

July 1, 2012

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple Skete



Way of Love

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

Usually I don't talk about the Epistle in my sermons, but this morning's Epistle is so interesting and so important that I feel it deserves a sermon all its own. Let me start by repeating this instructive and beautiful Epistle, written by St.

Paul to the Christians in Corinth:

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, helping, administrating, and various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts.

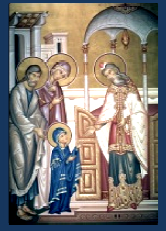
And I will show you a still more excellent way. (Corinthians 12:27-31) If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (And now comes the most important part of this Epistle:) Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. (13:1-8)

This Epistle has often and rightly been called, by the Holy Fathers of the Church, "The Way of Love." It begins by telling us that we are all part of the Body of Christ, which is the Church, and that in this Church we all given different gifts, different talents, different functions, and all of these are important and must be exercised according to the principles of the Gospel and not just according to our own will. St. Paul, the inspired writer of this Epistle, then goes on to say that whatever gifts or talents God has given us to use in the service of the Church, there is actually something *much, much higher*, as he says: "And now I show you a still more excellent way"—and he then begins to teach us about love.

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Brothers and sisters, sometimes we slip into the mistaken idea that the visible institution of the Church, the outward organization—patriarchs, bishops, priests, deacons, etc.—and the local parish church with its parish council and sisterhood, etc., are the only reality there is to the Church or, all there is to the Church in this world. This is incorrect. Of course the visible this-worldly institution is there, it *is* quite real, it was founded by Christ on the Apostles, and it is also necessary, but in and of itself, *by itself*, it does not constitute the entirety of the organic Body of Christ, which is a mystical reality and actually a *greater* reality than the visible institution.

Why so? Because the Church in and of this world is composed of frail and fallible human beings with feet of clay, not yet saints, not yet deified. They are all struggling to attain the Kingdom of Heaven just like everyone else. Bishops and priests are no exception. Living saints are few and far between in any age, but especially in our own, believe me! And so it sometimes happens that when things don't go well in the parish or in the diocese, when there are power struggles or even outright abuses, then we can become easily very "turned off" to the Church, not realizing that this only one part of the Body of Christ. Of course it's understandable that people become disappointed, turned off, even scandalized—this is what happens when human passions and politics go on in sacred places! If we weren't turned off by this we should be!

But the organic Body of Christ, being a mystical creation of the Savior, is so much more than the earthly organization, and so much bigger. And that's what the rest of this morning's Epistle deals with. Remember, St. Paul wrote, "And now, I will show you a more excellent way"—that is, something more important than the various offices and gifts exercised in the Church. This "more excellent way" is *the way of love*.

The Scriptures tell us that "God is love." This is an astonishing and astounding revelation, give to us by the Son of God Himself. No other religion on the face of the earth has ever understood, known, seen, taught, or believed this, that God is Love! The God of the Jews is a legalistic and angry God; the god of the Muslims is a distant and cold god; Buddhists do not believe in any god; Hindus believe in a multitude of gods, some of which are quite vile and bloodthirsty. Only Christians believe in a God of love, because only Christians have God's only-begotten Son, our Lord and God Jesus Christ, who is Himself the purest and fullest expression of God's love for us. This love always

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existed fully between the Persons of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and has been extended to us through God the Son, who demonstrated perfect love in His suffering and death for us and our salvation.

And so, St. Paul proclaimed to us the following: *“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never ends.”*

Notice that St. Paul is not talking about emotions and feelings. He’s talking about behavior and attitudes, and there’s a huge difference. In our drama-queen culture and society, fed by the media and Hollywood, everything is about how we “feel”, about “me”, and very rarely about *principles* any more. As a culture we have lost our moorings—which used to be in the New Testament—and, frankly, some of us Orthodox Christians have lost our moorings, too!

Time to recover our “first love”, which is Jesus Christ Himself and the way in which He has revealed Himself and His Father and the Holy Spirit, through the Gospels and the Church. The question is—and it is a legitimate and necessary question—*how do we do this?*

First we need to remember that God wishes to share His love, to receive it and be part of it—the love that emanates from and circulates continually between the Persons of the Trinity—He wishes us to share in this love. It is a virtually “river of love,” in which all are invited to bathe and be constantly refreshed. But the only way we can do this, the only way we can open ourselves to that experience of God’s love, is to give Christ the first place in everything we do.

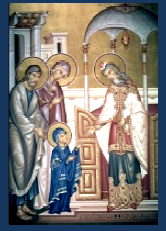
I am a convert to Orthodoxy, of 42 years standing, and I have noticed something very interesting in my four decades in the Church: the old fashioned traditional Orthodox Christians here in America—whether Greek, or Russian, or Romanian, or whatever—frequently make the Sign of the Cross. I’ve seen housewives do this as they begin to cook and even sign their loaves with the Cross as they put them in the oven. I’ve seen people make the

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Sign of the Cross just before they start their car. I've noticed how mature Orthodox men and women make the Sign of the Cross whenever they hear difficult or troubling news about something or someone. I've seen priests and monastics cross themselves before they begin to speak to laity. In this way, Christ and His saving Cross are brought easily and constantly into just about every activity in a visible way. And since we know that the Cross is the "terror of demons", we therefore know that this frequent making of the Sign of the Cross protects us and brings us closer to the very foot of that Cross upon which the Lover of Mankind hung for our salvation.

So, in both little and big things, we need to find as many ways as we can to give Christ pre-eminence. I've just mentioned one small thing here—the use of the Sign of the Cross. But whether we are going shopping, or about to answer the telephone, or begin work at our job, or work in the garden, we should always quietly ask the Lord to protect and guide us. And when it comes to troublesome matters that may occur in the Church, we must do this even more earnestly and constantly, so that we are not sucked into the heat and sinful emotions of the troublesome waves that beat against the ship of the Church.

If God is love, then Christ, who is the Son of God, is love; and if Jesus is love, then He fulfills all of the definitions St. Paul gave in His Epistle: Christ is patience and kindness, Christ is understanding—in fact, the Lord is everything that we need! But remember, God has not given us just something to help us "get by". No, He's given us His only-begotten Son, and Him crucified and risen, and He will give us all the qualities of love that the Lord has, if only we will put Him first in our lives.

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