

June 23, 2002
Pentecost Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It never fails to jar my soul when Christians want to feel that they are "making progress in the spiritual life." Personal impressions of progress are undiluted nonsense; our feelings have nothing to do with it. Indeed, among all possible barometers of our spiritual state, hardly any are more likely to be deceptive than our feelings about ourselves. Yet, in spite of the uniform testimony of the saints, who warn us to distrust subjective perceptions of our spiritual state, there must be some perverse component in contemporary culture that drives people to consult (and trust) their own self-analysis in order to determine their standing in the sight of God. Thus, if they "feel good about themselves," they rather presume that God feels the same way about them too. If, on the contrary, they are distressed with themselves, they imagine that God also is displeased with them. It is all perfectly absurd.

Convinced that real saints are always in need of real improvement, I suggest the following list of three useful maxims for the life in Christ:

The top of the list should probably read: "I am still a sinner and will be a sinner until the day I die, and the subtler impulses of my heart are quietly conspiring to conceal that truth from my mind." In the life of grace, absolutely nothing is less reliable than my own assessment of my spiritual progress. Indeed, any thought or sentiment suggesting to me that I have made even the slightest spiritual progress should be regarded as a temptation coming straight from the Evil One. I dally with such a thought only at my peril. Temptations to fornication, homicide, and blasphemy are more safely entertained. I should flee such an impulse as I would a fire, giving it not the faintest indulgence.

A second useful maxim of the life of grace may be: "It is in no way required that I feel good about myself." God does not require it; the Bible does not require it, and the entire ascetical tradition of the Church sternly warns against it. Self-approval is expected only within certain very dubious canons of contemporary behavioral sciences. A "positive self-image" is the most over-rated of modern commodities and a very bad bargain at any price. Most often, in fact, the price is a

concomitant compulsive disposition to pass judgment on other struggling servants of God.

The third useful maxim of the life of grace may be this: "I am just as likely to offend God because of my virtues as I am because of my vices, and if ever I am completely undone, my fall will more probably involve my strengths than my weaknesses. Consequently, in the spiritual life it is highly deceptive and even perilous 'to play to my strengths.'"

Each of us, when we place our lives under the Holy Spirit, brings along an assortment of personal traits, to be regarded as either strengths or weaknesses depending on their compatibility with that guidance. For example, some individuals are already possessed of a certain natural patience and a spontaneous sense of humble deference. Perhaps they were raised that way in their youth. These qualities are strengths, of course, inasmuch as the Holy Spirit leads us to patience and personal humility. Such a person is less likely to sin by impatience and arrogance. But suppose that same person, playing to his strengths, concentrates his mind's attention mainly on patience and deference, which he may do simply because these virtues come easier to him. Watch for such a one to offend God by failing to be properly impatient and appropriately intolerant in circumstances where impatience and intolerance are the only godly options. This seems to be the fault of which the Apostle Paul accuses Barnabas in Galatians 2:13.

Thus too, a person naturally given to righteous zeal, when playing to this strength, may sin by too abrupt a decision (David in 1 Samuel 25). Someone else, with a temperament disposed to gravity of soul, if he overly indulges this strength, may wax morbid in his heart and become despondent (Elijah in 1 Kings 19). Again, someone tolerant by native instinct may fail to impose discipline when it is morally necessary (Eli in 1 Samuel 2). Another, falling prey to a mix-up between divine grace and excessive adrenaline (a confusion common among those possessed of the latter), commits himself beyond his strength (Simon Peter in Matthew 26:33). In King Saul, it would seem, we find a man ultimately done in by that very quality that had initially made him so effective a servant of God. His executive impatience, that charismatic can-do that was his clear strength against the Ammonites in 1 Samuel 11, grows to monstrous proportions throughout the ensuing chapters, until King Saul, unto his own ruin, is completely dominated by it. Playing to his strength, Saul never improves.

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All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor

phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:

www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:

http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php