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Pastoral Epistle: Running the Race

When I was in high school, I was on the track and field team. I ran middle distances mostly, especially the 400 meter dash, which is a full sprint all the way around the track. One thing I remember vividly from my track days was the grueling practices. Especially after the first couple of days of practice at the beginning of the season, my legs felt like they were jelly, hardly able to take another step. My chest would burn as I inhaled the cold, thin air of a Santa Fe January, my lungs working overtime to supply my aching muscles with oxygen.

Those grueling practices were necessary, though, if I was going to be ready to run the race. The Apostle Paul uses the imagery of a race to describe the Christian life. To the Corinthians he writes, “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, though I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.” (1 Cor. 9:24-27)

Here the Apostle gives us the principle behind what we call “asceticism.” What do we imagine when we hear the word “ascetic”? A pasty-faced, withered old monk in a tattered cassock eating moldy bits of bread sprinkled with tears

of repentance? The problem with such an image is not that it’s wrong exactly, but that it probably means we’re stuck in a stereotype. What we should think of is an athlete, of the Spirit. We should also think, “he’s talking to me.” Asceticism is not a thing for monks and nuns, it is the way all Christians train to run the race. And if we’re not running the race, or training to do so, we’re not being Christians.

As Archbishop Averky (Taushev) puts it, “Asceticism is for everyone, not for monks alone,” and “it is the only trustworthy and reliable means for realizing the clear and direct will of God for man.” Why is it the only way to fulfill God’s will in us? Simply put, you cannot run the race well unless you train. Listen again to St. Paul: “Run in such a way that you may obtain” the prize. What is the prize? It is the transfiguring grace of God, that all the Saints participate in, and that is our birthright as baptized Christians. It only comes to us in full measure, however, to the degree that we run the race. Even for the sake of earthly competitions, people discipline themselves, being “temperate in all things.” All great achievements in this world require self-discipline. How much more should we expect the greatest achievement of all — spiritual victory, an “imperishable crown” — to demand a struggle on our part? Thus St. Paul says he runs with a deliberate strategy and preparation, not “beating the air” like a wannabe boxer who imagines himself as a champion. He disciplines his body for the overcoming of his passions, lest his preaching should be hypocritical and vain. He wants to be the real

deal, and he wants us to be the real deal too. This is why we fast and practice self-control; our ascetical struggles are the “powerful means indicated by God Himself for the attainment by man of God’s will for him.” (Archbishop Averky, *The Struggle for Virtue*)

Recently, I heard this word of inspiration from an elder in the faith: “It is time to run.” Meaning, not to run and hide, but to run the race. Even the “desert” is a place of facing the enemy, a place to compete. The track meet is at hand: no longer do we have the luxury just to meander along the track at a leisurely pace, as though our time in this world is infinite. It is time to take heed to St. Paul’s words, and with eagerness and purpose to run the race in such a way as to win the prize. For that, however, our ongoing training is necessary, so that we can run with certainty, as real athletes, lest we be “disqualified.”

It is for the sake of this training for the race that I, as your pastor, am encouraging all of you, in various ways, to go deeper in the spiritual life. May we be inspired by our Lord Jesus Christ, the “author and finisher” of our faith, and through the intercessions of the “great cloud of witnesses,” the Angels and the Saints, to lay aside earthly cares and passions that trip us up, and to “run with endurance the race that is set before us.” (Hebrews 12:1) Go deeper, my dear brothers and sisters! Train with purpose! Now is the time.

With love in the Lord,
Fr. Daniel

Christ is in the Desert
By: Rdr. John Carter Jones

In the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) we read of Christ being led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by Satan. Throughout this entire pandemic, I have meditated often on this story from the Gospels and what it means for us today.

Certainly we live these days in times of great temptation – foremost of these temptations is the great temptation to scorn our brothers and sisters, to be angry with them, to judge them harshly, especially when they do not handle this pandemic the way we think they should, or even insist that there is no real pandemic at all, or that even if there is, it’s not so bad and things are being mishandled. Satan uses any difference at all that he can grasp hold of, and turns even the slightest difference of opinion into a wedge, seeking to break asunder one person from another, seeking to diminish our love one for another, or to put conditions upon it... “I would love so-and-so, if only they agreed with me on X, Y, or Z! Since they disagree with me, I am going to be angry!” This, combined with the American tendency to politicize everything, and... well, the Devil certainly doesn’t have to try very hard to divide us.

At the beginning of this whole spectacle, we were locked down – all of us were forced into the desert, encouraged to stay away from people, locked in the cells of our homes, all of us made to become anchorites or cenobites in the small monastery of the home. It has been lonesome, and continues to be lonesome for those of us who are high risk, who are recommended to stay home so that the folks who are hardier can go about things in a halfway normal manner. We remain in the desert.

On the face of it, it could seem to be quite discouraging, especially being cut off from regular gathering with the parish. And yet, the Evangelists remind us that Christ is in the desert, also, being tempted along with us. Christ’s time of solitude is sanctified to eternity, and we can join ourselves to Him in our desert places, just as the Desert Fathers and Mothers did of old in Egypt and Syria, and as the monks of the latter days have in the forests and far-flung places of the world.

And indeed, although I have fallen again and again in temptation, I have been raised up by the Grace of Christ, which flows in abundance in this isolated place! For these times have been given to us precisely because of our sins, precisely

because of our need for repentance, precisely because otherwise we would not take the time to pray and repent as we ought to. We can use these times as we ought to, brothers and sisters, and be with Christ here even as we cannot at times be gathered in the flesh – we are nevertheless united in spirit and truth as we pray in the cells of our homes, praying the Jesus Prayer, the divine services of the Hours, or other services such as we have the opportunity to pray.

I can see now why our spiritual forefathers rushed away from the hustle and bustle of the world, into the desert, where they could give themselves entirely to Christ. I am far from that, but even so I can catch just the faintest fragrance of Paradise here. If we use this time properly, it can be a time of wondrous spiritual profit – but we must be careful, because as much as there is the gain, there is as much to lose. If we let our hearts become clouded with anger, with fear, with hatred for one another, we will lose everything that we have gained, and we will find ourselves prostrate before the Enemy. May God forbid it! And may God raise us up when we fall.

Christ is in the desert, whatever the desert may be for us – perhaps we are stuck in our apartments and homes, unable to go out, all too tempted toward idleness or loneliness, or even resentment of those who are not so bound. Those who are essential workers can find themselves working in conditions that are often stressful, scorched and fatigued by the heat of life as Christ was Himself worn down by the blazing sun in the wilderness. All of us find ourselves in one desert or another, bearing one cross or another, suffering in one way or another. But Christ is with us. He loves us, and is tender in His care for us, for He knows intimately our suffering, our temptations, our weakness and affliction.

Love one another, brothers and sisters, regardless of anything else, for there is no other commandment Christ has given us. Let us not grieve our Lord, or resent the crosses we have been given, but let us rather embrace what

Christ has given us for our salvation, and love one another. All of this has come upon us for our salvation, and so there can be no greater joy than to be with Christ wherever we find ourselves, no matter the hardship – and we are comforted by the words of our Lord, “He who endures to the end shall be saved” (Matt. 24:13).

Glory to God for all things.

What is Really Real?

By Shamassy Monica Olsen

In 1989, *The Ruston Daily Leader* published a photograph of my 8th grade play: I sat hunched on the floor of an inn, hair wildly messy and tangled, eyes as burning as I could make them. The play was *Man of La Mancha* and I was Aldonza, a dirty and abused scullery maid who was chosen by the aged and mad hero, Don Quixote, as his beautiful lady, Dulcinea. Dulcinea means “sweet” though this character had never been treated sweet in her whole bitter life. Don Quixote saw a reality that she didn’t see, that no one else could see.

Reality is a common theme in story-telling, as we can see in fairytales: Is the princess dead or sleeping? Is the Beast in the Castle really a prince? Is the Cindermaid a beautiful princess? Each of these characters appears to be one reality and turns out to be another. In Grimm’s version of the Beauty and the Beast, a wise Lady appears to Bell in the garden and tells her outright that everything is not as it appears.

Fairytales have been called “realer than realer and truer than true” by *The Literary Life* podcast host Angelina Stanford. In the introduction to each podcast, we hear the words of Stratford Caldecott, “To be enchanted by story is to be granted a deeper insight into reality.” Russian Orthodox writer Ivan Ilyin shares in his lecture, “The Spiritual Meaning of Stories” that fairy tales reveal the inner experience of a people. He says, “The Russian fairy tale conceals within

itself hundreds and thousands of years of its people's spiritual experience." He goes on to warn:

Only he who worships at the altar of facts and has lost the ability to contemplate a state of being ignores fairy tales. Only the one who wants to see with his physical eyes alone, plucking out his spiritual eyes in the process, considers the fairy tale to be dead.

... these fairy tales are not fabrications or tall tales, but poetic illumination, essential reality..."

We are left with a conundrum: the life we see with our eyeballs, touch with our hands, hear and smell and taste is not all there is to reality.

Even so, we are often tempted to focus on these things that seem to be more immediately in front of us. At work, the contract must be written to guidelines. At home, the children need to be snuggled on the couch and read a book. At school, the test approaches, demanding hours of study hunched over the textbook and notes. And in the sink - always respawning when we aren't looking - new dirty dishes mock us!

These are real enough. But they aren't the only reality.

Elder Amilianos in *The Mystical Marriage* warns us of the temptation to think that the material is all there is. He explains, "...a weak person sees the world solely through his physical senses, and is turned more or less wholly toward visible things."

Back when I taught high school, I once had a student tell me that all that existed were visible things. Thin, with dark bangs that often hung over his large shiny eyes, he flipped his head to move that bit of hair, raised and lowered his shoulders, and said matter-of-factly, "If I can't see it, taste, touch it, or smell it - it doesn't exist."

I felt bad for him and his lack of sight, because I knew that only God would heal all the hurts in his life. I should have felt bad for my own lack of sight.

When something difficult happens, I immediately tackle it with my own thinking and logic. Suppose siblings have been unkind to each other all day. First with patience and later with irritation, I correct them but it doesn't work. I think about what TV shows they've been watching that might cause the bad attitudes. Have they stayed up past bedtime? Have they played too many video games? What do I need to pray to change them? What can manipulate to control their behavior so I can finally have a day of peace?!

All of these things come to my mind before I remember, by the grace of God, that I might not be seeing the situation correctly. Something altogether different and spiritual might be going on in places I can't see inside of my children. Perhaps only God can heal or change them. Certainly, it is apparent that all my logic and thinking aren't working. Perhaps I am asking for the wrong thing in prayer because I don't even truly see what is going on. I think I'm being spiritual because I prayed about it, but what if I prayed blindly and didn't even come close to God?

I am the same as my atheist student. Even though I profess to believe in God, I mostly see the world through my physical senses and try to solve my problems through logic and reasoning, forgetting that all of this is a lesser reality.

Elder Ailmilianos warns, "this is the worst possible state for the person to fall into, because once the mind becomes habituated into the level of thinking and logic it becomes incapable of understand or even conceiving of the things of God, ...incapable of receiving God."

If he's right, then I might be blinding myself. All my efforts at controlling everything around me could be blinding me. It's possible that half my

thoughts are logismoi from the devil and I don't even recognize it. I think I can see fine and am surprised when I keep bumping into things!

Of course, I'm not saying that we should never use our minds or pay attention to what is happening in the physical world around us.

I am saying that we should remember that we are looking at, hearing, and touching only part of reality and another reality – a spiritual reality – exists. If you are old enough to have seen the movie *The Matrix*, then you might say that I need to realize that I have been plugged into a pseudo-world and not even seeing the real reality. Instead of being controlled by a machine plugged into the back of my brain, I am led by my own sin sickness and tiny thoughts from demons, thoughts so tiny that I don't see them enter my mind and I think they are my own.

How can I wake up to realize the other reality around me? The really real? The true essence of God?

Fr Seraphim Rose wonders these same things:

Why is the truth, it would seem, revealed to some and not to others? Is there a special organ for receiving revelation from God? Yes, though usually we close it and do not let it open up: God's revelation is given to something called a loving heart.

God, grant me a loving heart. Grant me to see beyond my physical reality.

In the story *Man of La Mancha*, the mad would be knight could see beyond his reality and it changed the people around him. In the beginning Aldonsa is a dirty, tangled-haired, scullery maid, staring poison through the narrow slits of her eyes. After her encounter with the crazy, loving heart of Don Quixote, she is transformed. In the final scene, she is clean, with brushed hair pinned neatly back and eyes warm and open to match her newly warmed and open heart. She sees something new,

something beyond her surroundings. May God grant us also this vision to see something realer than real.

August Birthdays

August Name Days & Memorials

September Birthdays

September Name Days



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St. Nicholas Orthodox Christian Church
9100 Youree Drive
Shreveport, LA 71115-3607