



Sunday of the Holy Fathers, July 17, 2011

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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is the annual Sunday of the Holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church, a day on which we not only remember them with gratitude and humility, but we also attempt to understand something about what they were and are. It's easy for us to think of the Fathers of the Church in terms of stately icons, stained glass windows, hymns, etc., but not actually enter at all into the mystery of what it means to be a Church Father.

But this morning's Gospel gives us an important glimpse; it opens, as it were, a window into the extraordinary phenomenon of Fathers of the Church.

The Lord said: **"You are the light of the world."** With these few words He describes not only His apostles and disciples, to whom He was speaking on that occasion, but He also clearly delineates all those holy Fathers and Mothers who would come in succeeding generations to lead and guide the Church, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, right up to the end of the world. Because Christ Himself was the great "Light" that came into the world, as St. John tells us at the beginning of his Gospel, and because that Light shines upon all, including all of us, who are not Holy Fathers and Mothers, it is a reminder that we are not only to cherish the Church Fathers, but to read them, study them, acquire their "mind," and slowly but surely struggle to become more and more like them, since they were suffused with the Light of Christ.

The Lord then said: **"A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden."** In other words, those who lead the Church must be clearly visible to the faithful followers of Christ, wherever they may be.

And He continued: **"Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lamp stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house."** The "house" spoken of here is the Church itself, the Body of Christ. The "lamp stand" refers to those in the hierarchy of the Church, who are required to give light to everyone in the house. And woe to those in the past or today or in the future who do not give this light, but hide it or disfigure it.

In this morning's Gospel account Christ continues: **"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify our Father in heaven."** So much for those who say that "works" are not a necessary requirement for followers of Christ but that Faith alone is all we need. Furthermore, these verses clearly show us that virtue is not only a personal thing, but it has an effect upon others; it has a public function. If we say we are living according to the Gospel, then that is the same as saying that we are actually "doing" the truth, living the truth in every thought, word *and deed*. We struggle to bring forth good works which reflect the completely perfect goodness of God Himself.

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The Lord continues: ["Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy, but to fulfill."](#) From this we see that Christ did not intend to found a new religion, but rather to fulfill and bring to perfection the Old Religion. This is why He added this explanation: ["For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will be no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled."](#)

Our Lord Jesus Christ, you see, fulfilled the Law in His very person, as God-Man. He did this by obediently doing everything that His Father in even willed, even unto suffering and death. He did this by not breaking the commandments and proclaiming that the fulfillment of the commandments is in the Law of Love, love for God and love for neighbor. And He fulfilled all that the Prophets of the Old Testament had predicted about the Messiah, and this He did down to the smallest detail, in a way that is overwhelmingly obvious to anyone who studies Scripture.

Thus, the *fulfilled* Law of the Old Covenant became the foundation of the Lord's new commandments about love, and this fulfilled and completed Law, He said, will not be changed, pass away, or be abrogated "till heaven and hear pass away."

And finally the Lord said, ["Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; who whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."](#)

Here Christ was speaking of righteousness, a righteousness He Himself possessed in the fullness of abundance and wishes to share with us. He explained righteousness in this way: if you break one of the least of the commandments, it is as though you have broken the greatest of them; and when you observe even the least of them, it is the same as keeping the greatest and all of the Commandments. Thus, nothing is too small or too unimportant for us to aware of and obey.

The worst thing, Jesus is saying, is hypocrisy—in other words teaching what one does not practice. Clearly the Lord is telling us that the "doing" must come before the "teaching" of others. We ought to do right and teach ourselves, first, before we attempt to set others on the right path. Let this be a reminder and a warning to all priests and bishops!

The Holy Fathers of the Church were not just those who had degrees in theology—in fact, most of them had no degrees whatever and the enormous emphasis the Church today places on bishops and priests getting higher and higher degrees, instead of emphasizing personal piety and repentance and complete transformation in Christ, is actually a radical break with the tradition of the Church. Until very recent times, in fact, future priests were always trained at monasteries, not in separate seminaries, where the emphasis would inevitably be academic and cerebral. In this way, over the last hundred years, we have managed to create whole

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generations of priests and bishops who are rich in head knowledge but lacking in holiness. All of this is completely unlike the Holy Fathers of the Church, who were, *first*, saints, and second teachers.

## WHAT TO DO?

Of ourselves, we can do very little or nothing. *But* if we are priests or parents who are encouraging young men to enter the priesthood, we should do everything possible to help them get their spiritual priorities in order. And we do this by first getting our *own* priorities in order!

In the last century the Lord mercifully granted to the Church still a few genuine Holy Fathers, although they are now fewer and fewer, reflecting the times. Fortunately just in the last generation of Orthodox Christians there were still some spiritual giants and men and women in the full patristic tradition. To them we must look by reading and studying. To them we must be connected. For when we celebrate the Sunday of the Holy Fathers, as we are doing today, we are also remembering not just the great early Fathers, such as St. John Chrysostom but also more recent ones, who lived in the time of our parents, grandparents and parents.

Let us join ourselves to this long and golden chain of wisdom that reaches all the way back to the great Councils of the Church and the Holy Fathers, straight back to the Apostles and to Jesus Christ Himself.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.