thinking the Unthinkable

It would be unthinkable for us to expect to hear from the lips of Christ an unfavorable judgment. We have been on His official staff. We have our bishop's approval on our ministry. We enjoy the applause of men. If anybody makes it to Heaven at all, certainly it will be we priests and bishops.

If we go by the standard of the word of God, however, we can see that it won't be all that simple. Christ warns us in advance that many of us in the ordained clergy will be in for one big shock. They will not hear: *"Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of thy Lord."* Instead, they will hear the incredible: *"I never knew you. Depart from me, ye that work iniquity"* (Matt. 7:23).

The Lord predicts that they will be pleading their clerical status and priestly functions they performed on earth. With unbelief they will be asking Him: *"Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name have cast out devils? And in thy name done many wonderful works?"* (7: 22).

To paraphrase, many in the clergy will be leaning on their faithfulness to their sacramental duties for acceptance into glory: *"Lord, Lord, have I not baptized countless babies and performed weddings and funerals? Have I not changed the bread and wine into your Body and Blood at the Divine Liturgy by the authority you vested in me at ordination? I blessed so many homes with holy water and even preached a sermon almost every Sunday. I kept out of trouble and refrained from anything controversial. I performed all the sacraments faithfully."*

My purpose here is not to be crit-

ical of the clergy. I don't want to be misunderstood as intending to undermine the position of the clergy in the Church. We certainly cannot have an Orthodox Church without priests and bishops who are ordained to shepherd the people and administer the sacraments. I believe it is pleasing to God to respect and honor the men who occupy pastoral positions in the Church.



The True Standard of Judgement

The point I want to carry across is that we priests need to be cautious against judging ourselves good or bad according to how dutifully we perform in the exercise of our formal, ceremonial functions. To be sure, the priest must be conscientious in the administering of the sacraments.

What I want to stress is that the One Who is to exercise the final judgement on our performance will not judge us by how well we celebrated the Divine Liturgy or how carefully we have done our baptisms, weddings and funerals. Going through merely the routine of the ritual is not going to get us priests into Heaven.

What makes this temptation even more perilous is the satisfaction of the laity with ritual. Their contentment with the minimum of spiritual nourishment from the priest with sacramental functions. So long as the lay people are not complaining the priest feels that he must be doing

his work adequately.

Why, for example, should he spend more time ministering the word of God and preaching the Gospel if the people do not ask for it?

"I do not think that many priests are saved," St. John Chrysostom declares, *"but that those who perish are far more numerous"* (Homily on Acts).

St. Jerome cautioned the priests of his own day: *"Ecclesiastical rank does not make a man a Christian."* He also had a word for the bishops: *"Not all bishops are true bishops. You notice Peter; but mark Judas as well"* (Letter XIV).

The priest who can be certain of his salvation is the one who is consumed with a passionate love for the Lord Jesus Christ. Wherever he happens to be, he witnesses verbally to Christ. He encourages those who love the Lord. He revels in their company. He exalts the name of the Lord. He finds a delight in lifting up the Lord in his contacts with people. He lives and breaths His Savior. It shows. People can see it. It cannot be concealed.

To Know Christ

To know Christ is to be in a love relationship with Him. It means entering into a sweet intimacy with Him. **Knowing the Lord results from loving Him and not only believing in Him.** Such a believer finds himself spontaneously telling His divine Spouse: *"I love you."* The Holy Spirit causes him to long for Him and to say: *"Come, Lord Jesus."*

In the Scripture the verb "to know" in the Greek very often denotes more than the intellect. It is a heart experience, because it is a love relationship between Christ, the divine Lover, and His Bride, the Church.

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Nothing could offend Jesus more than the practice of using His name in Church ministry without really loving Him and relating to Him as a person. There are those who justify their rank in the Church by exercising a controlling authority in His name. They simply self-indulge in the privilege that is vested in them by reason of their ordination.

Such men in effect support the abuse of their priesthood or episcopate by falling back on Christ's name and authority. What a terrible transgression to commit!

Pope Leo X has been quoted as saying: *"God has given us the papacy. Let us enjoy it!"* To paraphrase, many in the clergy can be saying in effect: *"God has given the priesthood (or episcopate, as the case may be). Let us enjoy it!"* Nothing can be more of an abomination in the sight of God than to minister in the name of Jesus without knowing Him in an intimate relationship of love. The priesthood is given to bring ourselves and others into a close acquaintance with our divine Savior – and not to cater to our pride and vanity and thirst for personal prestige and recognition.

A Longing for Jesus

The ministry is not an end in itself. We are called by God to glorify Jesus through the ministry that has been entrusted to us. That is possible, however, only when we who minister are in a right relationship with Jesus.

The Lord desires that we know Him in the intimacy of His loving Presence by constantly seeking His face, by calling upon His name on a daily basis – not to minister to others – but first and foremost to minister to Him with the sweet offering of our personal adoration and praise.

It is an offense of enormous gravity to minister to God's people in Christ's name without first knowing Him in a nuptial relationship of love. As a shepherd and ambassador of Christ, the priest is commissioned by the Lord to bring souls into an experience of His redeeming love and to respond to that divine love with their own love.

How can this be achieved unless the pastor's heart burns with a passionate love for Jesus? How can He cause the people to love Jesus unless he himself is fired up with an all-consuming love for Him? How can he communicate what he himself does not have?

Jesus is coming back to take unto Himself a loving Bride – a Church that loves Him and not only professes true Christology. The Nicene Creed, to be sure, is the touchstone of Orthodoxy. But believers in the Church can no longer content themselves with faith and with reciting the symbol of faith.

Intellectual assent to the doctrines of the Church is no substitute for a love relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, our soon coming King.

"I Know You"

"How do I know if I will make it to Heaven when Jesus returns?" Here is a question commonly asked by people in the Church. The answer is simple: if you relate to Christ with a passionate love and your life is consumed with that love, then rest assured that you are one of His. He will recognize you when He sees you. He will tell you: *"I know you!"*

If the Lord recognizes you, then He will welcome you to the Heavenly Marriage Supper. He will know you, when He sees you. **You're meeting together with him will simply be the consummation of an already existing relationship of mutual love and union.**

It is the "earnest of the Spirit" that you have had from Christ that enables you from the here and now to say: *"I know my Beloved and He knows me and I haven't the least doubt that when I am absent from the body someday I will be present with the Lord!"*

As the Song of Solomon expresses that nuptial love, you, too, will delight in affirming: *"My beloved is mine, and I am His,"* and *"I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine"* (2:16; 6:3).

A Recent Development

by Joseph Abbate / President

During the days of the early Church Period, there had been a number of events which caused divisions between the Christian and Jewish communities. Of course, we read in the Gospels that the Jewish authorities of the day had rejected Jesus and charged Him with blasphemy, and persecuted the Apostles and the followers of Christ.

Tensions had grown with the Roman persecutions, when the Roman governmental authorities would often make no distinction between Christians and the Jewish communities, since, in the eyes of the Romans, the Christian faith had sprung out from Judea. The region of Judea had often been a thorn in the side of the Roman Empire due to the numerous violent rebellions against Rome. The *"History of the Jewish Wars"* recorded by the historian Josephus, is popular reading to this day by modern historians.

It is an unfortunate fact that antisemitism had been mentioned by famous Christian figures such as St. Jerome, St. John Chrisostom and even Martin Luther. The Jewish people had suffered persecutions at the hands of both Christian and Muslim rulers of the medieval period. It is tragic that the hatred demonstrated towards the Jewish people under Hitler's reign did not end the hateful attitudes and persecutions. In fact, Antisemitism has once again arisen, not only in the region of the Middle East, but also from many young people in Europe and America. **This was virtually unthinkable just a generation ago.** The question remains, why has this hatred once again arisen at this point in time? People don't just randomly begin to hate people. History has shown to us that hatred is something which is taught.

Recently, the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Church had decreed that *"Christian Zionism"* should be condemned as a *"damaging ide-*

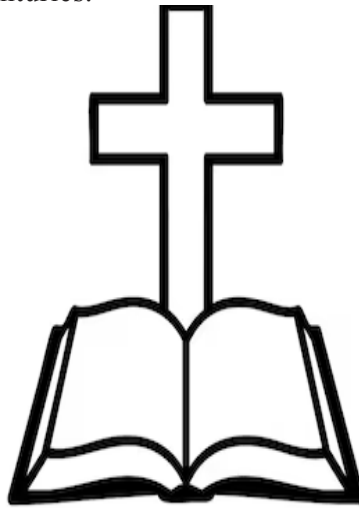
ology.” Christian Zionism is interpreted by many Protestant believers who support the restoration of Israel on Biblical prophetic grounds. **Nevertheless, the restoration of Israel is the very reason why so many modern Bible scholars and pastors are once again so interested in the prophecies concerning the nation of Israel and the end times.**

Some Catholic and Orthodox teachers of the past have often looked down upon Protestants who have almost blindly supported the nation of Israel, on the grounds of their Prophetic interpretation. Likewise, the Protestants have criticized the Catholics and Orthodox for callousness towards Israel in the past, and a lack of interest concerning Israel in Bible prophecy. Yet, many Christians today point out the difference of supporting and protecting the people of Israel, while at the same time, they don't necessarily support or defend all the actions of the Israeli government. It is possible to accept the one while rejecting the other.

I have written in previous articles how a good number of early Church Fathers had written about the restoration of Israel as a precursor to the appearance of the Antichrist, before the return of Christ. Many modern Protestant pastors openly desire to see the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem to hasten the second coming of Christ. This is mainly due to their pre-tribulation teaching that the event of the Rapture would take place before the Antichrist presents himself, **so they would not be directly impacted by the destructive events which would take place during the end times.** This is unlike the early teachings of the Church which considered the rebuilding of the temple as a warning sign which would usher in a terrible persecution of the Church by the Antichrist during the Great Tribulation Period.

Therefore, there is no doubt that the restoration of Israel was interpreted as an important prophetic sign by the early Church Fathers,

but not as a joyful sign. It was a sign of a period of impending destruction and persecution before the return of Christ. **It is a wrong attitude to blissfully dismiss this fact,** and think that they will not be fazed by the repercussions of trying to push forward the apocalyptic events which would follow. **At the same time, this is not an excuse to hold antisemitic views of any kind!** If God still loves the people of Israel, then who are you to hate them? Again, this doesn't mean you love the current events which are going on in that region. War has always been a terrible scourge to humanity. Fighting has been going on in that part of the world for multiple centuries.



It is a modern-day fad by a number of Catholic and Orthodox teachers to begin Church history as if it started in the Fifth or Sixth Century. They also have a tendency to over allegorize Biblical interpretations. In a sense, when it comes to Bible prophecy, they simply gloss over the teachings of the first three hundred years of the Church. Some of the most prominent Fathers of the early Church, such as Saints Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Cyril of Jerusalem and John Chrisostym, (to name a few), all taught that the Antichrist would present himself in a physically rebuilt temple in the city of Jerusalem. It should not be something to be taken lightly.

It has been a teaching among a number of prominent Church Fathers regarding the Church's inheritance of blessings which had orig-

inally applied to the Jewish people. This has been labelled as *Replacement Theology* or *Supersessionism*. Thus, the Church has often been referred to as the “*New Israel*”. Yet, does this mean that the Church has replaced the fulfillment of prophecies concerning the events which would be taking place in the physical restored Nation of Israel? Notwithstanding, St. Paul the Apostle states: *“Has God cast away His people? God forbid. For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not cast away His people which He foreknew”* (Romans 11:1-2).

Orthodox, Protestants and Roman Catholics need to take heed to the “*signs of the times*” which the Church Fathers had written concerning Israel. We should not dismiss the prophetic interpretations of the early Church Fathers, as if they didn't know what they were writing about! Don't get me wrong. Even though I have studied and written about the End Times in great detail in the past, yet, I have never claimed that I know when these end time events will be taking place. In fact, I often find myself having more questions than answers on the subject. The writings of the Church Fathers on the end times can be complex at times, and differ in interpretation. Yet, their writings are here for us to examine and will hopefully guide us in the days ahead.

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