

August 16, 2009

The Sunday After the Dormition

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Ever since reading it a half-century ago, I have wondered how anyone familiar with St. John Chrysostom's treatise on ordination could still summon the nerve to go through with the rite. The message of that book seemed to be: "Go ahead, fool, get yourself ordained; the devil is just waiting for you!"

Holy Scripture, too, speaks of the perils of the priesthood: Even as the rules for that institution were still being established, two brand new priests, Nadab and Abihu, came abruptly to a bad end when they decided to get fancy with the censer. (I've seen this, actually.) As a solemn warning on the subject of alcohol follows the story of their demise, I suspect the two new priests were intoxicated at the time (Leviticus 10:1-9). Not good.

Another pair of unworthy priests were the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phineas, who served the shrine at Shiloh. They, too, came to a sudden bad end (1 Samuel 4:11,17), after ignoring their father's warning to mend their ways (2:23-25).

The offenses of Hophni and Phineas were not common moral failings, such as drunkenness; they were directly related, rather, to the ministry itself. That is to say, these two scoundrels used their priestly authority and position to take advantage of the very people for whom they were ordained (Hebrews 5:1). Their sins were particularly heinous.

Holy Scripture mentions two abuses of Hophni and Phineas:

For one thing, they violated the trust of "the women who assembled at the door of the tabernacle" (1 Samuel 2:22). It was a sin of raw and crude exploitation: For the purpose of sexual gratification, they betrayed the confidence and exploited the vulnerabilities of those religious women, whom it was their responsibility to serve and care for. That is to say, their ministry in the Lord's house provided the very means and context of their infidelity.

The other offense of Hophni and Phineas involved the act of sacrifice itself. Disdaining that part of the sacrificial victim assigned to the priest, these two scoundrels insisted on taking a "choice cut" from the offered meat prior to the sacrifice itself (2:12-16). Thus, instead of serving the Lord's house, they made sure the Lord's house served them. This will always be the mark of an unworthy priest.

Following the lead of Venerable Bede's commentary on this story, we should regard those unworthy priests at Shiloh as foreshadowings of the later priests--chiefly Caiaphas---who condemned Jesus in the Sanhedrin and then accused Him before the judgment seat of Pontius Pilate. Indeed, it was at the home of Caiaphas that the whole plot was planned (Matthew 26:3-4). This supreme representative of the Jewish people used the very office of his ministry---the worship of God---to murder God's Son. Even Pilate read the motive as envy (27:18; cf. 21:38).

Thus, Caiaphas remains for all time the egregious example of a genuinely rotten priest.

At the same time, the Gospel writers were aware of the irony involved in that singular betrayal of the priestly office: By condemning Jesus to death (26:63-66), this unworthy priest unwittingly provided the means of God's perfect worship, the unique and supreme sacrifice to take away the sins of the world.

Given even the minimum standards for the ministry---"blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous"---it is not surprising that we find the occasional minister who doesn't measure up.

I fear the worst examples, however, are not those weak individuals who carry on a double life---priests with a gambling problem, for example, or drunken priests, even priests who violate their marriage vows. Although the canons of the Church properly bar such men from priestly ministry, their offenses are essentially manifestations of weakness, not malice.

Far worse, certainly, are those offenses associated with the very exercise of the priesthood, sins directly concerned with the setting and context of the ministry, such as the quest of power and absolute control. I have in mind the violation of trust in matters of conscience, the cultivation of malice in place of mercy, the disposition to answer criticism with revenge, and the abuse of authority to tyrannize the hearts and minds of the Lord's flock. Such offenses come closer to the sins of Eli's sons, and, more ominously, the unspeakable crime of Caiaphas.

©2009 Patrick Henry Reardon

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
phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

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