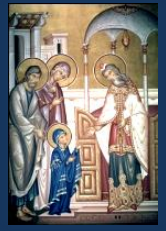


July 8, 2012

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple Skete



Your Talents

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

As with last Sunday, today I want again to talk about the Epistle reading we've just heard in this morning's Liturgy. This is from an Epistle written by St. Paul to the Ephesians—that is, to the Christians in the city of Ephesus. In the ancient world, Ephesus—today called “Efus” by the Turks—was at first a Greek city, then a major city under the Roman Empire, located on the west coast of Asia Minor.

St. Paul's reading begins with an important first verse:

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

This means that the gifts or talents the Lord has bestowed upon each of us individually, by His grace, are suited to the calling He has already determined and fore-chosen for each one of us in the Church. This is important to remember and understand. This grace, these talents, are not given to make us saints, or to make us better Sisterhood Presidents or Parish Council members (as useful as these functions are) but to help us be part of the Mystical Body of Christ, which subsists or remains in the Orthodox Church, and to help us in the spreading and building up of this sacred, most precious, and saving Body, the Church.

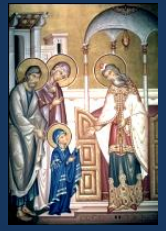
And this is why St. Paul continues by writing the following:

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:7-13.)

This is a powerful and strikingly relevant teaching for our Orthodox Church in America today because the surest and quickest way to stagnation of the Church, or to the burnout of a parish priest or parish council members, is for the parishioners to be so engulfed in activities and parish politics that the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ gets lost in the shuffle and the reason for the existence of the Church is somehow forgotten.

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The fact is, in all of our parishes, throughout all the jurisdictions, there are already numerous programs and activities of all sorts. These are usually quite worthwhile, at one level or another. Yet something is still lacking, and that something is slowly undermining the long term success and survival of authentic Orthodoxy in America, which really has grown so little since the last waves of Orthodox immigrants from the old countries.

I believe that what's lacking today is a thorough-going knowledge of the word of God contained in Scripture, and a lack of an intense and personal relationship with God Himself. Remember, St. Paul said that one of the purposes of the graces or gifts is to achieve "the knowledge of the Son of God." "*The knowledge of the Son of God*"..."

What does this mean?

It means that we must study and know and incarnate in our own lives all that the Lord taught, beginning with the Beatitudes, and then the Virtues—the greatest of which is love. It means learning about prayer, how to pray, and then *actually praying!*—and not just at Liturgy on Sunday, either. From the inspired Scriptures we also learn all that we need to know about how to live, about marriage and family and human sexuality; about sickness, suffering, and death, and about the Final Judgment, Heaven and Hell, and the Kingdom of Heaven.

But when spirituality begins to stagnate in a parish or in a jurisdiction, as it is doing in some places, now, this results in some individuals not learning about these things, and not being able to learn what their real *God*-given talents are, and therefore not able to use them in the "building up" of the Body of Christ.

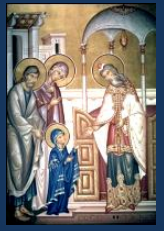
As Orthodox Christians we believe that those who go to Hell do so alone, but those who go to Heaven do so "in community"—in other words, not alone, but in and through the Church, the Body of Christ, with others. The same is true of spiritual growth. We cannot "do" spiritual life entirely alone, in isolation from others, or on our own. We must do it with others, for holiness is not just for a select "elite" *but for all of us together*. The tragedy today, however, is that some souls, though they belong to a parish and go to church sometimes, are not trying to live a spiritual life and make use of their talents for the building up of the Church *at all*.

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In this Epistle St. Paul says that we must be striving to “reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God”. This reminds us that we must be faithful to protect, preserve, and pass on the doctrines and dogmas of Faith—but in order to do this we must first *know* our Church’s doctrines! Just because we are Greek, or Russian, or Serbian, or whatever doesn’t mean that we are really, in our minds and hearts, *Orthodox*. And just because some of us may be converts doesn’t mean that we are actually *Orthodox*, either! Being Orthodox actually requires some maturity and some work, some study, and some integrity. And that leads automatically to sharing this truth with others. It can’t left to just priests and bishops. This was *never* Christ’s intention when He founded the Church. Historically speaking, in Orthodoxy, this—the preserving and sharing or spreading of the Faith—is considered the responsibility of the laity, more than of the bishops. The “faith given once and for all to the saints” has been preserved to our time in fullness and purity, to a degree that, we believe, has unfortunately not been preserved by all other churches or denominations. So we have distinct duty to know and guard the faith. The Lord will give us the grace to do this if we will just wake up from the *slumber of life* and pay attention to those things that speak to us of *eternal life*.

So let us awake, then, from the slumber and the illusive dreams of this life, and let us reach out not just to *receive* but to eagerly *snatch* the graces the Lord offers us, the talents and gifts that we have from Him, so that we may fulfill the instructions of the great Apostle and Evangelizer, St. Paul.

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