

Triumph of Love¹

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

On the Sunday of Orthodoxy we celebrate the Triumph of Orthodoxy. This cannot merely be expressed as the restoration of icons into the liturgical and pious prayer of the faithful, however important that is. The Triumph is nothing less than the personal and experiential encounter with the God who became man, with the one who took on human flesh so that he might be Emmanuel--God *with* us.

Preface:

God is love, St. John tells us in his first epistle. And it is so clear from the Gospels, from the epistles of the New Testament, and especially from the Holy Fathers, that God expects one and only one thing from us: that we also become love, that we become by grace what he is by nature: love.

The Ladder of Divine Ascent by St. John of Sinai is read by monastics, and frequently by the non-monastics as well, during great lent. The thirtieth and final rung on St. John's *Ladder* is the step of love. All our ascetic efforts culminate in love. St. John describes this fulfillment of our spiritual toil in this way: "Love, by its very nature, is a resemblance to God in as much as it is humanly possible."² The profound insight here is that Christ Himself showed us how love was humanly possible. He, as the perfect human, enters our world not only to show us how God loves, but how one who is truly human loves.

St. John of Sinai continues: "Love is the *inebriation* of the soul." This is reminiscent of St. Paul's words, "Don't be drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Holy Spirit" (Eph 5:18). The willingness of the Apostles and the Holy Fathers to compare our life in the Spirit to being intoxicated expresses the extremes to which our will must be given over to another power--not an impersonal or passionate power, but to the personal power of the Holy Spirit operating within us. Not the obliteration of our will, but its humble fusing to the divine will.

¹ Revised version of a talk given at Holy Dormition Monastery at Vespers on the Sunday of Orthodoxy, March 20, 2016.

²Step 30:7, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston, MA, 1991, pg 225.

Love is invitingly expressed in our Lord's high-priestly prayer (Jn 17): "I do not pray for these [twelve disciples] alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word" (Jn.17:20). He is praying for us, who have received his word through his disciples. And what does He pray?

That they all may be one, as you Father are in Me and I in You; that they also may be one in Us." Not just one, but one in Us. "That the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one. I in them and You in Me; that they be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me and have loved them as You have loved Me. (Jn. 17:21-23)

God's unifying love for us is no different than the love that he has had from all eternity for his Son. Our Lord's prayer continues:

Father I desire that they also, whom You gave Me, may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory, which You have given Me. For You loved Me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father! The world has not known You, but I have known You; and these have known that You sent Me. And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them. (Jn. 17:24-26).

Before he goes to the Cross, on the very night in which He is about to be betrayed, or rather on which he gives himself up for the life of the world, our Lord's prayer concludes with a very simple request: Father, let the love that You have loved Me be poured out into their hearts; be in them. That is the one thing that God desires for us: that we enter into his love, and let his love enter into us. It is so profound, so remarkable, to reflect on where our Creator is taking us.

In stark contrast to this great calling, however, are the countless preoccupations that consume our days. Our day is so often filled with distractions, disturbances, irritations and impatience that we easily forget that there is only one thing that matters: that we become conduits of God's love, from Him into us and through us into the world. Our Lord's prayer offers such a reorienting message, turning us away from the transitory to the eternal. The love which the Father has for the Son inebriates our souls. This is *theosis*: to be love; to let God so invade every little nook and cranny of our inner being that his love which the world knows nothing of is manifested to it.

The Love of Empress Theodora

I offer these reminders about love as a preface to a reflection on today's feast. From the 8th century into the early 9th century there was widespread destruction of the icons; 'iconoclasm' we

call it. We hold these icons now, and process with them, because they have been restored, returned to their proper place in our worship and piety. But to have lived during the tumultuous times of iconoclasm would have been insufferable. The destruction of the icons was carried out primarily by the emperors. The *Synaxarion* for today's feast lists the emperors who ruthlessly brought about extraordinary destruction, chaos, and turmoil in the Christian world over this issue, culminating in one name: Theophilus. Here is how the *Synaxarion* describes him: "Theophilus left the other devotees of iconoclastic madness in second place." All of his predecessors for the previous hundred years were in second place, compared to his destruction of the Church, and of the her veneration of icons. It is said of Theophilus that he had given many of the Holy Fathers over to outrageous torments and chastisements on account of the precious icons, and this for a period of twelve years of his life as emperor.

In his twelfth year as emperor, he became quite ill, and his wife Empress Theodora, whom we honor today, cared for him in his illness. After a torturous decline, he died immediately before the beginning of Great Lent of <year>. His wife Theodora was absolutely distraught. She herself had icons; she wore one inside of her clothing; she also had icons among her personal possessions, hidden from her husband. After the death of Theophilus, there were various prominent ascetics and monks from throughout the region who came to Constantinople to plead for the restoration of the icons. The *Synaxarion* records that Theodora asked them to make supplications for her husband. Although they disowned Theophilus who had persecuted their fellow Christians, seeing her faith, they were nonetheless persuaded. St. Methodius, who was the Patriarch of Constantinople at the time, assembled all the clergy and all the faithful, including the leading figures from Olympus (where there was a great monastic presence), and many others from Jerusalem. All assembled in the great Church (Hagia Sophia), and all night long they prayed and made supplication to God for Theophilus, for this person who had savagely persecuted them for twelve years. They all continued to pray with tears and fervent entreaty throughout the entire first week of Great Lent. The holy Empress Theodora did the same, together with the women of the court and the rest of the faithful. At the end of the first week, on Friday, after keeping vigil for an entire week, Theodora fell asleep. And while she was sleeping it seemed to her that she was standing beside a large cross, and that certain men were traversing a road and creating a tumult, carrying various instruments of torture. In the midst of them was the Emperor Theophilus, her husband. He was being led in fetters with his hands tied behind his back. On recognizing him, she followed after those who were beating him; when they reached the bronze gate she saw a man magnificent in appearance, seated in front of the icon of Christ, and they placed Theophilus in front of it. Grasping the feet of the man with that magnificent appearance the Empress entreated him on behalf of her husband. Opening his mouth with reluctance, the man said: "Great is your faith, O lady. Know therefore that on account of your tears and your faith and also on the account of the supplications and entreaty of my servants and my priests, I am granting forgiveness to your husband, Theophilus." He then instructed those

who held Theophilus to release him, and hand him over to his wife. After receiving him she departed rejoicing. Such was the vision of the Empress Theodora. Immediately she went back and reported her experience to Patriarch Methodius, and he performed another test, by which it was confirmed that God had forgiven Theophilus.³ On this occasion, then, they proclaimed Sunday, to be the restoration of icons in the church in Constantinople and across the empire.

So today's feast is brought about by the triumph of love, the love of a woman for her husband who was absolutely undeserving of love. She was married to the man who was the greatest persecutor of Christians in a century, and she did not cease to love him. He did absolutely nothing to merit the love of his wife, to say nothing of the love of his subjects. Yet she became by grace what God is by nature: love. And because of her love for her husband, the empire could love him. And because of her love, and the empire's love, God forgave him. What a profound transformation of the fallen, transitory and decaying world! The Triumph of Love.

*The Love of Jacob*⁴

There are, of course, countless stories of great love woven throughout the history of the Church. I'd like to consider one from the Old Testament as expressed to us in the Canon of St. Andrew, which we prayed in our churches last week. It's the story of Jacob.

³ Contrast the response of Ven. Lazarus the iconographer, *Synaxarion* for November 17th.

⁴ Original (and unedited) Introduction to this section:

There are other instances of this sort of intense love that is so profound, and I was struck by one earlier this week, when reading the Canon of St. Andrew. Many of you know Fr. Roman loved the services of the Church and loved, it seemed to me, to collect the service books of the Church, in different translations, different languages. And he always had them sort of very organized on the shelf. It was like little precious objects—as they indeed are. And I noticed that there was very little writing in these books. Occasionally he would put a reference or clarify a rubric in them, but very, very little notation in these books. The reason I noticed that is because I am always struck, every Lent, when I read the Great Canon of St. Andrew that there is one verse—actually two-thirds of a verse—that is underlined. And as I recall, it is the only text that I have seen underlined in any of the liturgical books that I have read here from Fr. Roman, so it stands out to me. And what verse would he choose to underline, out of all these texts? “By two wives understand action and contemplation. Leah is action, for she had many children; and Rachel is knowledge, for she endured great toil.” That is what Fr. Roman underlined. The part that he did not underline, the rest of that verse, says, “For without toil, O my soul, neither action nor contemplation will succeed.” Of course we are talking about the Patriarch Jacob, and the verses that are immediately preceding this say, “The ladder which the great patriarch Jacob saw of old is an example, O my soul, of approach through action and ascent to knowledge. If you wish to live rightly in action and knowledge in contemplation be made new. In privation Jacob the patriarch endured the burning heat by day and the frost by night, making daily gains with sheep and cattle, shepherding, and wrestling in serving to win his two wives.” The two wives represent action and contemplation. I have no idea when he underlined it, but ever since I saw it there I felt like he underlined it for me, and I am still trying to understand it.

Recall his story. He went to his uncle, his mother's brother, Laban, to work for him. On his way there he goes to a well, and up comes this woman who is a shepherdess, who turns out to be Rachel. He immediately falls for her; he wants to marry her, and her father Laban consents: "You only have to work seven years for her." Jacob enthusiastically accepts the conditions. So he works seven years for his uncle only to be tricked and is given the older sister Leah instead of the woman he loves. Laban says, "Well, you may have Rachel too, but you have to work another seven years." Jacob does exactly that. He labors fourteen years so he could marry the person that he loved. He toiled tirelessly, faithfully, and maybe most importantly without complaining. It is a profound story, really, when you think about it. It is the Triumph of Love. Jacob is a tremendous example for us of the inner power that arises from a heart set on love.

In the Canon of St. Andrew that we prayed last week, we read the following interpretation of Jacob's struggle for love.

The ladder which the great patriarch Jacob saw of old is an example, O my soul, of approach through action and ascent to knowledge. If you wish to live rightly in action and knowledge in contemplation be made new.

In privation Jacob the patriarch endured the burning heat by day and the frost by night, making daily gains with sheep and cattle, shepherding, and wrestling in serving to win his two wives.

By two wives understand action and contemplation. Leah is action, for she had many children; and Rachel is knowledge, for she endured great toil. For without toil, O my soul, neither action nor contemplation will succeed.

St. Andrew tells us that the toil of love forces to cultivate two characteristics: action and contemplation. Either alone will leave us shortchanged. This pursuit, this desire, to see love fulfilled, love culminated, love completed, will require that we *do* something. What did we hear two weeks ago, at the Sunday of the Last Judgement? Who are the sheep? They are the ones who visit the sick and the imprisoned, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty. They *do*; they *act*. Acts of mercy, in the simplest ways to those whom God puts in our lives. Christians are people of action--loving, compassionate, merciful, enduring, patient, and relentless action. The love which God manifests to the world is a love that acts.⁵

⁵ Removed: There are many other ways to describe the actions that we need to have in the context of loving one another, but maybe the most profound one, besides these very simple expressions of acts of mercy, is forgiveness. We have to be people that are radically forgiving of one another. Not just not holding grudges, but really setting people free.

Our actions, however, must emerge from a source deeper than ourselves. Action alone invites the ideologies of social and political movements that arise from self-reliance and pride, even when accompanied by good intentions. Where can we find, and how do we access, a source deeper than ourselves? I am reminded of Fr. Roman's comments in an interview on the Jesus Prayer. He said,

The first step should be the prayer itself—praying the prayer. If you repeat and recite the Jesus prayer the rest comes naturally. Man cannot become dispassionate without falling on his knees and asking God for this grace, because everything comes by the grace of God.⁶

This total abandonment to God, waiting in silence and stillness for his grace, is what St. Andrew means by contemplation. Contemplation reveals to us that our actions are not simply *our* actions. Our actions are by the grace of God, enlivening us, infusing us, awakening us, moving our very limbs. “Everything comes by the grace of God,” Fr. Roman insists. Attaining dispassion is not the result of personal effort, but it comes by the grace of God. So we must fall on our knees. See ourselves as sinners, and ask for God's help. “Contemplative prayer and the purification of passions happen at the same time,” he says, “but priority must be given to prayer. Some say there is no pure prayer without first attaining dispassion. But I say that whether pure prayer or forced prayer, prayer must be the beginning of any spiritual activity.”⁷

So everything that we do has its origin in us turning to God. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon says repeatedly, “Vanity of vanity, all is vanity” (Eccl. 1:2). All our good works are going to perish. And then he says, except “[W]hatsoever God does, it shall be forever” (Eccl. 3:14). Only those things which God does in this world are going to remain and endure; everything else is fleeting, vanity. But God does not act alone; he does not act apart from our wills aligning themselves with His will. He is neither a tyrant who forces us to cooperate nor a genie who carries out fickle wishes without our involvement. Rather, he comes to us as he came to his mother, waiting for our response, “Be it done to me according to Your word.” And so, as with Fr. Roman, every single one of our actions should be initiated by this movement first toward God in prayer, and then outward into the world of action to those that God gives us. This is how love triumphs in this broken and hurting world.

Love that Overcomes Fear

Finally I want to say this: often in our lives we feel totally inadequate at loving other people. We try, and we fail. Maybe we blame others for not responding to our attempts, maybe we blame circumstances, maybe we blame ourselves, or maybe we blame God.

⁶ Reference?

⁷ Reference?

St. John in his first epistle:

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love because He first loved us (1 Jn 4:18).

This is the most profound aspect of love: *we love because He first loved us*. When we try to go out and love others and we fail, we learn one very simple thing about ourselves, that we have aspects of our life that have not been cleansed by the love of God. When we fail at loving others it is because we have in some way closed God out of some portion of our life, and we do not thereby have the resources to offer that love to them. Whether it is in forgiveness or whether it is an act of mercy or whether it is being patient with someone, giving them a listening ear, saying an encouraging or a kind word, whatever it might be. When we find ourselves frustrated, discouraged, discouraged that we are not able to love another in the way in which the saints were able to love, the way in which the holy Empress Theodora was able to love her husband who did not deserve it, the way that Jacob was able to love Rachel, then we realize that however pious, or proper and reverent we might be, that there are portions of our lives that we are hiding from God. And insofar as we block out God's love in our life, it will not flow through us. Until we are transformed by it, we can not be a part of transforming anyone else.

I do not think this is an occasion for discouragement. I think that everything in our lives becomes a trigger to remind us of God. So often when we fail we get discouraged and downcast, and this is a great gift to Satan, because he loves to have us discouraged. God has no interest in having us discouraged. When we are discouraged, we just fall and we stay down on the ground and we do not get up. God always wants to raise us up. So when we face some failure in our lives, some inability to be patient, when patience is called for, some inability to call up the kind, supportive and encouraging word, the inability to resist gossip, the inability to overcome anger and envy, strife, to put aside divisiveness in our families and our parishes, when we fail in these respects we have to see it as a trigger to say, "Lord, what is it in my life that needs your love? What am I blind to? What do I not see?" There are two aspects to this: one is we have to stop looking at other people, just like the prayer of St. Ephraim, Lord, do not let me judge other people, let me see my own sins. Take my eyes off the other people. The second thing is not carrying on a conversation with ourselves. Often when we fail, we think, "Oh! I cannot believe that I failed again. I am never going to be any better. This is my problem. I can not ever get over this. Nothing is ever going to change. I have had this problem for ten years, twenty years, thirty years, my whole life. I got it from my parents. They got it from their parents. It is never going to change." But as long as we are talking to ourselves there is no opportunity for God's grace to intervene. This sort of self-monologue that we have creates a little seal around our heads; we live

in this little made up world of our own, thinking about other people, focusing on other people with our own thoughts, and focusing on ourselves with our own thoughts, is not all that different; Both leave God out of the picture. Not only do we not focus on other people, but in a certain sense we do not focus on ourselves either. We must say, “Lord, You show me.”

It is God’s responsibility—forgive me for being so blunt—it is God’s responsibility to show us our sins. The Holy Spirit is the one Who comes to convict the world, you and I, of our sins. God does not need our self- analysis. God knows us a lot better than we know ourselves. So, when we fail we turn to God, and say, “Lord, You show me my life. You are the light that comes into the world.” If we do not run from that light, He will show us those aspects of our life that need His light. He will cast out that darkness in our own lives, and in doing that we will experience His cleansing power, His redeeming power. We will feel our spirit set free in some simple way. And in the midst of that freedom, we will be able to love a little more. We will be able to have a kind word for someone. Judgment will not be as easy for us to make. So little by little, letting ourselves experience God’s love, we will be precisely what it is that makes us more like Him. Making us by grace what He is by nature. So when we say, in the liturgy, “Let us love one another that with one mind we may confess,” we express very clearly and very vividly that the foundation of our doctrinal teaching in the Church is love.

The triumph of Orthodoxy, in the Church, and in a sense in the world, is not simply an abstract doctrine. It is not even simply a great feast one day a year in which we process around the church, and hold up icons. The triumph of Orthodoxy is this radical love that the world knows nothing of. And that love is what it is that gives life, and light, and really, flesh, to the doctrine that we believe.

So, my brothers and sisters, my encouragement for you today is really very simple: make the triumph of Orthodoxy the triumph of love. Every time you venerate an icon, know that this is God’s love poured out to you. God wants to inebriate your soul, to make you radically changed and transformed that you become His icon in this world to those whom He places in your life.