



ST. NICHOLAS ANTIOCHIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

WONDER WORKER

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Thoughts From Father Michael "Christian Paradoxes"

November 2019

Recorded in Scripture are a number of Christian paradoxes.

What is a "paradox," and why are they important? Perhaps, the best known in English Literature is found in Charles Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities, which begins: "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times."

How can something be the best and worst of times at the same time? That is the paradox; two opposite things both true. Well, once you read the "Tale" you discover that it was the best of times in London, but the worst of times in Paris.

The same is true with Christian Paradoxes; once one digs deeper into the paradox one begins to understand it; one begins to understand the mystery behind it.

In Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians, he mentions several paradoxes.

...by honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report;
as deceivers, and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known,
as dying, and behold we live; as chastened, and yet not killed;
as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich;
as having nothing, yet possessing all things. [II Cor 6: 8-10]

How can one have nothing, yet possess all things? This is a paradox. *(continued)*

A popular song from the 1940s was "Gotta be This or That," that shows the epitome of a rationalist outlook as contrary to a Gospel outlook. Allow me to mention a few of these Christian paradoxes so we can see how a 'This or That' perspective misses the point.

We read in Scripture that the Kingdom of Heaven is "at hand" [Matt 3:2] and yet "in the future. [James 5:8]" Which is it? It is both. In several places Christ talks about entering the Kingdom of God at our passing from this life to the next.

Another paradox is the question of God's place. Is He "transcendent" (viz., somewhere above us) or is He "imminent?" (viz., near us). This paradox was hotly debated over the centuries. How can He be in both places at the same time? To rationalist, like many America founding fathers, God was transcendent. He created the universe and then left it alone. He does not interact with His creation. This was the position of the Deists. Thomas Jefferson did not accept Christ's miracles or the paradoxes found in the New Testament, so he cut them out. One can still buy today, Jefferson's Bible, with all the references to miracles or paradoxes eliminated.

One of the most challenging paradoxes of the Christian world is what can we say about Jesus Christ. Is He fully God and fully Man? This is the position of the Christian world from the very beginning, but from the fourth century it has been challenged by rationalist starting with Arius, a clergyman from Egypt. Arius argued that "there was a time when Christ was not," meaning that He was not divine. This heresy caused a major division in the early church that ultimately got resolved in 325 at the First Ecumenical Council meeting in Nicea. A major consequence of this assembly was the composition of the first part of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed which contains the phrase, "Very God of Very God, begotten, not made." Yet, there are still Christian groups who discount Jesus begin fully God and fully Man.

Another tough paradox is the Virgin birth. How can Mary be a virgin and yet carry the Christ Child in her womb? She is either a virgin or she is pregnant. For an "Either This or That" person, the answer is clear, she cannot be a virgin if she is pregnant. For us Orthodox Christians, she can be both as her pregnancy was a result of the Holy Spirit overshadowing her.

To get our human heads around these mysteries of God working in our midst, and accomplishing unique events, we need to elevate our minds beyond reason. We need to grow spiritually, so that these paradoxes begin to make sense.

One paradox that challenges many Christians is the Eucharist. Is it the Body and Blood of our Savior or is it just bread and wine (or grape juice)? For us Orthodox Christians and our brothers in the Roman Church it is indeed the Body and Blood of Christ after it is changed by the action of the Holy Spirit. This mystery of changing something into something else is hard for a rationalist to understand, and so the Eucharist that Christ asked His Disciples at the Last Super to do "in remembrance of me" is modified to fit the rationalist mentality. For them it is merely a symbol of the Body and Blood of Christ.

But Christ did not say, this bread is a symbol of my body, and this wine is a symbol of the Blood of the new covenant. He said: This is my Body, This is my Blood. He also said in John's gospel [6:51- 56] "I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.

"The Jews who heard Him say this wondered, 'How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?' Then Jesus answered them:

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh
of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you.
Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life,
and I will raise him up at the last day.
For my flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed.
He who eats My flesh and drinks my blood abides in Me, and I in him.”

It is very clear what Christ said: this bread is my Body and this wine is my Blood. For us Orthodox Christians it is both. Like the blessing of the water before a Baptism, it is still water but it now possesses God’s grace.

These paradoxes remind us that God is everywhere present and fills all things. As we ponder this reality we become transformed, we gain a new insight, we are growing closer to what God expects of us.

Two other paradoxes deserve our attention. When Paul asks God to take away a thorn in his flesh, God responds: “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” [II Cor 12:9] Paul concludes: “For when I am weak, I am strong.” How can one be weak and at the same time strong?

The other paradox is perhaps the most difficult to fathom; Christ is dead on the Cross, but alive in Hades. Dead and alive at the same time? Yes, we Orthodox believe. This paradox is most explicit when the priest prays while setting down the discos and the chalice on the Altar at the end of the Great Entrance: “In the grave with the body but in Hades with the soul as God; in paradise with the thief, and on the throne with the Father and the Spirit, wast thou, O Christ, filling all things, thyself uncircumscribed.” As difficult as it is to understand this prayer, we are introduced to the mystery of God.

How to reconcile these paradoxes? We Orthodox possess the teaching of the ascetical life, a life of denial that includes fasting, prayer, worship services, alms giving, reading Scripture daily and other religious books including the lives of the saints. Did not Christ teach “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him *deny* himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” [Matt 16:24 italics added]

Brothers and sisters, as we ponder these paradoxes, and begin to understand the greater reality of God’s teachings, we begin to grow in our faith. We begin to realize the magnificence of God’s love for us, of God’s compassion for us, of God’s trying to be reconciled to us. He wants to be our God and for us to be His people. He wants to walk with us [Micah 6:8]. He wants us to welcome and to experience the mystery surrounding Him.

As we unraveled Dicken’s paradox by reading the Tale of Two Cities, we can do the same by following the ascetical life and opening ourselves to God’s grace. One of the prayers a priest says while vesting himself provides a clue to how God works in our lives: “Thy hands have

made and fashioned me; give me understanding and I will learn thy commandments.” Trust God to help us make sense of the Christian Paradoxes.

Spiritual Sayings

We must begin with thanksgiving for everything. The beginning of joy is to be content with your situation. St Ambrose of Optina

Just as the most bitter medicine drives out poisonous creatures, so prayer joined to fasting drives evil spirits away. Amma Syncletica of the Desert

Update on Burning the Mortgage

Helen & Carole Massarrelli completed their pledge of \$40,000 in October rather than waiting to December. Thank you, Helen & Carole, and God bless you!

Also in October we have received a \$10,000 contribution, and a \$500 contribution. On Sunday, October 27, 2019 the following parishioners agreed to make a pledge: Luis & Janet Rodriguiz, Rob & Bonnie Guirguis, Pia Cummings, Chip Hanna, Gaby Atik, and Gerald Vizvary.

We humbly ask each of our parishioners to consider making a pledge. Once we pay off the mortgage, we can direct our current monthly payment to ourselves to begin setting aside funds to demolish the First Church and to build a new structure that will house a larger fellowship hall, Sunday School classrooms, a restaurant style kitchen, a clergy office, a library, and meeting rooms.

God and St Nicholas have blessed us to come this far, and with your prayers will continue to bless us in taking the next steps in the history of our beloved St Nicholas parish.

You will be receiving further information as to how you can complete a pledge. In the meantime you can make a secure on-line donation to St Nicholas using your credit card or through PayPal. Check it out at www.stnicholasaoc.org

Advent

During Bible Study this Fall we are reading and discussing Archimandrite Vassilios Papavassiliou's Meditations for Advent: Preparing for Christ's Birth. In this short book Fr. Vassilios brings together not only accounts from Scripture, but also from the prayers from the various services that take place during the forty days of the Advent Fast; vespers, compline, matins (Orthros), plus the several hymns specific to Christ's Nativity.

Unfortunately, we rarely do all these services in an urban church, so we fail to hear the beauty of these prayers, and the way they help us to make the Advent season so special from a theological perspective. The compline service, for example, held every day in monasteries and seminaries, is the service performed before retiring to sleep. It is not practical for urban churches to hold a daily compline service and then have people drive home.

Fr. Vassilios places the Entrance into the Temple, the feast days of Andrew and Nicholas showing how they relate to the Incarnation of our Lord. This book makes us aware of the great gift from God for our salvation. Read it.

Please Pray for the Following Brothers and Sisters

Departed: Louis Jasmine, Esther Salem, Yusif Kassis, Anthony Faccenda, Katherine Maznek, Constantine Joseph, Betty Jacox Craft, Marion Jacox Minick, Anna Alexandroff, Kh Josephine Courey, Fr Michael Soter, Richard Salem, Sandra Kotsopoulos, Romeo Poirier, Rene Mobayed, Kh Hafeeza Massouh, Mary E. Larson, Betty Massouh, George Essey, Bernadette Patell, Jamil Kassis

Shut-ins/Sick: Metropolitan PAUL, Archbishop YOHANNA, Nicholas Hughes, Schauki Kassis, John Bennett, Rose Beede, Alice Flaherty, Theodora Ohlinger, Sally Bell, Bob Bostley, Bill Yopp, George Joseph Rolfes, Aurelia Buda, Eveyn Lonack, Richard Pippy, Diane Zorich, Lisa McCoy, Thomas Ziegler, Susana Kassis

For the Health of: Fr Lazarus Sucanto, Kh Loretta Karparlenia, Kh Virginia Massouh, Pf. Margot Siniari, Viola Haddad, Angela Jacob, Farhat David, Helen Massarelli, Carole Massarelli, John & Evelyn Salem, Helen Salem, Ruth & Evern Hazel, Gerorgette Abraham, Mariam Haddad, Bryan Haddad, Nasir Kassis, Geri & Mitch Kanaan, Alice Faccenda, Pat Salem, David & Eva Szabo, Marion Bostley, Theodore Todorow, Alex Gimon, Diane Karns, Leo Poirier, Sophie Massouh, Bob Poirier, Steve Bové, Natalie Floreancig, Millicent Palko, Leila Bashara, Paula Massouh, Philip Lemieux

Service Members: Christopher Salem (Air Force): Nephew of Helen Salem), Peter McIntire: Nephew of Viola Haddad, Curtis Brickwood (Navy): Fr. Michael's Cousin, James Sexton(Army): Grandson of Michaelina Sexton, David Butler (Navy): Son of Joanna Kassis Butler, Trenton Wesley (Army): grandson of Leila Bashara, Luka Dundua (Army): Grandson of Salome Rollins

Upcoming Events

Tuesday, November 5, 2019 - 6:00 PM Ladies Society Potluck Dinner & Book Discussion
Wednesday, November 6, 2019 - 7:00 PM Lecture at Holy Trinity Orthodox Church, Clearwater Dr.
Elizabeth Prodromou "Current Threats Facing the Ecumenical Patriarchate"
Sunday, November 10, 2019 - Annual Parish Meeting after Liturgy
Friday, November 15, 2019 - Advent Fast Begins
Saturday, November 16, 2019 - 5:00 PM Vespers with Bishop NICHOLAS
Wednesday, November 20, 2019 - Vesperal Divine Liturgy
Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple
Friday, December 6, 2019 - Liturgy for St Nicholas' Feast Day;
Sunday, December 8, 2019 - St Nicholas Feast Day Celebration after Liturgy

Mortgage Update

We are nearing our goal of reducing the Church Mortgage to zero. Thanks to the generosity of Helen & Carole Massarelli and others the mortgage balance as of October 31, 2019 is \$136,686.00. We should easily reach our interim goal of \$125,000 by December 31, 2019. Please consider responding to Helen's and Carole's challenge by making a pledge before the end of the fiscal year. Consider your tax situation and make honor your pledge either in this tax year or early in the next one. We look forward to celebrating the burning of the mortgage by the time His Grace Bishop NICHOLAS visits us after Pascha.

Birthdays for November

1 November, Wafa Ishaq, James Lynn McDowell, 3 November, Carole Massarelli; 9 November, Joey Camodeca; 10 November, Anna Jacob, Rita Maria Khoury, Alice Flaherty, Mitchell D. Kanaan; 15 November, Samya Semann, Heart; 16 November, Hilda Mobayed; 17 November, Luis Rodriguez; 19 November, Fadel Gheim; 20 November, Jaymelyn Kassis; 21 November, Fr Michael Massouh, Eleanor Parker, JoAnn Shaheen Hawkins; 22 November, Marline Kassis; 23 November, Najla Kassis; 24 November, Laila Phakeovilay; 25 November, Matthew Kanaan, Odette Mansour Hodge; 28 November, Donald Hawkins; 30 November, Bill Catton, Charles Barnett, Guiliana Kassis, Branson Stout

Anniversaries in November

5 November, Matthew & Amanda Kanaan; 12 November, Lee & Elizabeth Kirshy Hudson; 15 November, Victor & Reem Jacob; 25 November, John & Salome Rollins

Departed this Life in November

1 November, Louis Jasmine, Esther Salem; 2 November, Yousif Kassis, Anthony Faccenda; 3 November, Katherine Maznek; 4 November, Constantine Joseph; 8 November, Betty Jacox Craft, Marion Jacox Minick; 9 November, Anna Alexandroff, Kh Josephine Courey, Fr Michael Soter; 11 November, Richard Salem; 12 November, Sandra Kotsopoulos; 15 November, Romeo Poirier; 19 November, Rene Mobayed, Kh Hafeeza Massouh; 20 November, Mary E. Larson; 21 November, Betty Massouh; 23 November, George Essey; 25 November, Bernadette Patell, Jamil Kassis

Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

On November 21 we celebrate the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple, a very special event, as she prepares herself to become the Mother of our Lord. It is one more step in the Father's plan to send His Only Begotten Son into the world for our benefit, for our salvation. During the Vesper service of the Entry we sing:

Today, let us the faithful dance for joy, singing to the Lord
with psalms and hymns, venerating His consecrated tabernacle,
the living Ark which contains the Word which cannot be contained.
For she, a child, in the flesh is offered in wondrous fashion to the Lord,
and Zachariah the priest receives her with rejoicing as the dwelling place of God.

As we can see, we begin to fathom the very special nature of the Entry as a prelude to the Incarnation, the Nativity of Jesus.

Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is the best American holiday as we gather with family and friends to celebrate the harvest, and to thank God for His bounty. We need more than ever in this current adulterous and corrupt generation to take time out to focus on what really matters: brotherly and sisterly love, good food and drink, and our recognition of our dependence on the Creator for all that we have. Thank God, there is little hype and corruption to this holiday.

Thanksgiving began with the best of intentions as the early Puritans finally had a good harvest with the help and advice of the Native population. Unfortunately, this sense of thanksgiving was short lived as the two populations began to experience tensions, animosity, and ultimately warfare.

We can only pray that we will again appreciate our common humanity, and act accordingly in peace with every child of God.



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