

A Call to Return to the Classroom

I miss the classroom setting. Recently Fr. John Chryssavgis, a professor of Theology was a guest on the radio program. In preparation for the program I read his book, "Beyond the Shattered Image." In the book I saw something I knew intellectually come to life in a new way. Christ not only came to save and re-create mankind but simultaneously saves and re-creates the entire order of creation.

Many years ago, I was searching for God. After high school, I took a trip to Colorado and met up with some friends in Boulder. We planned a hiking trip just outside of Aspen to a place called "Moon Lake." My childhood was marked by many family camping trips. At Moon Lake, I discovered once again the beauty of creation that I had once known as a child. I found myself in "God's Country." Hiking to a lake at 12,000 feet and camping at the foot of a 15,000 foot summit began to stir in me a yearning for something more in life. A few years later, I ventured alone into the surrounding peaks of Yosemite Valley, only to find myself at night gazing up at the stars asking the "big" questions. Eventually, my searching led me to Christ.

My visit with Fr. John on the radio brought back something I had known--creation is God's dwelling place. Some have wrongly concluded that because God fills all creation, one does not need to attend Church in order to worship Him. What is missing from such an understanding is that one cannot be a Christian alone. The Church has even guarded its' hermits from isolating themselves. When we assemble as the body of Christ, the world is offered to Him through us and the Church brings God to the world as its' Life. Communion is restored on three levels, between humanity, the world and God.

Living in a modern city, with much time spent at work, sending e-mails on computers, transporting children and managing households, it all can dim the sacredness of the world. What can be done, living in such a fast pace world, that can bring back the sacredness of life? It's impossible to leave everything and go to the mountains...or is it? Fr. John reminded me that in fact we can go to that place of discovery and with fewer complications. An icon not only depicts the person that shines with the light of the Grace of God's presence, but the entire scene. The mountains, buildings, tables, jars, heavens and creatures are also filled with the light of God in an Orthodox icon. The term mystery is used by the Church in referring to "a reality that is hidden but is gradually revealed through initiation. (Fr. Chryssavgis, Beyond the Shattered Image)."

The sacredness of creation is expressed as a mystery-- the hidden reality is that God has renewed the world by His becoming a man. Here, the world includes everything, humanity and all of created matter. Every Sunday assembled as the body of Christ, looking at the images, the smell of incense, the sound of sacred music, the taste of the body of Christ brings the new creation before our eyes and calls us to ascend. In developing an awareness of life being permeated with the presence of God, not only will the Divinity of God shine more brightly in the created order, but it will also become

brighter in our fellow human beings. Here Fr. John leads us down an old path with a new perspective -- the path of asceticism.

Fr. John defines asceticism as a call to integration between oneself, the world and God. "The various expressions of the religious or monastic life sometimes deviate into a form of angelism that verges on point of disincarnation and dematerialization in its aggressive attitude towards the body. Yet the ascetic life, at least in its more authentic expressions, is a way of tenderness and of integration with oneself, with each other and with creation (Fr. Chryssavgis, *Beyond the Shattered Image*)."

As our bodies' age it would require quite a training period in order to sustain oneself on an excursion in the mountains yet, it would be foolish to venture without any preparation. The same is true for recovering a sacred vision of all created realities. The ascetic life is not a call to escape from the world or things of the world but the desire of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride in riches (1 John 2:15-16). Fr. John delineates the three distortions that are in need of renewal and transformation. "Flesh of course signifies the whole of one's life in the state of conflict with oneself, with the world, and with God. Lust of the eyes implies a blurred vision of the world as created and as intended by God. Pride constitutes the ultimate hubris (arrogant overconfidence) of humanity that usurps the role of God and seeks to dominate the world. (Fr. Chryssavgis, *Beyond the Shattered Image*)."

God is wonderful. He makes the world into a classroom, takes us to places we have been before and fills them with meaning and purpose. Life is a mystery that continually is revealing a reality, bit by bit, piece by piece until we get the whole picture.

In Christ's Love,
+ Fr. Andrew