

April 29, 2012

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



Sunday, April 29, 2012, the Sunday of the Holy Myrrhbearers

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

On this Sunday I remember my ordination as a priest at the Monastery of St. Herman of Alaska in Platina, California, thirty-three years ago. It hardly seems possible. It hardly seems possible, but there we are, and here I am.

Always I have been aware of the special significance of the Sunday of the Myrrhbearing Women in regard to my ordination and my years of priesthood—the last twelve of which have also been spent in monastic life. I will speak of this significance in a moment, but first a few words about the Myrrhbearing Women.

From both Scripture and tradition we know the names of some of the Holy Women who came early to the tomb in order to complete the anointing and proper burial of the Lord, but there were others whose names have not been preserved and passed down to us. Among those whose names we do know are: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Salome, Mary the wife of Cleopas, Susanna, Mary and Martha of Bethany (the sisters of Lazarus) and one other very important name, Mary, the Theotokos and Ever Virgin Mary, the Mother of our Lord Jesus Christ. They were all there.

These brave women—and they were indeed very brave, knowing that they would have to confront the Roman soldiers who had been placed by Pilate to guard the tomb—these holy women came bearing myrrh, a spice used in the preparation of bodies for burial, but not the bodies of poor people and certainly not for criminals, for myrrh was expensive; it was used for royalty, for they knew Jesus was their King and therefore deserving of the best.

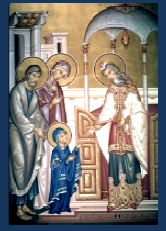
This taught me, from day one that, as a priest I, too, must be a “myrrhbearer”—that is, I must carry or bring something to the Lord—as, indeed, must all of us, brothers and sisters. But I took this especially to heart. And what I must bring, I knew, must be something of worth, not something cheap or ordinary. It would be something that you cannot buy, which you cannot obtain in the market. It would have to be something about myself, and something within myself. But what would that be?

The Holy Fathers of the Church saw that in addition to the practical purpose of the myrrh, the ointment which the women brought had a mystical significance. As the late Archbishop Andrei said in his own sermon for this day, “The Myrrh-bearers, fulfilling the Old Testament Law, the Law of Moses, bought

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perfumes and went to anoint His body, the body of Christ. And we, fulfilling the Law of the New Testament, the Law of Christ, must also acquire *spiritual* perfumes - His commandments: humility, meekness, peace-loving - and we must anoint His body with spiritual oil (that is, love and mercy). And His body is the Church of Christ."

So that is the "myrrh" which I, as a priest—and every Orthodox priest and deacon--, knew I must somehow find a way to bring to Christ and His Church, and not just in the divine services and in the Divine Liturgy, but every day, for one does not stop being a priest after liturgical services have ended. Whether or not I have at all succeeded in doing that is doubtful, and awaits the merciful judgment of my Lord after I die. You see, I have made many mistakes in my life, both as a priest and as a spiritual father, as a monk and as a man. So please pray for me that, if I have not yet brought sufficient "myrrh" to Jesus and His Church, I will somehow yet do so...remembering, as I said, that this special "myrrh" must be humility, meekness, and peacefulness...!

Now...for some reason, on this particular anniversary—as I said, my thirty-third--I am also remembering something else about my ordination which I've not given much thought to before and want to share this morning.

In the Orthodox rite of ordination and just before the laying on of hands by the bishop, the priestly candidate is led around the holy table three times in what is called "The Dance of Isaiah". It is a "ritual dance"—so this is not like any dancing we would know of in our culture--and it comes from the Book of Isaiah where the holy Prophet, after he foretells the coming of Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Savior of the world, writes: "Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all ye that love her: rejoice for joy with her, all ye that mourn for her." (Is. 66:10) and also, from Psalm 30 (v. 11): "You have turned for me my mourning into dancing: you have put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness..."

So, as the about-to-be-ordained priest is led in this "ritual dance" around the holy table, the choir sings the following verses:

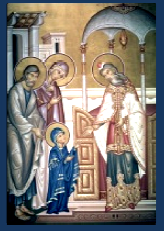
O holy martyrs, who fought the good fight and have received your crowns, beseech the Lord to save our souls.

Glory to you, O Christ God, the apostles' pride, the martyrs' joy who have proclaimed the consubstantial Trinity!

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Dance, O Isaiah! A virgin has conceived in her womb and has given birth to a Son, Emmanuel, both God and man. His name is Orient: magnifying him we bless the virgin.

The "Dance of Isaiah", you see, is a kind of ritual icon of Orthodox priesthood. It speaks to the priest of his marriage to the holy table, the awesome altar of the Lord, at which he will henceforth serve the Unbloody Sacrifice of the Eucharist until his very death. From the moment of his ordination, he is mystically "wed" to the altar, to the church, to his Bridegroom, Jesus Christ. (And by the way, the "Dance of Isaiah" occurs in an Orthodox wedding service, too, also signifying the marriage between a husband and wife.)

The holy martyrs are invoked in the hymns being sung during this "dance" as a reminder that the priest's life will be one of martyrdom and carrying of crosses. The Holy Trinity is invoked to remind the priest that forever after he will serve our awesome God in Three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in order that he might dwell with Them forever and ever. And finally, Isaiah himself is invoked, to indicate that this is a dance not of sorrow but, truly, of joy, as the new priest begins his service.

As we read in the Psalms: "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord." (Ps. 122:1) This short verse should, I believe, be on the tombstone of every priest and deacon, a reminder of the intense joy and privilege of serving the Lord so closely and so intimately in "His house", all our days.

"Dance, O Isaiah, dance..."

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