

## Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost 2014

### More on "Second hand smoke"

Good morning to all. May the blessings of the Holy Theotokos be with us today. Especially, welcome to all of our young visitors who are here for our Youth Retreat.

At the beginning of our Dormition Fast I spoke with the congregation about the opportunities that our Orthodox fasts provide us for taking a break, mentally and emotionally, from the secularized culture that dominates American entertainment, movies, tv, music and also the news reporting these days. I compared these things to 'second hand smoke' that can, simply by our exposure to it, injure our spiritual health. Did you take my advice and add to your fast by turning off the tv, radio, iPod and computer and any other 'windows' by which the worldly mind enters our inner world? I have been doing this and it is hard. Hard yes, but it is the 'good for you' kind of hard. Those of you who were here for that sermon, or read it on our website will recall that I used as my example of the power of such 'second hand smoke' to cause real harm, the slow erosion over the past 50 yrs for support of marriage and the family as they were once understood in this country.

I found it remarkably coincidental that Metropolitan Joseph spent a great part of his sermon last week in defense of the Christian understanding of marriage, the family and restraint in our sexual conduct. Yet, such teaching flies in the face of the 'spirit of our times'. Sadly the 'second hand smoke' of this worldly spirit has infected many if not most Orthodox Christians here in America. So much so, that the traditional teaching strikes many as somewhat 'old fashioned' and out of date, if not actually wrong minded.

Most Christians are good people and naturally find it difficult to believe that there might be an overt effort and deliberate campaign to actually destroy the traditional understanding of marriage and the family. We are easily led to believe that the changes in public opinion on these issues are the result of a greater

tolerance of 'diversity' and are evidence of a generally more educated attitude about these matters. 'Second hand smoke', indeed.

On the other hand, people who have tried to warn the public about the inevitable social consequences of redefining marriage and the family have been consistently excoriated as fear mongers, homophobes and bigots. Ask our young people what happens in their university communities when someone ventures an opinion on these subjects that is out of line with political correctness.

The fact of the matter is that the American public has been consistently lied to by the promoters of the new definitions. As a recent rally celebrating the 'victory' of same sex marriage in New York State, a leading academic and activist reminded the cheering crowd that legalizing homosexual marriage was only a step towards the ultimate goal of getting rid of marriage altogether. This statement was greeted with even louder cheering. Meanwhile we are repeatedly told that redefining marriage and the family will have no impact on persons or institutions that hold the traditional view. No one, we are assured would require Christian or other foster care or adoption services to place children in same-sex households. No one would require religiously affiliated schools or social service agencies to treat same-sex partners as spouses. No one would seek to prohibit by force of law religious teaching contrary to the new definitions. No one would, especially in academia, suffer employment discrimination for voicing support for our traditional marriage or criticism of same-sex conduct. And no one we are repeatedly told was proposing to recognize multiple partner relationships, open marriage or any other undermining of the norms of sexual exclusivity and monogamy in theory or in practice. Many of these lies are spread by people who sincerely believe them, but they remain lies nonetheless.

There is a tendency among religious conservatives to sort of blame the homosexuals for all of this. The truth is, however, that all of this 'redefining' got underway back in the early sixties with the so-called sexual revolution that normalized promiscuous behavior and made divorce easy. The same era, interestingly, also marks the beginning of the wholesale abandonment of Christianity that has left so much of America littered with empty churches.

To some extent Orthodox Christians have felt themselves to be insulated from all of these things. We are a small minority in America, made even smaller by our different ethnic groupings and a typical immigrant ghettoization that persists for many generations. Despite the growing number of American Orthodox converts, the Church is still a long way from being an American Orthodox Church. Too long for some – not long enough for others. Still, part of our challenge as bearers for the Gospel of Christ, is to bring the truth claims of our faith into active confrontation with the ‘big questions’ and issues of our time and culture. Orthodoxy has always done this, whether it is St John Chrysostom enduring exile and death as a consequence of standing up to the Byzantine Empress or St Herman of Alaska standing up to the Russian officials to protest the mistreatment of the Aleuts. Even when greatly compromised by the Byzantine model of state/church relationships, the church has usually found a way to speak truth to power. So it must be also in America.

And here is exactly where we should shine. For Orthodoxy HAS answers and perspectives that are very distinct from the failed voices of the so-called western confessions. That light, that shining, however is dimmed when Orthodox people unknowingly breathe in the ‘second hand smoke’ of popular American culture, loaded with the spiritual, moral and rational carcinogens of modernistic materialism, relativism, secularism, hedonism and individualism. I know that’s a lot of big words that many people don’t really understand. Most people don’t understand what it is about tobacco smoke that causes cancer either but it will kill you whether you understand it or not. The signs of ill health are clear when many Orthodox no longer keep the fasts, study the scriptures, go to confession or even to church. Yet the tv is on 24/7 in their homes.

In all honesty I must share with you the fact that I am often discouraged as a pastor by what seems to be an impenetrable spiritual inertia that typifies my own life and the life of the church generally. But after this weekend Youth Retreat my spirit is lifted up beyond all of that. I sense that our young people are not only zealous in and of themselves but are also full of God’s promise never to leave the world without light.

As for today's Gospel, can there be any question about its message? We must learn to be merciful. We are not merciful by nature, rather the opposite. We may like the idea of mercy, especially when we are the ones receiving mercy but practicing mercy is much harder to do. In truth, it requires training if it is ever to become a habit, or 'second nature' to us. Let us work to acquire this habit. May the blessings of the Theotokos help us to do so.

Amen