



**Orthodox Mission of the
Entrance of the Theotokos
into the Temple**

**306 W. Main Street
Emmitsburg, MD 21727**

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Do No Harm!
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions. One believes he may eat anything, while the weak man eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who abstains and let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats; for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Master is able to make him stand.... We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves; let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to edify him. (Romans 14: 1-4; 15: 1-2)

During the past week I had occasion to speak with a friend of mine who is an Orthodox Christian and a health care professional. We commiserated over a trend we have both been observing in world-wide Orthodoxy, a trend toward radicalization, judgmentalism, extreme legalism and lack of charity toward others in and outside of the faith. This has been primarily exhibited in a number of hateful and inane postings on those most potentially harmful social

media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, where people never fail to amaze with their ignorance and lack of charity. Of late, the trend has primarily involved priests from a wide variety of world-wide Orthodox jurisdictions, a variety of priests who have banded together in their radical points of view in the so-called “Brotherhood of the Burning Bush.”

At the heart of the posts has been the declaration that we may not alter any of our traditions. Understand that by “traditions” I do not mean “Holy Tradition.” There is a difference. Holy Tradition is that corpus of teachings and practices that originated in the apostolic community of old, that have been passed down and preserved from apostles to bishops and eventually lovingly preserved in the writings of the apostolic age, the Gospels and Epistles of Sacred Scripture. Traditions (with a lower-case “t”) are different. They regulate the so-called debatable non-essentials that also make up a large portion of our parochial practices: the melodies, the translations, the precise cut of vestments, the way in which we practice our faith in all of our various cultural traditions, the methodologies of cultural and local Orthopraxis. The parochial priest is expected to submit in obedience to his bishop in whatever jurisdiction he serves and allows the bishop and the metropolitan above him to specify the precise nature of these local “traditions,” which vary from Metropolia to Metropolia, from Diocese to Diocese. It is not within the purview of priestly authority to make these changes without the blessing of the bishop. Nevertheless, many of those priests who have been pontificating on issues of parish practice in the “Brotherhood of the Burning Bush” have dared to suggest that their ways are the only and true and right ways and that local “traditions” may not be altered. We have seen this trend in many cultures, countries and jurisdictions, most recently relating to practices they say are allowed or not allowed relative to keeping people safe from the deadly COVID virus.

It never occurs to those priests when they pontificate in their arrogance that the simple application of the Golden Rule should be their guide. My friend reminded me in our discussion that he took the oath as a medical professional to “Do No Harm!” This we both agreed is entirely compatible with the application of the Golden Rule, to “do unto others as we would have them do unto us.” That rule, which much to my continual amazement still needs to be taught to my students in my university lectures, comes directly from Christ in His Sermon on the Mount. Our Lord’s teaching even goes beyond the Hippocratic teaching to do no harm. Not only are we to do no harm, but we are to positively and actively do good. We not only refrain from doing harm, but we seek to serve as He has served us. We practice the patience and love for the good of the other, as our Lord gave His Life for the true life of the world.

St. Paul reiterates this teaching as he brings to a close the wondrous Epistle to the Romans. In chapters 14 and 15 of what has been called his *Magnum Opus* he reminds those whom he addressed of the need to be patient, caring and charitable. Remarkably, he points out that we are to bear with those who are legalistic and overly meticulous in their practice of the faith, even though they are “weak.” They are weak, of course, because their faith is in the practices, the “traditions,” that seek to distinguish themselves and earn God’s approval by means of their own self-righteousness. St. Paul had taught clearly in all of his writings that none of us can make ourselves righteous before God; we must rely on His mercy and receive in repentance the free gift of forgiveness of sins. But some who are weak seek to overlook that true Holy Tradition, the

core of the Gospel, with separate self-serving, legalistic and overly meticulous nit-picking, preferring cultural or local “traditions” in place of the true Holy Tradition of the Gospel of Saving Grace. Nevertheless, he urges his congregation to be patient with those who are “weak” and for the sake of the love of Christ, which he says, “constrains us,” to put up with them.

There is much nonsense you will read on social media, including the pontifications of lay and clergy, who forget the simple application of the Golden Rule. Whatever our local “traditions” may be, they may and should be carried out in submission to the oath to “do no harm,” and more importantly, to “Do unto others as you would have others do to you.” Be patient with those who are overly zealous; see them as misguided souls who are weak in the faith because they have not faith enough to rely on the Grace of God for their salvation, still erroneously thinking that their meticulous nit-picking matters. What truly matters is that the Lord has come to us, Incarnate of the Holy Virgin, that He has died for our salvation and has risen from the dead, the first fruits of those who have already fallen asleep. He bids us to trust in that Grace, that Divine Mercy, which is freely offered, to repent of our sins and to follow His teaching to do no harm and to seek ways throughout our lives to protect, serve and love our neighbor in need.

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