

THE MISSION AND IMAGE OF THE PRIEST ACCORDING TO BIBLICAL  
THOUGHT AND THE TEACHINGS OF THE HOLY FATHERS,  
AND THE IMAGE OF HIS FAMILY

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The priestly order is worthy of enormous esteem, and great is the salvific and miraculous grace of the priesthood. Through the priest, the Lord performs great and salvific deeds in man: He purifies and blesses man, grants him a re-birth in the waters of new life, He renews and strengthens him; He turns bread into the Most-pure Body of Christ and the wine into the Blood of the God-Man Himself; He unites Heaven and earth, man and God; He forms a unique gathering of Angels and men.

We, the pastors of Christ's Church, can best see our mission and apostleship in the Church from the miraculous occurrence which is described by the Evangelist Luke, when he and Cleopas journeyed with Christ to Emmaus (Lk. 24:13-35). It would be superfluous for me to now repeat that biblical story, which you all know better than I, but I would like to direct your attention to Luke's and Cleopas' admiration and wonder when Christ broke bread and gave it to them; their eyes were then opened and they recognized Him at which point He then became invisible to them. While they were returning to Jerusalem, they pondered: "Did our hearts within us not burn whilst He spoke and interpreted the Scriptures?" They told the apostles about this and from that time, they themselves became apostles of the resurrection and salvation in the God-Man Christ, i.e., witnesses and bearers of that essential, and ever-contemporary mission of the Church in the world: the resurrective mission of salvation. This miraculous biblical event is an important message and example for us, the pastors and missionaries of Christ's Orthodox Church today. There is no greater or more contemporary job or task than the God-given concern and care for the salvation of the world and mankind. And it is not just a question of care for one's personal salvation, although it is indeed important and inseparable from the mission of the general salvation of man's being and the whole human race; rather, it is a question of the basic Christian proclamation – the Gospel of the salvation of the world.

This is indeed a holy and difficult mission, full of responsibilities, but, if within our hearts is born that same God-given concern that Luke and Cleopas had, that concern for salvation and Christ the Savior, Crucified and Resurrected for the whole world and the human race, then, Christ Himself will definitely accompany us, sharing with us His blessed bread and fulfilling our hearts with the salvific joy of the resurrection and apostolic missionary fervor. Christ came and appeared in our human world as the Savior because such an encounter with the Savior and salvation is the foundation for every Christian (Lk. 10:42). Until a man awakens internally, unto this encounter and access to Christ as the Savior, he remains in the courtyard of Christianity. And herein lies the enormous role of the priest; to bring his faithful from the courtyard into the house itself - the Church. And to be able to do this, he himself must first of all encounter Christ and experience Him. It is not enough to just be religious, it is necessary to be a Christian, and Christianity begins with faith in the Gospel of salvation, and the experience of salvation in Christ (Mk. 1:15, Jn. 1:36-37). Our modern man is perhaps religious, but usually just

in some generalized manner, which is not adequate for the experience of the newness of Christianity. Faith in Christ and the experience of salvation in Christ is indeed something much greater and more complete than simple religiosity.

Man, in his sin, brought the world into this present state, and not God, as those with weak faith complain; and so, we should not be surprised that the world is in such a state (1 Jn. 5:19), because, it is our own doing. But, in this world, such as it is, by God's grace, salvation and the Savior exist: "For, God so loved the world, that He gave His Only-begotten Son so that all who believe in Him should not perish, but have life everlasting" (Jn. 3:16). With this message from the Gospels, we pastors, can find comfort, both for ourselves, and for our people. Here we find Orthodoxy's mission of the Church, for Her representatives, to endeavor for salvation in Christ for all people and all things. I say 'salvation', not just as deliverance and healing, but much more, the fullness of man's being and life in unity with the Holy Trinity, in salvation and everlasting life, which begins already here on earth, and continues in eternity. In this search for salvation, there of course exists no egoism, because, the goal is not that just I am saved, but that every man in Christ, to be re-born through the Holy Spirit, into a new life. This is the ideal which our Church, and we pastors, even today in our times, place before man, and for which we, in our pastoral mission, must struggle for. It is not in vain that Christ tells us: "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and its Justice, and everything else will be added" (Mt. 6:33). God is not opposed to this human world and this life of ours, but, it is extremely dangerous for man to allow himself to be reduced to the level of this world and life, to the work and labor in it; even though we Christians must struggle to improve our world and life, our human relations and societies, nevertheless we must not deceive ourselves and enclose ourselves only in this world without enlightenment and orientation towards the Kingdom of God and eternal Justice and Life.

So, to be concise, the mission of us priests is "to awaken within ourselves, in our hearts, and in the hearts of our faithful, those evangelical truths concerning salvation and our thirst for this salvation. We must, therefore, speak and bear witness, (and thus our mission is always modern and always new), about the salvific love for man, even if he be the worst sinner, as the case with the prodigal son in the Gospels, about God's love for us, His children, and how He, with this love, awaits us and comes out to meet us.

This mission of ours, the mission of the Good News of salvation to modern man and the world, can be successful and convincing only if it springs forth out of our Christian hearts and our experience of the new life in Christ. St. Gregory the Theologian states that a true pastor of the Church is the one who first works on his own salvation, who first "works on his own enlightenment, and then on the enlightenment of others; who first purifies himself, and then leads others to purification; who first learns wisdom, and then teaches wisdom to others".

Or, as we say in the Holy Liturgy: Every priest first of all offers God the sacrifice "for his own sins", and then also "for the ignorance of the people". In other words, each priest, missionary and pastor, first of all senses that he is the one for whom Christ suffered, that he is the "first sinner" (1Tim. 1:15) in need of the salvation and joy of the new life, and

then, from this experience and knowledge, goes further in his pastoral service and mission. St. Gregory goes on to say that the priest in a way "completes the liturgy for himself", in his priestly service; that he himself, through grace, is the object of Christ's deeds of salvation and redeeming asceticism, and that through him, such as he is, Christ's mission of the salvation of all people in the community of the Church as the Body of Christ continues.

Indeed, the service of the priest is above that of the Angels. In his writing "On the Priesthood", St. John Chrysostomos asks why God didn't appoint the Angels rather than men as pastors and priests. And he answers: perhaps the Angels wouldn't have the long-suffering and understanding for human weakness, the numerous and frequent human stumbling, the falling, and getting back up. An Angel would perhaps forgive us once or twice, but then would not have any more understanding, because he is not a man who "bears a body and lives in the world" (as is stated in a prayer for Confession) as does a priest who himself is subjected to sin. The priest knows the weaknesses of human nature, and therefore, as a true pastor, is able to identify with each and every soul in his flock, with every human being, to share in the suffering of the weak, as the Apostle Paul states, and thus, with compassionate love, helps others with the help of the great grace of God, to free the sinner from the shackles of sin, and to, as a child of God, taste the joy of Christ's salvation and set out on the path of a new and holy life in the Holy Spirit. In his asceticism of salvation, the level a man may reach isn't as pertinent as the importance that he experience that new reality, that grace-bearing communion in the power of the "future age", as the Holy Apostle Paul says in Hebrews 6, 4-5.

Each of us knows for sure if he has ever sensed, even just a little, the joy of repentance and the grace-bearing taste of salvation: at once, everything becomes lighter, as if a new life has begun - "the murmur of living water flowing into life eternal", as St. John the Theologian and St. Ignatius the God-Receiver tell us. A priest is crucified and resurrected with Christ daily, and such is our Christianity "bearing one's cross", and "following the Lamb of God, wherever He may go" (Mt. 16:24, Rev. 14:4). And if such is the case with us, then this will surely shine forth both in our missionary work, and upon other people around us, in these God-given times we have for salvation.

God has appointed us to do this pastoral work in these difficult times, and we must be deeply aware of them, for they place before us enormous tasks and challenges, which we, with our human weaknesses, cannot successfully resolve. We must be aware of our human weaknesses, but must not despair, for, as the servants of God's altar, we are familiar with the words of Apostle Paul: "When I am weak, then I am strong".

This means that the weakness is present, but we also know that God's great grace, which we received at our ordination, is also present; God's Grace which perfects all human defects, will ensure that out of our weaknesses, God's power, which is given to all who are helpless, will speak forth, but this we receive only through our humility, fasting, prayer, love, patience, and our pastoral efforts. Therefore, if we priests do not possess these virtues, and if we do not apply them, then we will not be able to sense within ourselves that grace-bearing activity of the Holy Spirit Whom we received through ordination; rather, we will sense the activity of our own spirit, with which we cannot

help, not just others, but even ourselves, nor can we bear "Christ's yoke" in the secularistic times in which God has appointed us to perform our pastoral service. Therefore, if we desire to be justified in our pastoral service, we must place in its foundation, the example and image of Christ the Archpastor, "Who gives us the power"; in this manner, we will be of use to God's Church which we all serve. It is up to us priests to first of all be enlightened in our lives, and then to enlighten others; we first must experience the foretaste of eternal life while still here on the earth, and then transmit that joy to those who through us seek salvation, and who desire to come unto the knowledge of the Truth.

It is also true that today's world greatly differs from the times of the past. Today's man has grown weak in: faith, love, hope, self-sacrifice, church-mindedness, and ardor for both the individual and society; the course of time in which we live leaves its mark upon us, which is in truth, the mark of this world, such as it is, and not the mark of the ascetic deeds, sacrifices and faith of our Holy Ancestors. It seems to me that there are two qualities which are in great demand today in this civilization, in modern society, and those are: P E A C E and T O L E R A N C E. These concepts, these characteristics, are not new – only their contemporary interpretations are new, which accept and support things which until yesterday, were considered unacceptable (for example, drug use, murder, bombing); teachers instruct the children that there is nothing wrong with homosexuality, etc., stating that they have just chosen a "different life style".

This interpretation of such concepts touches not just the private lives of our faithful and their families, but also the families of our priestly servants, and also, brethren, the very foundation of our Faith; according to Christian understanding, the people of the world today are perishing in great numbers: some from bombs, others from immorality, AIDS, infidelity, heresy, and from many other misfortunes which are served to man by this civilized society.

The times are truly difficult, but then again, the Holy Gospels warn us about that by stating: "this world lies in evil". This means that in every time, but I would say especially in our times of today, every Christian, and especially the pastor, has the responsibility to keep guard and take care so that first of all, he himself is not caught in the nets of these "spiritual" wolves, who make use of all possible methods; for, it is the responsibility of the pastor to save and free from these nets, all who have fallen into them, but also desire to be saved from them, and to attain the freedom through the assistance of Christ's Truth. So we must then direct them to the words of our Savior, which only He could say to all of us: "I am the way, the truth and the life", and more importantly, we must not just speak these words to others, but first of all, to ourselves.

Thus, it is our holy duty, to which we are bound by our priestly oath, to, even in such times, seek out the lost sheep (but at the same time to take care of the herd still in the pen), and to carefully keep track of ourselves so that while seeking the lost sheep, we ourselves don't get lost and wander aimlessly. For, if this happens, then we are of no use - neither to ourselves, nor to others; of course, we must keep in mind the words of our

Lord Christ: "Go forth and preach the Gospel unto all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit", and to teach them "to keep that which Christ commanded".

The task of the ecclesiastical pastor today is very complex, difficult, and full of responsibility. Our faithful, sadly, largely because of their lack of a proper attitude towards the Church, partly because of their ignorance concerning Christianity, and also because of the various social pressures - be it from the surroundings they live in or from themselves, make errors in their lives, errors which are most often damaging to the Church and Her order. And worse yet, if the priest is not on an adequate spiritual level so that he can help these people in their misfortune, and instead of, with God's help and pastoral guidance, bringing them unto knowledge of the Truth, it could happen that he himself gets pulled into the quicksand of these above mentioned people; he may identify with them, and even more sorrowful, he may even feel comfortable in such company, and thus lose his valuable time and his significance, and begin to feel more at home with the company of these lost sheep rather than with the company of the tame. The priest who does not feed himself and his faithful with the food of the Gospels and the Holy Fathers, most often feeds them with politics, financial matters, gossip, divisions, and similar things.

Everything I have said so far indicates that the difficulties of the pastor are both subjective and objective, and when the subjective difficulties are in question, it is usually the "deeds of our own hands".

Our faithful today, in this society of "equality", most often use democracy as their justification; when the priest points out the order and the Canons of the Holy Church, of if he should tell them that something cannot be done in the Church, they often answer: "But Father, this is a free and democratic country:, and of course, we priests also say it is so. But, it is at the least, difficult to get them to change their minds and understand that democracy was conceived as a "free market of ideas", where everybody can, according to one's abilities, propagate his own ideas. It is truly a difficult question - how can you tell them that, in opposition to this concept, the Church is not a "free market of ideas" or of anything else of that nature. The Church is first and foremost, a spiritual field on which the Divine Truth is exhibited, which the Lord offers to man in order to free him from sin. And freedom from sin is a condition for receiving eternal life. This means that in the Church exists the eternal Truth which man, through his free will, either accepts or rejects, and thus, in the Church, there is no democracy.

Unfortunately, it sometimes happens that a Bishop or priest will give in to the "desires of the people", in order to maintain peace in the Diocese or parish. It is not rare for someone in the Church to start some action because of one's personal goals, and succeeds in convincing other individuals to "appeal" to the Church's governing authorities to ease up in Church discipline; and if it actually comes to that, they themselves open the door to democracy in the Church - and if today a concession is made in a small scale of little importance, tomorrow it will occur in a larger, much more important matter.

Today, many people will in one way or another pose the question of "salvation", or "the greater good", and will say: As long as it leads to salvation, this or that can be allowed..." But we must understand very well that we have no right to spend the inheritance which we did not earn and acquire ourselves. According to God, the Church is God's and She is given to us for our salvation in Her, but even if it be according to man, the Holy Fathers established this order in the Church, we didn't. And now, if we "sell" it out because of some "greater good", or because of the secularization of the times, what then will be left for future generations? How will they be saved and acquire that "greater good"?

As God's co-workers and servants of the Altar, regardless of one's rank, we are all responsible, not for some modern "customs", but for Holy Orthodoxy, the purity of our Church and the Apostolic Faith. The entire Church order, the complete organism and all of its cells serve one and the same end: entrance into God's Kingdom while here on the earth.

We pastors are not called to be "representatives of the people", but priests; we are held accountable for people's souls, while representatives of the people are held accountable as much for the interests of others as they are for their own personal interests; we shall be held accountable for not being better, for not giving a better example. A priest may think that he is responsible for the whole world, and thus fall into spiritual delusion. In truth, we are saved only in and through a community – and that is the Church; but we are first and foremost accountable for those whom the Church entrusted to us and whom we have led into the Church.

It is of utmost importance for a priest in his pastoral work to guard himself from pride and vanity. In each and every contact with the faithful, he must always put Christ before himself, and not his own charm or diplomacy which will not have a lasting effect on keeping somebody in the Church. It is true that some have the ability to attract people to the Church, but only Christ has the ability to receive them and keep them there within His own Church. The Lord Himself warns us with the words: "The servant is not greater than his master..." In other words, we are not called to bind people unto ourselves, but rather unto the Church and Christ. At the same time, the means and the goal of our pastoral work is nothing other than Christ Himself, in Whose Name we are saved; the priest is God's servant and is to lead the souls of his flock unto salvation. On the other hand, we, like some craftsman, turn the Church into a "service for satisfying spiritual needs". All that's left is to adopt the slogan "the customer is always right", and thus, nothing will remain of the holiness of the Church and of our salvation in Her.

It has never been easy to perform the holy duties of a priest. All the dark powers of this world turn on him, just for the reason that he is the bearer of God's grace which enlightens and sanctifies all. For this reason, a priest must be armed with all the spiritual weapons: faith, fasting, prayer, love, patience, hope, and virtues. As Apostle Paul advises: Receive the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph. 6:17). This apostolic message is directed to all us priests. Just as a barehanded warrior is helpless, so also, a priest who does not preach the word of the Lord is weak and feeble. The warrior who casts away his weapons is no longer a warrior. In the same manner,

without the words of the Gospel, a priest is no longer Christ's warrior; thus, we must continuously arm ourselves with the evangelical teachings, because in the Holy Gospels, we find all the answers asked by today's "modern" man. A bee flies from flower to flower in order to drink up the sweet nectar which she then carries back to her hive as the most valuable food. And so it is with the priest - the preacher continuously gathers up the divine truths from the Holy Scriptures, Church literature, and ecclesiastical and worldly writings, and also from the lives of wise clergy, and then he organizes all of that in his own soul. This is not the regular acquisition of knowledge acquired through memorizing and practicing, rather, it is the actual experience of the truth, faith, and divine Revelation.

In order for a priest to be successful in his service, along with all of the above mentioned, his own personal life and example are of great significance, just as is the example of his own family, and in the first place, the example given by his wife. No matter how hard a priest may strive to live in a quiet manner, the parishioners will continuously and carefully keep an eye on the priest's family.

The priest is not a priest only in the temple for the duration of the services, or while performing his duties in the parish, but rather, for every moment of every day since the time of his ordination. The priesthood he received cannot be left in the temple. In some institutions, be they civil, military or some other, one can leave his trade behind when he leaves the building; but the priest remains a priest even within his own family, in his own house. His wife must see in him, not just her husband and the father of her children, but first, a priest. It is of great importance for the members of the family to realize that their husband and father is - a priest. This is important for the development and strengthening of the family and the household church within the homes of the clergy.

In concert with the advice given by the Apostle, a priest can become a mature man only if he "manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity; but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the Church of God?" (1Tim. 3:4-5).

The family of a priest must be an exemplary, Christian, Church-minded family, because, all eyes in the parish are watching. Thus, a priest and his family must have "a good reputation with those outside of the Church, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil" (1Tim. 3:7).

More than any other family, the priest's family is obligated to be a home church. In order to create such a family, it is necessary for the priest and his popadia to lead a very intensive spiritual life. In such a life, the children will experience and participate, in according to their own individual age and development. Prayers must be said regularly in the home - spiritual conversations; because of the importance of his family, the priest must understand that his family is his "first and closest flock", and he is their pastor, who within the family is the first to make a moral and spiritual impression, taking heed to the words of the Holy Apostle: "But if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the Church of God?" (1Tim. 3:5). Unfortunately, there are examples, which is truly sad, where some priests are somehow inhibited and

don't have the courage to establish Church order and the home church within their own house. The son of a wonderful priest writes: "We became so attached to the home church order and chanting at home, that it was very uncomfortable and sad when it wasn't present. Upon returning home from services, after a necessary rest, we would again return to the ecclesiastical chanting".

The wives of the clergy play an immensely important role in the creation and maintenance of the Orthodox order and system, both in the home, and also in the parish; in the Russian tradition, for example, the wives of the clergy are called "*matushka*" - spiritual mother. Thus, the flow of family life, and the relationship of the children with their father, greatly depend on the wife. "The wise woman builds her house, but the foolish tears it down with her hands" (Proverbs, 14:1). If a home church exists in the household, and if the wife and children give their support, it is much easier for the priest to bear the cross of his service. "Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labor, for if either of them falls, the other will lift up his companion..." (Eccl. 4:9-10). A good wife is a counselor and conscience for her husband, but not a *commander in chief*. It is wonderful to see the wife of a priest singing at the lectern, or doing the readings, his sons serving in the altar, and his daughters singing in the choir.

As seen in all of the aforementioned, the path of a priest's wife is a most difficult cross to bear; it can be compared to the monastic cross. There is great symbolism in that, because, both a nun and a priest's wife must deny themselves of a great number of the worldly pleasures, for they are not becoming to her as they may be for other wives.

The popadia can help many other women by offering advice about things such as the raising of children, and also about other, purely womanly matters, about which it is not necessary to disturb the priest with such things.

If a prayerful atmosphere does not exist in the priest's home, then a spiritual atmosphere cannot be created within the family; this will be replaced by a materialistic-consumer life style. But when a home church exists in the household, when the priest has the support of his wife and the support of his family, then he too will more easily maintain his spirituality, for then, his family members are also his closest fiends. The experiences from his own family life can greatly serve the priest in his pastoral work. And in ending, I would like to say this: I am deeply aware that much has been excluded and left unsaid, and perhaps I didn't fully address the theme I was given, nor a subject of interest to you, and therefore, I ask for the forgiveness of all of you listeners. I myself, as a so-called pastor, always recall the words of St. Gregory the Theologian, who says: he could never listen in peace to Christ's words spoken to the Hebrew Pharisees, because the fear that they apply to both him and to those in the Church would shake him to the bones. What then can I, the least of the pastors of Christ's much-suffering flock, say?

As the pastors of Christ's Orthodox Church, the suffering Church of both the past and the present, the unblemished Church of glory and which has neither spot nor stain, but rather is the holy and spotless Bride of Christ, we know and sense that we are not worthy of our



calling, and by far do not do the things that we should in order to fulfill the shortcomings in our communities, i.e., the living community of the faithful as God's flock, but we also know and sense that "even if we fall, we don't fall from You, O Lord, for You are our God even from our mothers' womb", You are the Head, and our Archpastor and High Priest, You are our hope. He is the main goal of our path, and the purpose and content of all or pastoral work.