

## 9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Good morning all – May the blessings of our Lord Jesus Christ be with us all this morning as we gather to worship God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Somehow we, who are in no way special, or more deserving, have nonetheless, discovered and been permitted to enter the miraculous world of Orthodox Christianity. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we have been drawn into this world by Christ's invitation. 'Come', He has said in our hearts and like St Peter in today's Gospel His helping hand continues to sustain us amidst the turbulence and intensity of worldly life.

And what, we might ask ourselves, does Jesus do with us once His helping hand has rescued us from our various follies? Just as with St. Peter, He puts us back in the boat, sometimes again and again, which is the Church. So, here we are again this morning in the temple of the Holy Trinity, where the turmoil and strife of the fallen world is muffled and hushed for a few minutes so that our souls may feed upon the life-giving energies of the New Creation. Rejoice Orthodox Christians that we are so privileged as to be participators in the Divine Mysteries of God's Re-Creation of the world.

My sermon today concerns how we must struggle to maintain both a clear headed and clear hearted awareness of the miraculous blessing that is taking place right here in the "ordinariness" of our daily lives as Orthodox Christians. I have somewhat playfully titled this sermon "Secondhand Smoke".

Back when I was growing up, just about everybody seemed to smoke tobacco. We even had a designated smoking area at my high school and at college we smoked in the classrooms. Then, bit by bit, a steady campaign against smoking successfully changed public opinion to the point that nowadays smoking is not even allowed in many outdoor public parks. Every new car used to have an ashtray – not anymore. Whether it is true or not I don't know but it is widely believed that tobacco smoke is deadly even to those nearby a smoker, thus the dread of "secondhand smoke".

My thesis this morning is that just as tobacco smoke is thought to be dangerous, even deadly to non-smokers, so also are such things as popular opinion, the spirit of the times and the ideas of non-Christian even anti-Christian worldviews potentially toxic to Christian believers. Fr. Seraphim Rose used to talk about such ideas being “in the air”, just like smoke and that people often “breathe in” these ideas without even knowing it. Then, like smoke particles in lungs causing cancers, this “secondhand smoke” of ideas also begins to infect the health of our minds, our emotions and our behaviors.

Consider, for example, the subject of marriage and the family. Christians, like all intelligent advocates of a healthy, decent society, have always recognized the family as one of the essential pillars upon which such a society must be founded. The family, based upon the marital commitment of one man and one woman, husband and wife, is also the original and best ministry of health, education and welfare to the young. Where families fail to form, or too many break down, the effective transmission of the virtues necessary for civilized life is imperiled. Without these virtues respect for the human person as well as for legitimate governance will be undermined and eventually lost, resulting in societal decline. These are not just Christian ideas but they are ideas that Christians also recognize as true.

Until about 50 years ago this understanding of the importance of married family life was fairly well established in American society. It is so no longer. For 50 years Americans have been relentlessly told and taught, via the public schools, the entertainment industry and political activism that marriage and the family life are outdated at best, repressive and harmful at worst. The people behind this “secondhand smoke” of ideas firmly believe that the traditional family is an exploitive patriarchal institution that oppresses women, interferes with the right development of children and imposes unhealthy sexual restraints upon people that are psychologically damaging and inhibit the free expression of personality. Their campaign to ‘re-define’ marriage and the family has been largely successful.

Consider this: in 1965 a government report shocked Americans with the news that out-of-wedlock births in poor communities were over 20%. The report

went on to warn that the widespread failure of family formation portended disastrous social consequences of delinquency, despair, joblessness, violence, drug abuse, crime and explosive rates of incarceration. Does that sound familiar? Yet for all that warning the out of wedlock birth rate in some poorer communities is now over 70%. The overall rate for the whole country is over 40%. Yet the news of these vastly greater rates does not seem to cause the shock or alarm that the 1965 report occasioned.

Any society that can view statistics such as these with anything other than grave concern has lost its moral compass. Yet, that seems to be exactly what has happened. The 'secondhand smoke' of the anti-marriage and family elites has convinced Americans that unrestricted sexual activity is 'healthy', that marriage is 'unnecessary', that adultery is what 'everybody does', that perversions are 'alternate life styles', that raising children doesn't require the presence of morally mature parents and that anyone who disagrees is probably a religious fanatic who should be silenced. This has become rather intimidating. It takes courage these days to stand up for Christian values. Even in our own families. None of us are immune to the effects of this 'secondhand smoke'. Many of us find ourselves confused and dispirited by this continual barrage of conflicting social, political and economic agendas of what seems to be an increasing polarized national culture war. Then there's the international news. God help us!

And He does. The Church regularly encourages us to pull away from the noise and strife of this world, not to hide or avoid the trials of our times, but to refresh our souls with good things and strengthen ourselves for right living. This coming Thursday marks the beginning of such a time – the Dormition Fast. May I suggest to you the following addition to your program? Turn off the world. Trust me, you won't miss anything important. Turn off the TV, the radio, the I Pod. I suggested that we do this on fast days some weeks ago, has anybody been doing it? I have and it's hard – for me it's the radio because I drive a lot at my job. But it's worth it. You can think your own thoughts, even pray or sing a spiritual song. Remember Elder Porphorios' counsel to open a window to your soul so that God's light can shine in and help you? The Dormition Fast is such a window. Open it up and take a breath of unpolluted air. Refresh your soul with good things.

May our most Holy Lady Theotokos help us to keep a Blessed Fast.