

## Birth of the Theotokos September 21, 2014

### First Commandment

Good morning and may the blessing of our most Holy Mother, Mary the Theotokos be with us all. Today we celebrate her birthday – she who would be chosen by God to be the human means of our Lord’s Incarnation. She is celebrated throughout the Christian Church as Mary the obedient, Mary the Pure, Mary the faithful, Mary the long suffering and if I may be so bold, Mary, the most beautiful. She was and is the glory of all humanity.

I can’t imagine a more auspicious day to begin our study of the Lord’s Commandments. Of the very few words of Mary recorded in the Scriptures, her reply to the angel Gabriel’s Annunciation stands as a testimony of human humility and obedience. “Behold, the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word”. Let us all, in our hearts, right now, ask the blessing of the Panagia, the all holy, to help us acquire a greater willingness to submit ourselves to Christ’s Commandments. May it be so.

Our study this morning will be the first of the Ten Commandments given by the Logos, Christ, to Moses. These commandments can be found in the Old Testament book of Exodus. The text of the 1<sup>st</sup> Commandment reads as follows, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me.”

I discussed the three distinct parts of this Commandment in my sermon from October 14, 2012 which you can access via our website, [holytransfig.org](http://holytransfig.org), for your own study. In that sermon I discuss both the literal, historical understanding of this passage of scripture and to some extent how the Church has interpreted it allegorically as a commandment for all ages, especially for the new non-ethnic Israel, the Church. What I would like to focus on this morning however, is the practical implications of this Commandment for people living in modern American society.

Here in America we have what seems to be a very different religious and cultural climate than that experienced by the ancient Hebrews. Christ then was

calling a particular people "out of the house of bondage," which was not just the physical bondage of Egyptian slavery but the spiritual bondage to the pagan gods universally worshiped at that time. In our time it might seem that people have no gods at all.

If we look a little more carefully, however, I think we will see that at its deepest levels, every human society and culture is in fact religious. Religion here must be defined by what people believe about some ultimate reality and what they may think that reality demands of them. It is in this sense that we will find America in no way lacking an abundance of false gods. I would suggest that America's great problem is not, as some might think, a falling away from religion into irreligion, as much as it is a falling away from good religion into bad.

Some of these bad religions are pseudo-Christianities such as the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and most of the more recent kinds of conservative Fundamentalists and social justice liberals. Then there are the people who claim to be Christian, (or sometimes just 'spiritual'), who belong to what might be called the 'cult of the individualized self', examples of religious anarchy. Lastly, among the bad religions of our time we will encounter different forms of secular humanism, the various ideologies that those who no longer believe in a supreme being substitute for one. It is interesting to note here that the US Supreme Court ruled that the Secular Humanism was in fact, a religion.

The first Commandment calls us out of this mess. One of the first things an Orthodox Christian must absolutely not do in the face of all these 'alternative' and competing religious voices is to subscribe to the politically correct, (and ironically Polytheistic), nonsense that all of these 'religions' are equally valid, that they are all equally good ways by which different kinds of people can find their way to truth. That is just not true. In Christian terms they are "Egypt", they are "houses of bondage", they are nets laid to ensnare the unwise and unwary. They are bad religion.

Now as soon as I say this, I know that I'm going to have to make clear that I am not a 'hating hater who hates', not an 'oppressing oppressor that oppresses' or any other of the nasty things that anyone who tries to stand up for Traditional

Christianity gets accused of these days. We Christians are commanded to love our neighbor, but we are also commanded to hate evil. Our spiritual teachers inform us that the passion of anger was given to man for just that purpose, but we sin when we turn that anger upon another person.

There was an excellent example of this a few years ago when a certain Coptic Priest won what is called the 'Daniel Award' for Christian witness in a hostile environment. This Priest, Fr. Zachariah, operated a highly successful internet ministry to convert Muslims to Christianity. Needless to say he remains a marked man to this day and continues his work from a hidden location. He said, "It is because I love the Muslim people that I hate Islam". Do you see the distinction here? This is absolutely vital. Islam is a bad religion. Most Muslims are peace loving people. That does not mean that Islam is a religion of peace. One of the Sura's of the Koran even addresses the issue of how difficult it is to get people to wage jihad. The solution? They must be forced. Bad religion indeed.

I'm not sure that there is really a finish to my sermon this morning. It is more like just a beginning. Let us resolve, however, in our hearts, to have no other gods in our lives beside Christ. He is our God, He is the one who has led us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Knowing through this, His goodness and care for us, let us in turn strengthen our resolve to be faithful and to be doers of His Commandments, not just hearers of them. May the blessings of the Holy Theotokos help us to do this. Next week, God willing, we will take a look at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Commandment. A sermon on that Commandment is also available on our website from October 2012. You might want to check that out also by way of preparation.