

OCTOBER 16, 2016

ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

SUNDAY OF THE HOLY FATHERS OF THE 7TH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL

TITUS 3: 8-15

“SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE”

Today, in our Orthodox calendar, is the annual Sunday of the Holy Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council. This last of the seven Councils met in Nicea in 787 A.D. to speak out against the very strong iconoclast heresy. At this Council, the Fathers, inspired by the Holy Spirit taught God’s truth. And today we honor and remember them.

Church Fathers, such as those that met at the seven Ecumenical Councils, are the God-inspired leaders and teachers of our Church. Led by the Holy Spirit, these holy men properly explained what the Bible says and properly interpreted the Scriptures.

2000 years ago, the Son of God came to the world. He established His Church upon the Apostles and taught them truth. The Apostles handed that truth on to the later generations of Christians who were led and taught by the Church Fathers. And the Church Fathers handed the truth of God on to later generations, including us. So the true Truth of God has been handed on, preserved, and properly interpreted for 2000 years.

What is our role? To obey, to believe, to spread the Truth, and to hand it on to future generations. Our role is not to try to change what is true. Our epistle lesson today, the one set aside for this particular Sunday of the Fathers, is from Titus 3. Let me read you just one verse where St. Paul comments on what is going on in his day in the church on Crete.... Titus 3:9—“But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels over the law, for they are unprofitable and futile.” The Apostle here rebukes the Cretan Christians for arguing over what to believe. We should not argue about the Truth, not argue about Holy Tradition---we should keep it and obey it!

But the world around us increasingly rejects the truths of God. The Cretans argued about God’s truth. Many today don’t bother to argue about it---they just simply reject it all! They reject Christ and what He taught, they reject the teachings of the Apostles, and they reject the teachings of the Fathers.

Such rejection isn’t all that new, but it seems to be increasing and developing faster and faster lately. It seems like every year the rejection of God’s truths accelerates more and more. Things that were hardly discussed not many years ago are now believed by many. More and more, there is obvious and sharp denial of the truth of God.

This is especially true lately in the areas of truth having to do with family, sexuality, and gender.

Some examples:

In regards to family and marriage.....Many now say that marriage is whatever someone wants it to be. A man and a woman. Or a man and a man. Or a woman and a woman. And now a new push is beginning as some begin to argue that there is no reason why marriage has to be limited to just two people.....This way of thinking says that any type of

sexual relationship is good. You can call any relationship a marriage.

In regards to gender...Many now say that you are whatever you say you are, whatever you feel you are, whatever you want to be. It doesn't matter what you were when you were born. You can now declare you are a different gender and that's that. And it keeps getting wilder. On Facebook and some other places, there are now more than 50 gender "choices" listed. Whatever gender or shade of gender you wish to be---just say you are that and then you are that. This is obviously not just a total abandonment of Christian truth, but an abandonment of reality. And much of this radical thinking has just popped up in the last few years.

As all these rapid changes continue, and as our Orthodox Church's teachings *don't* change, we obviously will end up more and more different from many around us. And that means pressure will be put upon us to "catch up" to the world, to go with the flow. Such pressures have already begun and if things continue on as they are developing now, the pressures will increase. We will hear people call us "bigots", "haters", etc. We will be pushed to "get with it".

What should our response to all this be? First, to love all people. To try to help all people, no matter what their struggles and problems might be. All human beings are created in God's image and all have the potential to become holy beings forever aglow with the light of God. And so our Orthodox Church will continue to work with anyone that needs help from God. We are not among those who hate those that are different. We don't mock them, or bash them, or ridicule them. We love them and want to help them. When it comes to people of very different lifestyles than those of traditional Christianity, we don't wish to keep them away from our churches. We wish to bring them *into* our churches so they can receive help, healing, change, and salvation from the Lord.

But...in order to do any of that, we do have to stick to what is true. We cannot change 2000 years of believing what the Apostles and Fathers have taught us. We cannot say that things that are wrong have suddenly become good.

So our beliefs in these areas of change aren't changing. We still believe marriage is only for 2 people, one female and one male. We still believe that God creates us either male or female and we don't go along with the idea that there are many, many gender options to choose from. We still believe that sex is wonderful, but only in marriage.

When it comes to all these matters of marriage, sexuality, gender....We will hold to the Bible, to Holy Tradition, to the teachings of the Holy Apostles and Holy Church Fathers.

Getting right down to the nitty-gritty, practically speaking, at least at this precise point in history-----where do all these changes in thinking most impact Orthodoxy? Any priest will most likely give you the same answer because this subject comes up a lot in priests' meetings (in total confidentiality, of course!). That is the matter of sexual relations outside of marriage.

Most of society is pretty accepting of that now. It's commonly thought to be okay. But the Bible and Orthodox Tradition still say it's sinful.

This is not because we think sex is bad. Actually, it is a wonderful and beautiful thing. If you doubt that, think for a moment---who invented sex? Maybe you never thought about that question before, but the answer is obvious---God! So we know it's good.

But God invented it for marriage. It's wonderful within marriage; it's wrong outside of marriage.

Any variety of sexual relationships outside of marriage is sinful. Whether it's adultery or fornication, whether young or old, pre-marital, post-marital, extra-marital, engaged, a quick hookup or a one night stand. If the man and woman aren't married to each other, it's wrong, clearly sinful. The Bible and all Christian tradition are clear as a bell on that.

So if a person is involved in such sin, what they should do is repent, ask God's forgiveness, and stop. It's very black and white. There's really no gray area.

A last point---and a very important one. It is very wrong to receive Holy Communion if involved in conscious, decided, and ongoing unrepented sin. That includes sexual relations outside of marriage. So if you are involved in that sin, don't deepen your sin by taking Holy Communion. It is very disrespectful to the Body and Blood of Christ to do so. And it is very spiritually dangerous to the person who does. St. Paul warns, in I Corinthians, about receiving the Holy Eucharist in "an unworthy manner". Here is what he wrote in I Corinthians 11: 27-31----"Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged."

The Apostle is very serious here that there are dire consequences to receiving the sacrament "in an unworthy manner". He even says some in Corinth had become ill or died due to doing so. And it is certainly dangerous spiritually to approach the pure Body and Blood of the Lord when living in an impure way such as sexual relations outside of marriage

So a two-fold message here:

1. If a believer is involved in any type of sexual relations outside of marriage, that person should repent and stop. That person should return to purity in obedience to God.
2. If the person doesn't repent and stop, then he or she should not deepen the sin and destroy themselves by partaking of Holy Communion. That is why I (and many other priests, too) say something along this line just before dispensing the Sacrament in the liturgy---that a person should be in "good sacramental standing" in order to receive. This has nothing to do with being a parish member "in good standing"---nothing at all to do with whether or not a person is paying on their membership pledge! It means that a person who wishes to receive should not have some ongoing sin or situation in their life that should keep them from communing----they should take care of the situation before communing. So....in order that a person not harm himself spiritually, if he or she is involved in sexual relations outside of marriage they should not partake until the sin stops---that could mean beginning sexual abstinence, it could mean getting married....

Questions about the specifics? Please feel free to talk with me about it, whether in the sacrament of confession, or over a cup of coffee, or by e-mail.....

And please, as St. Paul said in the I Corinthians passage above, "judge yourself".

Priests certainly don't know everything that goes on! If a person is involved in such sin, and the priest doesn't know, obviously that person should abstain from Communion on their own---until repentance takes place and they live in purity.

In conclusion-----Today we commemorate and honor the Holy Fathers of the 7th Ecumenical Council in 787 A.D. And we, not just today, honor and accept the leadership of all the Church Fathers of our Orthodox Church. They properly interpreted for us God's Holy Bible—they, along with the even more important Apostles, are our spiritual leaders, our Fathers in Christ.

The world changes all the time. But truth always stay the same. If truth could change, it wouldn't be truth!

Therefore, the beliefs of the Church always stay the same. Over the centuries, the liturgy may change in minor ways, how we are structured can change in some ways, customs may change---but our beliefs never change. We still believe today what the Apostles and Fathers believed long ago. They believed the truth of God---and our Church still does today.

May we, as individual Christians, also stay true to God's truth, no matter what.

