

On the Cross of Our Lord

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“For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” – 1 Corinthians 1:18

What does our Lord mean when he says, “If you want to follow me, you must deny yourself”—you must “disown” yourself—“and take up your cross and follow me?” (Mark 8:34) These words form the basis for a living faith, and therefore the basis for an authentic experience and life with the living God.

Just as belief is bound to the experience of God, we are compelled by the Lord himself to know what the “word” of the cross means. We are obliged to know what denying or disowning the self expects of Christ’s disciples. For unless we truly embrace the word of the cross, the living, saving, transfiguring, and deifying experience of God remains an idea that ultimately has no real impact on our lives. If we do not know or live the word of the cross, our minds and hearts are joined only to an idea of Christ formed by our own thoughts and feelings, which ends up having little or nothing to do with the challenge of the cross.

To deny ourselves is an act by which we entrust ourselves to the care and love of God. But trust demands that we make ourselves vulnerable. To accept the cross is to stand in a place in which we are exposed to the possibility of being harmed. This is pre-

cisely what the Latin root of *vulnerable* means—“able to be wounded.” Our great high priest, the pre-eternal Word and Son of God, makes himself vulnerable. He empties himself, taking the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7), and so submits to arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, and burial. The Lord makes himself vulnerable. He exposes himself and in turn is wounded. If we are to take the word of the cross seriously, if we are not to succumb to the thought that the cross is a scandal or that it is foolishness, then we are to apply this word to ourselves and make ourselves vulnerable.

The cross calls us to disown (ἀπαρνέομαι) the self. Each of us knows how difficult and fearful this is. We know that it is easier simply to confess or profess the word of the cross than to apply it to our life. Here we need to ask ourselves if our acceptance of the cross goes beyond a formal, and therefore verbal, profession. Does it bring us to that vulnerable place where we are given the opportunity to encounter the divine and uncreated light? Does the word of the cross impact the mind and heart, the will and energy of our being? Or is our profession an intellectual affirmation, fostered either by curiosity or by a self-serving interest in the Bible, the

fathers, mysticism, and the aesthetics of liturgical worship? Indeed, to enter into the reality of the Liturgy—to attend to the Scriptures and to acquire the self-emptying spirit of holy people—requires us to become vulnerable. We are called to break down every wall that surrounds us, that insulates us, that isolates us from entering into communion with God, our neighbor, and ourselves.

As we think about this let us also think about how the cross provides the word for the Church's life in and for the world. We live in a time when we hear many things about Christian social doctrine. There are bishops, priests, and laity in the Orthodox Church who, with apparent conviction, speak about the Church's responsibility to be involved in our culture. They issue calls for the Church to become the conscience of the culture by engaging the culture wars of our day. From one perspective we can see how this might be a noble call. However, for the call to remain noble, and therefore truly life-giving as well as life-saving, it must be based on the "word" of the cross. Before examining the word of the cross and how it charts a course for the Church to serve and engage the world, let us first look at three extreme ways the Church has chosen to manifest itself to the world. The first is isolationism or sectarianism. Many Orthodox Christians hold to the view that the Church is a ghetto. As we know, the Church does not necessarily have to be ethnically homogeneous to be a ghetto. It can be a bona fide "American" or heterogeneous ghetto surrounded by the walls constructed by doctrine, patristic writings, and of course, the Bible. These walls isolate the Church from the world. They protect the Church from becoming vulnerable. Within its safe enclave, the Church can only

condemn the world, while depriving itself from gleaning from the world what is good, true, and beautiful. The Church confines itself to a place that is "safe" inasmuch as it does not expose itself to the trials, challenges, and suffering of the world, and consequently, to the trials, challenges, and suffering of every human being.

The second extreme opens the Church to the world so completely that it capitulates to the ways of the world, rendering itself unable to manifest the coming kingdom of Jesus Christ. By capitulating to the world, the Church becomes bourgeois and therefore unable to identify with the poor, miserable, and marginalized. By capitulating to the world, the Church eliminates the creative tension necessary for it to interact with and even judge its cultural, social, and political environment.

The sectarian extreme makes an idol of the Church's living tradition, taking the past as its only point of reference. The "worldly" or "relevant" extreme supports an iconoclasm that treats the living tradition of the past as something to be ignored due to the scientific, technological, and philosophical advances of the ever-changing present. Both of these extremes ultimately deny the ongoing presence and work of the Holy Spirit.

This brings us to the third extreme that is gaining momentum within Orthodox Churches in America. There are bishops, priests, and laity drawn to the idea that the Church is called to reveal its life and vision to American culture. On the one hand, history tells us that the Church has played a major role in the moral and cultural formation of empires and nations. This has especially been the case when there has been a marriage between church



and state. On the other hand, we also know that the marriage between church and state has compromised the gospel and rendered the cross a weapon of suppression and destruction. The formation of Christian cultures was not infrequently the result of the state-backed church that, from a position of worldly power, *imposed* its life on a non-Christian populace. History teaches us that the marriage between church and state often made the Church into the abused spouse. This abuse steadily led the Church to compromise the cross by transforming it into a weapon of tyranny, division, and destruction.

Today, the third extreme has encouraged the Church to establish a symphony between itself and certain politicians or political parties that ostensibly appear to be in harmony with its own ethos. This alliance with politics also reduces the tension between the Church and the world. Seeking to give the Church visibility and even a modicum of respectability, the marriage of Church and state places the Church on a missionary course that compels it to use its privileged status to change the conscience of secular culture. The Church becomes a political force that can wield its influence to legislate an agenda for the state. This third extreme removes the Church from its vulnerable place within the culture, as it strives to unite itself with the rich and powerful from whom it derives political and social influence. This extreme tempts the Church to join with forces that seek to “impose” a social doctrine, until it ultimately forgets that its work is to change the minds and hearts of the people. There can be no imposed or legislated *metanoia*.

But, finally, there is another way, the *via crucis*: the way of the cross, the

way of vulnerability. Like the Lord himself, the Church works in and for the life of the world by emptying itself of all worldly power and glory. This seems to be the great opportunity being offered to the Church, particularly in its American context. America offers the Church the possibility of making its presence known through its very “weakness” derived from the cross. In its weakness, the Church shows its supreme authority—“for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor. 12:9).

As the Lord ascended the cross in his extreme humility, his theanthropic being was not compromised. On the contrary, the divine-human power of the Savior is revealed to the world through his voluntary vulnerability. Likewise, by assuming its vulnerable place in our culture, the Church will simultaneously expose its strength, glory, and freedom. How all this is going to unfold remains to be seen. However, we can be assured that by being vulnerable, the Church will be able to engage and dialog with the world convincingly.

I want to share an excerpt from an interview given by Metropolitan Anthony Bloom in 1990 that clearly shows the relationship between the “word” of the cross and vulnerability. At the time of the interview, he was at the prime of his thinking, a seasoned pastor and hierarch who skillfully used the Church’s theology to serve and save humanity and all creation. The excerpt was quoted in an article that appeared in *Le Messager* in 2009. Metropolitan Anthony boldly affirms: “It seems to me, and I am personally convinced, that the Church must never speak from a position of strength. It ought not to be one of the forces influencing this or that state. The Church ought to be, if you will, just as pow-

erless as God himself, which does not coerce but which calls and unveils the beauty and the truth of things without imposing them.”

“Without imposing them.” Sadly there is a developing attitude in the Orthodox Church in America and throughout the world that the Church should act from a position of worldly or political power to impose its ethos on everyone. Metropolitan Anthony continues, “As soon as the Church begins to exercise power, it loses its most profound characteristic, which is divine love, [i.e.] the understanding of those it is called to save and not to smash.”

The Church is given for the life of the world and its salvation. The cross that we venerate, that we wear, that we hold up as we proclaim it to be the invincible trophy and weapon of peace, is bound to the humility of the God-Man. And I would say that the words of Metropolitan Anthony brilliantly capture and articulate what the “word” of the cross is. The word exhorts us personally and corporately as the Church to be a presence in the world, not a powerful presence,

but the humble and vulnerable presence that is able to draw everyone and everything into the beauty, light, and glory of God.

Humility and vulnerability free the Church to dialog with the culture in which it lives. However, dialog is one of the most vulnerable and therefore risky acts that the Church—that *we*—can submit to. Why? Because it puts the Church in a position in which it may have to acknowledge that *it* needs to change—that *it* needs to recalibrate how *it* lives in and how *it* serves the existing culture. The Truth who is Jesus Christ is not exhausted by the word of Scripture. His divine-human economy is not exhausted by the words of the Fathers or the doctrines of the councils. The word of the cross that affirms the love and compassion of the triune and tri-personal God “for us and for our salvation” is not exhausted by the celebration of the Liturgy. Too often, we Orthodox Christians forget that these expressions of the Church’s living tradition are not ends in themselves, but rather, through the Holy Spirit, bring us into the inexhaustible encounter with God, humanity, and all creation. ✱



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