

The Eyes and Heart of St. Agathon: Steward of God's Mysteries

Fr. Andrew's article for the November 2014 Oasis in which he discusses a model for stewardship - St. Agathon.

Going to town one day to sell some small articles, Abba Agathon met a cripple on the roadside paralyzed in his legs, who asked him where he was going. Abba Agathon replied, 'To town, to sell some things.' Then the other said, 'Do me the favor of carrying me there.' So he carried him to the town. The cripple said to him, 'Put me down wherever you sell your wares.' He did so. When he had sold an article, the cripple asked, 'What did you sell it for?' and he told him the price.

Then the other said, 'Buy me a cake' and he bought it. When Abba Agathon sold a second article, the sick man asked, 'How much did you sell it for?' And he told him the price of it. Then the other said, 'Buy me this,' and he bought it. When Agathon, having sold all his wares, wanted to go, he said to him, 'Are you going back?' and he replied, 'Yes.' Then he said, 'Do me a favor of carrying me back to that place where you found me. Once more picking him up, he carried him back to that place. Then the cripple said, 'Agathon, you are filled with divine blessings, in heaven and on earth!' Raising his eyes, Agathon saw no man; for it was an angel of the Lord come to try him." (Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection, by Benedicta Ward, p. 25)

St. Agathon (435 A.D. Feast Day, January 8) had a life free of self-interest which availed him the ability to care for a stranger and serve his needs. St. Agathon was known for going off with only his knife in order to make wicker-baskets (Agathon, Saying 7). He spent his days laboring with his hands in order to provide for his own needs (Agathon, Saying 10). When Agathon would sell an article he would name a price and accept whatever was given without saying another word (Agathon, Saying 16). Agathon displayed an absolute freedom from attachment to wealth. Despite the social status of the crippled man being an outcast, Agathon responded to his request as if he were his own brother. As Agathon went about his routine of selling items, there was an acceptance of this new purpose for his endeavor. How often do we find ourselves not appreciative of unexpected interruptions in our work? It is an extraordinary faith that abandons self-concern when one knowingly is giving sacrificially for the benefit of another.

How are we to understand the reason for this test sent to him by a messenger of God? The test was to see if he was true to the name he had – Agathon means one who loves. In one of his saying he said, "...the fact of giving and receiving has been for me an agape (love), for I consider the good of my brother to be a sacrificial offering." (Agathon, Saying 17). To see if Agathon was living the words he spoke, an unusual messenger of God was sent. The angel would not let Agathon keep any of the money he would earn that day and instead have him buy him something. The next question is how true are we to own name, we who call ourselves Christians.

There are numerous names by which a Christian is identified in the Holy Scriptures, "And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch." (Acts 11:26)

Temple of the Holy Spirit: "Or know you not that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit Who is in you, Whom you have from God, and you are not your own?" [1 Cor. 6:19]

The Body of Christ~ "Now you are the body of Christ, and members severally. (1 Cor. 12:27)

Christ-Bearer ~ "For as many as were baptized into Christ, you put on Christ." (Gal. 3:27)

Kingdom-Bearer~ "For behold, the kingdom of God is within you." (Lk. 17:21)

Ministers, Servants, Deacons (Θεοῦ διάκονοι) of God ~ "But in all things commending ourselves as ministers of God ... in much patience, in afflictions ... in pureness, in knowledge, in long-suffering, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in love unfeigned...as having nothing, and yet possessing all things." [2 Cor. 6:4-10]

The last name, "ministers of God" reveals the source of what made Agathon's heart free of self-interest and paves the way for all Christians to follow. St. Paul uses this designation not in the narrow sense referring to only the "officially ordained clergy" but every Christian is consecrated to serve God and be ministers of the mysteries found within us as described in the names given above. "Let a man so reckon us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. And furthermore, it is required in stewards that one be found faithful." [1 Cor. 4:1-2] The gift to love as Christ has loved us, transforms the life of a Christian into a life-giving fountain for the benefit of others. "Keep on becoming imitators of God, as beloved children. And be walking in love, even as Christ also loved us and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for an odor of a sweet smelling fragrance." [Eph. 5:1,2] The gate that surrounds one's true wealth is opened the moment a person acknowledges that the heart and soul cannot exist without God.

"First we learn ... that we are not masters of our own money, for we have nothing that is our own, but we are stewards of what belongs to another, the Master, Who entrusted these things to us that we might use them well and as that One directs (Blessed Theophylact)."

In the early Church, deacons brought aid to families in need as an expression of this fountain of life that flowed from the love of those who gave the gifts being distributed. Caring for the needs of the poor was made possible because the Christians shared their possessions for the greater benefit of others. Another name for a Christian is "Philoptochos" which means, "a lover of the poor." This is why at Assumption we do not restrict the outreach ministry of the Church to Philoptochos but have always included this as part of our stewardship and having a Good Samaritan fund in the annual ministry budget. This fund is administered by me on behalf of the community. There is no greater joy for a priest other than to bring these gifts to families in dire need. I always remind them not to thank me but to give thanks to God who works through the faithful of our community.

"Above all hold unflinching your love for one another, since love covers a multitude of sins. Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another. As each has received a gift, employ it for one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who utters oracles of God; whoever renders service, as one who renders it by the strength, which God supplies; in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever." (I Peter 4:8-11)

Is one blessed with compassion and concern for others? God's grace fills the heart with this love so that it perceives the needs of others and can do something about it. Is one successful in making money? This success is given by God in order to do good works for others. Is one personable? God's grace creates a welcoming heart that can embrace a stranger who visits the Church. The gifts of God's grace are given for the benefit of the other and for His glory.

"And the Lord said, 'Who then is the faithful and wise steward, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions.'" (Luke 12:42-44)

Life-giving fountains of God's grace consider the good of my brother and sister to be a sacrificial offering worthy of being offered to God. St. Agathon was a faithful steward who when God sent an angel to expose his true wealth revealed the hidden treasure in his heart. May we also pursue having extraordinary faith and run after the same gifts of St. Agathon.

In Christ,
Fr. Andrew