

The Eighth Commandment November 16, 2014

### The Woman with the Issue of Blood

Today's Gospel gives us an intriguing example of a fundamental Orthodox teaching that can, in itself, be rather hard for everyday folks to understand. That teaching has to do with what the ancients, especially the Greek Philosophers, referred to as "energies" and also the close association of this term with what the early Church Fathers taught about the spirit, both the Holy Spirit of God and the natural spirit of human persons.

In the Gospel story of the woman with the long sickness, certain elements of this teaching are made highly visible, yet for modern people especially, they remain largely unrecognized. I will try to explain. When this woman touches Jesus she is healed by His Divine Energies, (which we often call Grace), that flow into her, rather like what we think of as an electric current. Jesus says "Someone has touched me" and clearly does not mean just physically, since the Disciples also express confusion over this point, wondering what He can possibly mean by saying this since the crowds "press upon Him" obviously touching Him often. He tells them "I perceive that power/virtue has gone out of Me" again the image is that of an energy, moving from one person to another.

Now, we moderns have been taught to think of energy in impersonal terms, as a purely material power that acts according to the laws of thermo-dynamics. It is natural for us thus to think this way about the "power" of God as a sort of Divine "life force". The Star Wars movies capture this idea very well. The Hindu's have built an entire religion around this idea of a life force with both a dark and a bright side. This, by the way is what is commonly called dualism. Christians are not dualists.

I believe that the key for our understanding of such usages in Scripture and the Holy Fathers lies in recognition of the fact, that for Israel, both old and new, energies were understood to have both impersonal and also personal characteristics. A person's energies were not just material stuff (impersonal) like dollar bills that the person used to do things but were also infused with and

identified with the person's "spirit". Such personal energies were the means by which we not just interacted with each other individualistically and impersonally but were also enabled to commune "spiritually" with each other as can occur in marriage and genuine friendship. Such communion was understood to be made possible by the cultivation of the higher forms of love through the virtues. The opposite of this was the cultivation of selfishness/individual separateness through vice/sin.

Left to ourselves it would seem that most of our relationships with other people tend to remain rather towards the low end of the love spectrum. In this state our moral and ethical awareness tends toward legalism, a system of agreements made by autonomous individuals that we hope will allow us the most individual freedom while at the same time restricting other "separate selves" from interfering with us. The so-called "new" morality is based exactly on such a premise. We agree to disagree, to go our separate ways. "Live and let live" we say and "let's just try to get along". We preach "tolerance" as the very first of virtues, especially tolerance that allows us to do evil "as long as we don't hurt anyone else".

For Christians this can only be nonsense and very harmful, even deluded nonsense at that. For Christians there is no private morality because there is no such thing as sin/evil that only hurts the sinner. A society of mutually agreed upon self-indulgence cannot long endure.

For Christians however, the main object of morality is not, as I have said before, the establishment of stable human societies. Utilizing the idea of personal energies in an almost "scientific" manner we can see how the cultivation of virtue makes real love between persons possible, whereas sin/vice makes such communion difficult if not impossible. The Commandment of today's study is "Thou shalt not steal". Let me share with you a story about this that was shared with me. I think it will help make what I'm trying to say here more clear.

There was once a boy of about 10 or 11. He had a nice home, his parents were honorable people, well off but not rich. In his early childhood he had been happy but as he interacted with the world, other kids at school, going to stores

full of wonderful things and so forth, he began to be unhappy. There were many things he wanted but could not get. He, I'm sorry to say, was somewhat lazy, a dreamer rather than a doer. He was also clever enough to find ways to pilfer small change from his parents. So it began. From that time he began to live a sneaky life, always on the watch-out. As he grew older he expanded to shop-lifting, then outright theft with a gang running a midnight auto supply. He never got caught but told me that all of this time he suffered from terrible loneliness, even when enjoying some social popularity. He had plenty of "friends", always a girlfriend but couldn't really love any of them. He also distrusted their love for him. He was, after all, an opportunist constantly manipulating others for what he thought might be a personal advantage.

It is hard to say whether he found Christ or Christ found him but eventually it happened. He became a Christian and began to repent. For many years he came to me for his confession and finally told me the story I have just told you. He had been a thief, in oh so many ways, and had even avoided punishment, but his soul grieved. He told me, with tears in his eyes, that from that early age he had been a predator in his own home and therefore did not love his parents. Later he learned that they, unbeknownst to him had known everything, had tried everything they knew to reach him but had failed and that in many ways he had broken their hearts. He had been their dear one. His parents died before he could be fully reconciled to them but he told me that he had determined to live the rest of his life, as much as he was able, in a way that might make amends. Let me tell you Brothers and Sisters, that man hates theft with a burning hatred to this day for what it did to him, for the suffering and sorrow that it caused his parents and all the people in his life that his selfishness injured, for all the love and good that could have been and was not.

That's what sin does. That's why we don't hesitate to call it evil. That's also what God can do and that's why we must never hesitate to call Him Lord. Amen

