

### Third Commandment 10/5/2014

Good morning Brothers and Sisters in Christ. In addition to many other commemorations, today is a Feast Day of the twenty six martyrs of the Bulgarian Monastery of Zographu – the painter. The Monastery is named after the famous miracle working icon of St George which “painted itself” on a bare board placed by the founders of the Monastery in the altar in an effort to discover who they should have as their Monastic Patron. The twenty six Martyrs were burned alive in the Monastery tower by “the Latins” as it says in the calendar. (Probably Spanish Catalan and Greek troops operating under the attempted reunion of Emperor Michael Paleologos.) The Monks had refused their offer, and then their demand, that they come down and “worship together” with the Unionists. In the light of our modern sensibilities about inclusiveness and tolerance it might seem to us that these Fathers were overdoing it in the refusal to ‘get along’ with the people who were “just trying to help bring the churches back together.” We might notice however that it was the ‘inclusives’ who set the fire. Compromise is a valuable and necessary element of human social life. But then, as now, there are always some things that must not be compromised. Study of the Ten Commandments can help us gain discernment about how to apply this truth in our own lives.

Our study today is the Third Commandment. “You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes the name of the Lord in vain.”

In simple terms essentially this Commandment is a call to integrity and honorable behavior. Our effort to be people whose ‘names’ are written in the Book of Life, begins with respect for God and everything God represents to us: goodness, truth, beauty and love. This respect must be more than mere lip service and outward show. God sees into the heart of all and is not fooled by false piety, by our just going through the motions of a religious life. The Scriptures rebuke those who say Lord, Lord, but whose “hearts are far from him.” That is the very essence of taking the Lord’s name in vain.

In our Orthodox literature we will also find a good deal of writing about what might be called the “mystic” meaning of names. I touched upon that in a previous sermon and will not try to go into it again this morning. To some extent such speculations can distract us from the nuts and bolts of this Commandment. There was even a minor heresy connected with this stuff where certain practitioners of the Jesus Prayer sought to impute a magical power to the name “Jesus”. But that is all far above our ‘pay grade’.

Let us consider instead those things that will actively help us, not only know what God’s Commandments are, but also help us learn to follow them. Elder Sophrony, himself quite a mystic, confirms this saying, “Unless we labor to keep His Commandments, we call upon His Name in vain.”

We cannot expect of ourselves that we will keep the Commandments “naturally”. We would not need commandments at all if this were the case. Our nature, that is our fallen nature, is actively inclined in an altogether different direction, towards the worship of “me” that I spoke of last week. Our Baptisms and Chrismations do not abolish this fallen nature but only begin its transformation. For this transformation to achieve its full potential our active participation and conscious support is required. In the Church language this is called synergy – cooperation with God. This is what our Baptismal promises are all about.

Undertaking this labor of transfiguration is as I said, “against nature” and that is why we all find it so hard. In our moments of inspiration it can seem less hard, thankfully, but at the end of the day, much of our Orthodox way of life comes down to a practical retraining of ourselves. Training is always arduous – a word that has great etymological connections to the Greek word “Orthos” meaning straight. We are working with God to get our lives straightened out.

For Orthodox Christians the beginning of this training is learning to fast - not just to become ‘sensitive’ to spiritual realities, but to strengthen our wills and the ability to say ‘no’ to the passions that defile and corrupt us. There is a wonderful story in the book Russia’s Catacomb Saints, about the Church under Communism. There was a certain Monk, who was made a Bishop to replace the

previous Bishop who had been sent to the camps. He immediately increased the strictness of his fasting to “strengthen his will” against the greater temptations he knew he would have to face as a Bishop. This is wisdom we could all do well to take to heart.

Speaking of fasting, do you remember what I was saying a few weeks ago about “second hand smoke” and the need to shut off as much as possible the voice and ‘noise’ of the world? Especially I recommended doing this on fasting days, Wednesday and Friday, as well as the greater fasting times. I’m still doing this and it is so helpful. Turn off the tv, the radio, the computer, (except for work or school). Stop the music and listen to your own thoughts. Learn some prayers by heart, some hymns to sing, read spiritual books, think about important things.

I am so happy, by the way, to know that our young people have begun a regular Bible study on Wednesday evenings. May God’s blessing be with you and help you maintain this good undertaking for the Glory of God and the health of your souls. Bravo!

Next week we will discuss another important building block of our spiritual training – the Fourth Commandment concerning keeping one whole day set aside for religious matters. In the meantime let us continue to reflect upon the necessity of making our Christian life a genuine one. To that end let us honestly admit, at least to ourselves, that there is much to do in the way of improvement as regards our personal integrity. In our struggle to prepare our souls to be faithful, to hear from our Lord, “well done” rather than “depart from me”, even on a weekly basis here at the Divine Liturgy, let us ask God’s help in renewing our efforts to put away all cunning and deceit, cowardice, lying and all dishonesty. Thus we will honor God by living honorably. Amen