

AWAKE, SLEEPER!

by Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

After reading the short article, "Will the Heterodox Be Saved?"* by St. Philaret of New York, I felt that the Saint had hit the nail on the head. In a few words, he said what needed to be said. I could only wish I had the same gift.

Being prone to somewhat long-winded explanations, I started thinking about some things that I've read and heard during our monastic vigils and at the readings during our monastery meals, and I thought that others might want to hear them also, since they reinforce what Saint Philaret had to say in the above-mentioned article.

Essentially, what Saint Philaret (and the Church Fathers) say is that, in order to judge mankind fairly, our Saviour will give every person who ever lived on earth the opportunity to espouse or reject His teaching. Whether this happens while the person is still living or in Hades — *whenever* it happens — he or she will have the opportunity to make that choice.

This is what the Holy Scriptures and our Holy Tradition teach us (see our previous article, "Sheol Delenda Est!"). Whether all choose to believe and accept that message is a question we cannot answer, of course. But, in general, the Saints of the Church are generally optimistic about the success of the Christian message.

Let us suppose the following scenario:

If a Methodist's *only* encounter with the Orthodox Christian Faith is the *ecumenistic* version he hears at the Near East Festival held by the local new calendar "Orthodox" parish, has that Methodist actually encountered the *true* Orthodox Faith? So, suppose he dies the next day. Will our Saviour judge him as one who has encountered Orthodoxy and rejected it (together with the gambling and the belly dancer)? Or rather, will our Saviour say to him: "What you saw at the ecumenistic church was not the real McCoy. *Here* is what the Orthodox Christian Faith is actually all about. Now, do you accept it or reject it?"

At that point, the person whom we know to have died as a Methodist might well exclaim, "My word! So *that's* what the Orthodox Christian Faith really believes! Well, of course, I do accept and espouse it. What I saw when I was still living on earth was a parody, so, of course, I rejected it, but this is completely different! Yes! I accept it with my whole heart!"

Now, in the eyes of men, this man appears to have died after having rejected Orthodox Christianity. But is this actually the case?

* *Orthodox Life*, Vol. 34, No. 6, Nov. – Dec. 1984, pp. 33-35.

According to the teaching of the New Testament (I Peter 3:18-20), our Saviour preached to those spirits in Hades "who formerly had not obeyed...."

So now, the person whom we, the living, saw departing this life as one who had "rejected" the Orthodox Christian Faith might actually be in the bosom of the Father, thanks to his acceptance of our Saviour's preaching.

But wait. Did not our Saviour Himself say: "Amen, amen, I say unto you: Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God" (John 3:5), and also, "Amen, amen, I say unto you: Except ye eat the Flesh of the Son of man, and drink His Blood, ye have no life in you" (John 6:53)?

Our Saviour Himself is telling us unequivocally that we must be baptized in order to enter the Kingdom of God, and that we must partake of His Body and Blood in order to have life in ourselves. These Holy Mysteries are found only in the One True Church.

What now? What does this mean for those who were *not* baptized and did *not* partake of the Holy Mysteries in this life?

Will all receive the same reward — both those who lived and struggled in the Orthodox Christian Faith during their life, and those who believed only later?

As usual, we must turn to our Saviour and the Saints for the answers.

You will notice that in our translation of the Lord's Prayer, we do not say, "Our Father, Who art in Heaven," as everyone else does. Instead we say, "Who art in the Heavens." Elsewhere, in the Beatitudes, we say: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of the Heavens," "Blessed are they that are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of the Heavens," and also "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in the Heavens." There is a very important reason for these differences. First of all, the Greek word for "Heavens" is in the plural (See St. Basil, *Hexaemeron*, III:3). Furthermore, our Saviour tells us, "In my Father's house, there are many mansions. Were it not so, I should have told you, because I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2).

The Church Fathers teach that there are *many* degrees, *many* levels of His saving grace, that are given to each according to his worth. Each one will partake of God's glory according to his level of love for God and man, his devotion, faithfulness, purity, struggles for the Faith, etc. That, also, is why Saint Paul can speak of his being taken up to the "third Heaven" (II Cor. 12:2). In his First Epistle to the Corinthians (chap. 15), Saint Paul writes about the resurrection from the dead, and at one point, he says:

There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another star in glory. So is it also with the resurrection of the dead.

Likewise, one saint differs from another in glory.

One valuable source for much of this information is our hymnology. However, there is one problem with our sacred hymnographers: they were too prolific! Saint Romanos the Melodist and Saint John of Damascus, for example, wrote so many hymns, our service books cannot contain them all.

Another prolific hymnographer was Saint Ephraim the Syrian. In his *Hymns on Paradise*, written in the Syriac language, we find many insights into the state of the souls in the other life. Here are some of the Saint's inspired thoughts about the different "levels" and degrees that we are speaking about:

When Adam sinned, God drove him from Paradise.
But by His goodness He gave him a lower place outside her
boundary;
He permitted him to make his dwelling at the foot of
Paradise.
But because men continued to sin, they were driven from
there;
Because they were no longer worthy to be neighbours to
Paradise God commanded the ark to cast them out upon
mount Ararat.

(Hymn One, stanza 10)

I saw there also the arbours of the righteous,
Dripping with spikenard, wafting forth fragrances,
Garnished with fruits, crowned with blossoms.
As the toil of each man, so also his arbour:
One impoverished in its adornment, another radiant in its
beauty;
One faint in its colours, another dazzling in its glory.
Blessed is he that is worthy to inherit Thy Paradise!

(Hymn Five, stanza 6)

There the eye of the spirit can behold in their beauty
The desirable abodes of the righteous, who invite us
To be their brethren, their companions, their members.
O, my brethren, if only we should not be separated from
their company!
O, if we could be their kindred, or at least their neighbours:
If not within their dwellings, then at least round about their
arbours!
Blest is He, Who by His Cross, opened the door of
Paradise!

(Hymn Six, stanza 16)

May my audacity stretch no further!
But perhaps another will be found who will dare to say:
"When the ignorant and the foolish, who sin unknowingly,
Must undergo punishment as ones guilty,
The Good places them at the foot of Paradise,
Where they graze in those blest grasses to find some small
morsel."
Praise be to Thy justice which exalts the victorious!
(Hymn One, stanza 16)

When He fashioned Paradise, He made there a diversity of
beauty,
For the splendor of one degree is greatly surpassed by the
next;
And further, as one degree is higher than another.
Thus He allocated the nether region to those below,
The middle region to those of the middle degree, and the
summit to the most exalted.
Blest is He, Who being pierced in His side, removed the
sword from Paradise!

When the righteous ascend the degrees of Paradise to
receive their inheritance,
Then each according to his toil shall be justly raised up,
Being held to that degree of which he was deemed worthy.
Her degrees offer room for all:
Her floor for the repentant, her middle region for the
righteous,
Her heights for the victorious, and her summit for the
Divine Majesty.
Blest is He, Who being pierced in His side, removed the
sword from Paradise!
(Hymn Two, stanzas 10 and 11)*

So, from the Scriptures and the Saints, we learn that, both in salvation and in condemnation, our reward, as it were, will be "customized." Everyone will get what fits — or, to paraphrase the Dismissal Hymn of the Feast of the Holy Transfiguration, what "each one can endure." But again, according to the Scriptures and to the Saints, everyone will be given an opportunity, at some point, to hear the *true* message of the Gospel and to either accept or reject it. It will be a fair trial.

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So, because we have a God Who loves us, we are hopeful. For example, in the Praises for Sunday Matins for Plagal of First Tone (Fifth Tone, in the Slavonic usage), we find these words:

O Lord, King of the ages and Creator of all, Thou didst accept crucifixion and burial in the flesh for us, *that Thou mightest free us all from Hades*. Thou art our God; beside Thee we know none other.

And also:

.....And crying out to the stout-hearted myrrh-bearing women, [the angel] said: Do ye not see the lifelessness of the guards, the loosening of the seals, *and the emptying of Hades*."^{*}

But still, I would *not* want to be in the shoes of those who knowingly pervert the teachings of Christ and His Church, or who, to the end of their days, persecute and slay His servants.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul tells the Christians there that they should live a life of virtue, and not the dissolute life of the pagans around them. Then he inserts a quotation into his text in order to make his point. He writes:

Thus it says: "Awake, sleeper, and arise from among the dead, and Christ will enlighten thee."^{**}

(Eph. 5:14)

Saint Paul does not tell us where this quotation comes from. One thing is certain: it is found nowhere in the canonical Holy Scriptures. This has led some to believe that Saint Paul is here quoting the title, or perhaps a verse, from an early Christian hymn about our Saviour's descent into Hades.^{***}

If that is so, then the words of that text are most re-assuring.

What men must do, then, is live in a way that will make them receptive to Christ's teaching.

This is why the Saints teach us: "Judge no man before the time." "The time?" When is "the time"? The Final Judgement.

^{*} Copyright, Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Brookline, MA.

^{**} Some translations have "Christ will shine on thee."

^{***} Theodoret, *Commentarius in omnes B. Pauli Epistolas*.

An Additional Thought About This Subject

This is not encouragement *not* to embrace the Orthodox Faith. The holy Apostle Peter says the righteous will scarcely be saved: I Peter 4:18. We still need to work out our salvation in fear and trembling, and those who *plan* to plead ignorance will hear, God is not mocked," and that those who knew their Lord's will and did it not will be beaten with many stripes.

"At His commandment is done whatsoever pleaseth Him; *and none can hinder, when He will save.*"

Wisdom of Sirach, 39:18