



Monastic Musings

Living in and Practicing the Presence of God

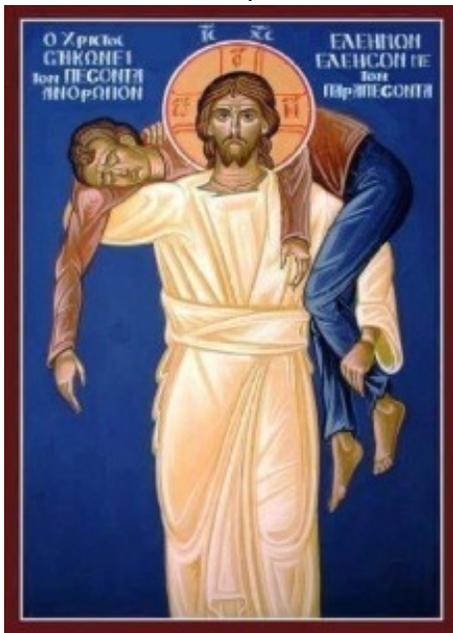
Spring/Summer 2020

Strange World We Live In

by: Right Reverend Barb Martzall

It seems that there are times that the world feels the need to cleanse itself! Presently we are in the middle of that time given that we are all being affected by the coronavirus (covid-19) pandemic. Most of us are forced to stay at home, to remain healthy, with only computers and/or phones to communicate with the rest of the world. As soon as the pandemic was announced in America, people flew to the grocery stores stocking up on toilet paper to the point that two months later, it is still difficult to find any on the store shelves. For whatever reason, people had to panic and think only about themselves. So sad actually to watch. Then there was the situation where stores had to mark floors to force people to stay 6 feet away from someone else or mark the aisles as to the direction to walk to keep the people moving at a distance. Again it was people only thinking about themselves and not others around them. Excuse me, but as we all are in this situation together, is it not time for us to learn to be more considerate of others around us. This selfishness that I am seeing is not what our faith (no matter what it is) has been teaching us!

If we look at the Gospels, we see many examples of Jesus reaching out to help others and not push people around to grab an object off the shelf in front of them. Jesus taught us to be loving and considerate of others just as we would like to be treated. So what has happened to us? Well, it looks like when we feel threatened, we forget to continue to live our lives as we have been taught by our faith. We seem to throw everything out the window, so to speak, and try to run our lives as we see fit. So how is that working out for you? Really be honest with yourself – it is NOT working at all! You are still worrying about what is going to happen when you run out of something. You are also worrying about what if someone coughs or sneezes near you. Just for a minute realize that everyone coughs or sneezes. Stop being so paranoid and selfish! Yes we need to be protective so as not to spread the virus, but be loving about the way you go about it! We also need to learn the follow the rules that are laid out by our towns/cities and the governor beside the rules laid out by our federal government! Not following the rules shows



others that you really don't care about anyone but yourself. You show your selfishness big time to the world.

Have you looked around to see what you can do to help others? The other day I was in the grocery store waiting patiently in an aisle while an elderly couple were trying to decide which cans of vegetables they wanted to purchase. The man saw me standing there and tried to get the attention of his wife to move back so I could pass. I looked at him and said, "I am in no rush. Let her find the cans she wants without having to rush herself." He smiled at me and then went on to help his wife. She finished quickly and I was able to move further down the aisle to what I was looking for. Meanwhile the elderly couple was happy not to be treated harshly and they thanked me for my kindness. Now that is practicing the idea of "what would Jesus do".

If you think about life today, patience and love will help make situations a little easier to handle. Even a kind word, a smile, or offering your help when you see someone struggling. Tell yourself to start practicing peace, love and kindness wherever you are and no matter what you are doing. You will be surprised how much easier it will be to move through these rough times and keep your sanity. Be the leader to teach others how to act during stressful times by living the Gospels. Stay safe and be the best example of Jesus you can be!

+++++

What is Orthodoxy? ***by: Fr. Ron Lathi***

I recently made the acquaintance of another Independent Catholic priest who works for the hospice which cared for my father in his last days. This priest had received a classic Western, Roman Catholic education prior to being ordained as a Roman Catholic priest. He expressed an interest in our jurisdiction and I explained that we are more western liturgically while being orthodox theologically. He asked me "What exactly is Eastern Orthodoxy?" I had to stop for a moment and, stammering, I mumbled something about not recognizing Original Sin and being less scholastically oriented and more mystically informed. I left the visit less than satisfied with my answer. It dawned on me that to me Orthodoxy is, well, Orthodoxy. I just "know" what it is, but, when pushed could not articulate it – it's kind of like trying to describe the taste of chocolate.

So, sufficiently humbled, I set to try to define for myself what being Orthodox means. For many of the Orthodox folks I have known, their Orthodoxy is mimicking 18th or 19th century Russian peasant life. It works for them, but I find it not my cup of tea. Academically, the first thing one finds is that the Orthodox adhere to an "apophatic theology". This is commonly understood to mean a description of God by naming what God is not compared to stating what the attributes of God are (kataphatic theology). Apophatic theologians approach God by negating what God is not, finally ending with the Great Mystery. Most would say that apophatic theology is less "scholastic" and more "mystical". But to say that Eastern Orthodoxy rejects kataphatic theology would not be right -- even great Eastern Orthodox theologians like Gregory Nazianzen argued that kataphatic theology was superior to apophatic approaches (likewise to state that Western theology is only kataphatic is also wrong. We find apophatic terms in Western Christian writings, eg. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Meister Eckhardt). So, we cannot point to any one academic or intellectual approach to define Eastern Orthodoxy.

One can look at specific doctrinal understandings. One of the most obvious, and one which resulted in the split between Eastern and Western Christianity, is the understanding of the Holy Spirit. The West hold the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, while the East holds the Spirit proceeds from the Father but is sent by the Son. Minute points, but which evidently meant a great deal to folks one thousand years ago. Other points include the Eastern rejection of the doctrine of Original Sin preferring to speak of inherited weakness than actual inherited “sin”. The East also has rejected attempts to define the action of grace through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, preferring to speak of the Mysteries which Jesus left us. While such intellectual approaches might be appealing to academics, I feel they still do not adequately express the experience of Orthodoxy. I think a familiar quote from one of the Desert Fathers, Evagrius of Pontus (345 – 399ce) helps to bring us closer to understanding Orthodoxy: “One who prays is a theologian and a theologian is one who prays”.

I found a quote by one of my spiritual heroes, Sergius Bulgakov. He stated “Orthodoxy is not studied, it is felt” (I wish I could remember where I saw this, but if anyone knows the citation, please let me know). Does Bulgakov mean the Eastern Christian experience is based on passing emotional responses? No. What he is pointing to, I believe, is Orthodoxy is something that is lived, more than thought about, and which is grounded in prayer. Orthodox means “Right Worship” – it is life lived in worship of God rather than an emphasis on intellectual or academic comprehension.

For Eastern Christians, the intellectual understandings have been less important than living their lives with the constant Presence of God. Often this living is found in what many Western Christians consider to be at best quaint folk customs, at worst superstitious remnants of pre-Christian practices. One example is the use of the Sign of the Cross. Eastern Christians make use of the Sign of the Cross very frequently, never undertaking any action no matter how seemingly trivial without signing themselves with the mark of their salvation. And anyone who has attended an Orthodox liturgy will have seen the near constant signing with the cross accompanied by bows and, sometimes even, prostrations to the floor. Why? Because it is understood that the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus (expressed through the Cross) informs, underlies and vivifies every aspect of a Christian’s life. Further, the idea of being strangers and pilgrims in this world is tangible in Eastern thought – thus the Sign of the Cross acts also as a protection against our “enemies” (the world, the flesh and the devil) as well as a constant reminder that Christians have died with Christ and now live in His Resurrection. Even more importantly, the Sign of the Cross becomes a constant expression of love to our Lord for the love He has shown us.

Another example is the ubiquitous presence of icons – especially those of Christ and the Holy Theotokos. This is because in Eastern understandings, the spiritual and material worlds are not all that far apart. Icons are the windows/channels which God has given us to communicate and commune with our Savior and the Faithful in Heaven. Orthodox homes have “the Icon Corner” usually near the front door, where the Lord, His Mother and the Saints are greeted upon entering and are the last acknowledged before leaving home to venture into the dangers of the “world”. Every day starts and ends with time spent speaking to God and the Holy Theotokos about the day, needs, fears, frustrations, joys. During the course of the day, when problems arise or joys are experienced, the icons remind us that we are never alone and our Lord and Heavenly Family are right beside us, feeling what we are feeling and sending us their love and support. During Church celebrations, as well as those outside of Church, our icons are taken up and processed with the faithful, inviting our Friends to

share in our joy and celebration. Icons are physical means of expressing our love to our Lord and Heavenly Family – and often, as many recorded miracles attest, the icons also serve as channels for that love being returned in the form of healings and protection from our Family.

There are many other such practices which one finds in Orthodoxy which demonstrate how the faith is something which works into, is expressed by, the actions of day to day life. The worship services in Church are indeed integral and important in the fabric of life, but they do not constitute the entire expression of our Faith. No, Orthodoxy is about living in the constant awareness and Presence of God and His Saints. So, I guess the question “What is Orthodoxy?” can only be answered with an invitation to “come and taste” our life. Come and experience how our lives as Orthodox Christians are lived and experienced and then one can gain a taste, and hopefully an understanding, of our Faith.

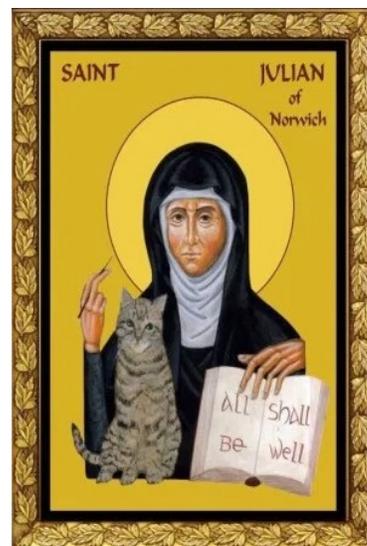


Julian of Norwich – Trusting in God's Goodness *by Rev. Myrella LeClair*

Julian of Norwich was a 14th Century mystic and anchoress (a woman called to living a solitary life, devoting herself to prayer and contemplation). She was born in England in 1342 during the time of the Black Death and lived through three plagues. Despite all that was going on, Julian’s writings are “suffused with hope and trust in God's goodness”.

At this time, we too are dealing with despair due to the plague known as COVID-19. Just as Julian had a choice to make about what to think or do during the plagues, we too have a choice to make: to succumb to pessimism and despair or to “anchor” the Light of God by acting in a responsible manner so as to not spread the virus and to keep the world and all of its inhabitants in loving, Light-filled prayer.

On May 8th, 1373, Julian received a series of 16 Visions as she was laying on what she thought was her deathbed. She recovered and wrote about her visions, referring to those visions as “Revelations of Divine Love”. It was at that point that Julian perceived God as not blaming us or judging us but as enfolding us in love – referring to Jesus as Mother: “Our Savior is our true Mother”. What a concept that is in this century never mind having such a thought in the 14th century!



Following are two of Julian’s 16 Revelations. As you read Julian’s revelations on “God is our Mother” and “All Will Be Well”, please take time to reflect on what these writings mean to you.

“God is our Mother”

“It is a characteristic of God to overcome evil with good. Jesus Christ therefore, who himself overcame evil with good, is our true Mother. We received our ‘Being’ from Him and this is where His Maternity starts – And with it comes the gentle Protection and Guard of Love which never ceases to surround us. Just as God is our Father, so God is also our Mother.”

And He showed me this truth in all things, but especially in those sweet words when He says: "It is I". As if to say, I am the power and the Goodness of the Father, I am the Wisdom of the Mother, I am the Light and the Grace which is blessed love, I am the Trinity, I am the Unity, I am the supreme Goodness of all kind of things, I am the One who makes you love, I am the One who makes you desire, I am the never-ending fulfilment of all true desires. (...)

Our highest Father, God Almighty, who is 'Being', has always known us and loved us: because of this knowledge, through his marvellous and deep charity and with the unanimous consent of the Blessed Trinity, He wanted the Second Person to become our Mother, our Brother, our Saviour. It is thus logical that God, being our Father, be also our Mother. Our Father desires, our Mother operates and our good Lord the Holy Ghost confirms; we are thus well advised to love our God through whom we have our being, to thank him reverently and to praise him for having created us and to pray fervently to our Mother, so as to obtain mercy and compassion, and to pray to our Lord, the Holy Ghost, to obtain help and grace.

I then saw with complete certainty that God, before creating us, loved us, and His love never lessened and never will. In this love he accomplished all his works, and in this love he oriented all things to our good and in this love our life is eternal.

With creation we started but the love with which he created us was in Him from the very beginning and in this love is our beginning. And all this we shall see it in God eternally." — From "Revelations of Divine Love" by Julian of Norwich

In another of her Divine Revelations, Julian writes of the hope and comfort that God provides to us: no matter what is happening, we must maintain our trust in God's goodness:

All Will Be Well"

"I saw that [our Lord] is to us everything which is good and comforting for our help. He is our clothing, who wraps and enfolds us for love, embraces us and shelters us, surrounds us for his love, which is so tender that he may never desert us. And so in this sight I saw that he is everything which is good, as I understand.

And in this he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand....

In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, the third is that God preserves it. But what did I see in it? It is that God is the creator and protector and the lover. For until I am substantially united to him, I can never have perfect rest or true happiness, until, that is, I am so attached to him that there can be no created thing between my God and me.

And so our good Lord answered to all the questions and doubts which I could raise, saying most comfortingly: I may make all things well, and I shall make all things well,

and I will make all things well; and you will see yourself that every kind of thing will be well.”
– From “Revelations of Divine Love” by Julian of Norwich

Just as Julian never gave up hope, we must never give up hope about God’s goodness. More than ever we need to trust in God and allow Her Light and Love to shine through us to all of the world.

Peace be with you!



Unless You Hate Your Life...

by: Fr. Ron Lahti

“The one who loves his life will lose it, and the one who hates his life in this world will guard it for eternal life.” John 12:25

The above quote is one of those “difficult saying of Jesus”. People either stumble upon it and quickly try to ignore it, or they see it and try to explain it away as “not meaning what it says”. But I feel, based on my personal spiritual journey, that Jesus meant exactly what he says – it is just a matter of letting the Spirit of His Word sink in to get the full meaning.

In Greek, this verse reads just as it is translated above. The saying comes in a section in which Jesus predicts his death and resurrection – the seed falling to the ground and then emerging as a tree – and in which He states that those who follow Him will be “with Him where He is”. The word translated “hates” (Greek “mison”) means literally hates or detests. And what are we to either “love” or “hate”? Well, that’s where things get interesting.



The word generally translated as “life” above is in Greek “*psyche*”. It is a complex word in meaning and in syntax. The word is used by different writers in different ways, no one use being consistent, though Psyche is most often translated as “soul” in the New Testament. In Pre-Christian philosophical circles, notably Platonic thought, the word refers to the part of a human in which dwell our passions, feelings, desires and the word’s root is in Greek “*sunesis*” which refers to our intellectual knowledge. Psyche is contrasted to “*nous*” or “*pneuma*” which refer to Mind and Spirit respectively – seen as the “higher” or more spiritual experiences.¹ If the writer of the Gospel thought Jesus meant to refer simply to the physical “life” of our bodies, the Greek word “*zoe*” would have been appropriate. The writers of the Septuagint (the Hebrew Scriptures translated to Greek) used *psyche* to translate the Hebrew word “*nephesh*” – as found in Genesis 2:7 “and G-d created man and breathed in him the nephesh”. In general, *psyche* can be seen as referring to our “*l-ness*”, our sense of self – and all of those things that go on to build up that sense.

As I have prayed about this verse, I am reminded of Jesus’ exhortation to take up our crosses and follow Him (Mt. 10:38). Further, St. Paul’s exclamation: “I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). What Jesus asks, indeed one could say demands, of those who will follow His path is letting go, “despising” the life we think of as “ours” – our

ego or as Paul would say “the old man” (Rom 6:6, Eph. 4:22, Col 3:9). I see this as a call to challenge and possibly give up our cherished thoughts, feelings, desires, habits, etc. - even those that we feel might be “holy” - no matter how well reasoned or researched or appealing. For what? That there might be space for G-d’s Life, the Holy Spirit, to live within and through us. Letting our psyche die is not fun, it is in fact very painful and humbling. But this is the way for us to know more fully the love of G-d as our infatuation with our own thoughts, desires, etc. grows dim and passes away. May the Holy Comforter enlighten our bound and darkened minds to this truth.

1 Zodhiates, Spiros, The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament. AMG Publishers, 1992.

+++++

Just a Thought!

by: Right Reverend Barb Martzall

I want to leave you with something to contemplate concerning your beliefs over the next few months. When Mother Myrella’s mother was letting go of her body to enter her death, she was very fearful that St. Peter would not let her through the Gate of Heaven. This came from her many years of the Roman Catholic Church teachings about life and death and who would be allowed into Heaven. She did not believe that her life was good enough to allow her to join her family in heaven. To both Mother Myrella and myself we found this feeling/thought was really sad. Mother Myrella quickly reassured her mother that she would be very welcome to walk through the Gate of Heaven that St. Peter would open for her.

Why would a religion, church, pastor, etc teach fear of death? God is the fullness of LOVE just as Jesus is our example of God’s Love. That in death, we are welcomed home to be with our Father/Mother who had always loved us no matter who we were. We must always remember that we are created in the image of God therefore our spirit/soul is of God. That which God creates is only GOOD and therefore the Gate of Heaven will always be open to us.

Please, start accepting yourself as a Loved Child of God who is always welcomed home! Teach only love with your life. Do not make others fearful of life and death. Show them the Love of God. Teach Peace!

+++++

Newsletter is copyrighted © by:

Holy Theotokos of Mercy Community

All writings are the views of the author(s) on a particular subject and are meant to challenge your thinking so as to help you grow in your spiritual walk with God.