

Fear of God, Faith and Love

It is difficult to understand decisions in the Church when rationality is allowed to prevail over faith. In January of 1995, Metropolitan Anthony visited St. Sophia Cathedral in Los Angeles where I had been serving four years. At a reception following services, His eminence announced to everyone's surprise that as of March 1, I would be re-assigned. Prebytera and I were expecting our second child in May. The decision of His eminence did not make sense at that time. Logically, it seemed better to wait until after the birth for reassignment. It wasn't until several months later that I realized that it was the will of God for everything to have taken place just as it did. As it turned out, a small parish in Scottsdale, Arizona was without a priest for three months prior to my arrival.

When I was ordained a priest, it was conditioned upon the Gospel imperatives. Christ gave rather harsh dictates to those who would desire to follow Him: *He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me, and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me* (Mt 10:37-38).

When presbytera and I gave our lives to Christ, it was under obedience to the Gospel. If one is *not* obedient to the Gospel, then slavery to self-will is incurred. The way of following God is narrow. The manner in which we walk is paved with the *fear* of God, with *faith*, and with *love*. No matter how illogical things may appear, by obedience we learn humility, and our faith is strengthened.

This past year, a group of concerned lay persons gathered in Chicago to discuss issues facing the Greek Orthodox Church in America. The group calls itself the "Greek Orthodox American Leaders" (G.O.A.L). G.O.A.L. has publicly called for the removal of our Shepherd Archbishop Spyridon. These self proclaimed "leaders" gave an ultimatum to the Archbishop that he should resign by May 1 or be reassigned by the Patriarch. This is not how Orthodox Christians solve problems within the Church. This is how misdirected individuals behave when they abandon the Shepherd and are ignorant of the true spirit of Orthodoxy. The fundamental error of this type of action is that it breathes the spirit of the anti-Christ not of the Church. The Church is *ontologically* a *unity of clergy and laity*; one cannot act without the other.

In looking at the action of this group, they have discredited themselves and their effort. Our Lord taught that we should look at the works of individuals to evaluate their real intentions: So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. *Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits* (Mt. 7:17-20). Clearly, the fruit of this group is not worthy of any praise. In the sacred tradition of the Church, it is firmly established that without the Bishop there is no Church and the Church can do nothing without its Bishop (*St. Ignatius*). The reason behind this teaching is that the Bishop presides over the Eucharist. Where the

Eucharist is, there is the fullness of the Church. No Eucharist can take place without the entire Church present-both clergy and laity. This is the basis for our model of Church governance: clergy working in synergy with the laity.

When an individual has a problem with a hierarch (or priest), the issue ought to be brought before the presiding Bishop and clergy. Each region of a diocese has a Vicar who presides on the Bishop's behalf over a spiritual court. This court mainly hears cases of divorce; however, any serious matter can be petitioned to be heard. When a group organizes without the support and blessing from a bishop and priests, it becomes a "*para-ecclesiastical sect.*" In other words, such organizations are acting separate from the body of the Church. The head cannot act without the body. There is a wrong way and a right way to solve problems. A *body* solves problems as a *body* would working in unity.

The leader of the Orthodox Church is God the Holy Trinity. Christ, our High Priest, has established that leadership is to be carried out in the Church through the Bishops and priests with the cooperation of the laity. The laity is set apart for ministry by the grace of Baptism and Chrismation, but never are they independent of the Bishop and priest. The Church is not a democracy; it is a synergy. In the liturgy we pray for a Trinitarian unity: "*Let us love one another that we may with one mind confess . . . Father, Son and Holy Spirit, One in essence and inseparable.*" The unity we seek comes from above and not from the will of the majority. Bishops are shepherds commissioned to guide and safeguard the Church in unity with Christ. At times, the guidance may not be politically correct nor understood; however, if we live by the fear of God, faith, and love, understanding and cooperation become possible. This is why St. Paul said: *Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account* (Heb. 13:17).

When the 270th successor to the Apostle Andrew, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, appointed Archbishop Spyridon to lead the Church in America, he did so by the grace of the Holy Spirit who spoke to his synod and has guided it for the past two thousand years. The Archbishop is not teaching a false Christ or distorting the traditions of the Church; his controversial decisions have revealed more about us than himself. The Divine Liturgy instructs the Church in the manner in which God is glorified: "*And grant that with one voice and one heart we may glorify and praise your most honorable and majestic name, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*" God is glorified when the Church reflects the divine love of the Holy Trinity. When the Church loses sight of being the *body* of Christ, called to manifest the love of the Holy Trinity, joined together by the selfless sacrifice of Christ upon the Cross, it becomes a country club for the elite to vote on improvements. Independence must never replace the interdependence of the members in the body of Christ.

With the fear of God, faith, and love, draw near!

Fr. Andrew