

THE CHIEF SINNER

Compiled by Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

"As for him who teaches anything other than that which has been ordained, though he be esteemed trustworthy, though he fast, though he maintain virginity, though he work signs, though he prophesy, let him be esteemed by you to be a wolf in sheep's clothing, striving for the sheep's destruction."

Letter to Heron, 2
St. Ignatius of Antioch

Some years ago, an article appeared in the Greek periodical *The Holy Kollyvades* (Sept.-Oct. 1998). This article was a response to a new calendar writer, Demetrius Kokoris, who had castigated the traditional Orthodox clergy and faithful, calling them "schismatics," "outside of the Church," and "garbage cans". At the same time, he managed to overlook his own Church's doctrinal, canonical and moral lapses (this is ironic, in view of the troubles "World Orthodoxy" and their "sister" church, the Papacy, are presently enduring).

Here are a few excerpts from that response in *The Holy Kollyvades*:

"We thank you for your friendly thoughts, which are so loving, noble, and Christian, perhaps even pietistic, and may God keep you in good health, so that you may always 'give it to us,' because in this way you can only bring us benefit, and not harm. However, since we have never been taught this type of theology, nor these types of arguments, we are unable to lower our conversation to this level.

"But from our Church's viewpoint, I am obliged to remind you of some things. . . We have been taught that each of us should have his eyes turned towards his own sins, as every true Orthodox Christian should. Consequently, he will have neither eyes, nor time, nor the ability, nor the disposition to occupy himself with the sins of his neighbor. We have been instructed to be disturbed by our own sins and not by the sins of those near us.

"So, I would like to ask you discretely: Have you ever read the Compline prayer to our all-holy Mother, which begins, 'O spotless, undefiled, incorrupt, immaculate, pure Virgin'? Have you ever read the Service of Preparation for Holy Communion? If the answer is 'yes,' then what is your reaction when, for example, you come to the point where it says, 'I have sinned more than the harlot' and 'neither do Thou abhor my mouth, yet more defiled and polluted than hers'? By any chance, does your Prayer Book also have that prayer that is printed in mine, where it says, 'I believe, O Lord, and I confess that Thou art truly the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Who camest into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief'? And if you read the same prayers as the rest of us sinners, permit me to ask you: Did the Holy Spirit, perchance, write them only for us? Do they not apply to you also? What do you feel when you read those dread words? Are they words that speak to you perhaps? Do they express what you feel? Do you espouse what they say? Or when you reach that point, do you simply skip them, and say, 'These words are only religious prose or poetic license,' or, 'These words apply only to the old calendarists'?

"Is this how you propose to convert us from our error?! Well, good for you! May God keep you in good health! Would that you always corrected us in whatever matter we go astray. We will even raise up a statue in your honor! It doesn't matter to us who corrects us. Within the Church, we are all 'taught of God'.

"But in order to do this, you have to prove that you also are within the Church of Christ, that you believe in Him correctly, and that you glorify Him rightly . . .

"Do you know the story about that monk who wanted to be freed from his warfare with the temptation of fornication? The devil offered to free him from this temptation, providing the monk would no longer venerate the icon of the Theotokos. And what did an Abba tell that monk by way of counsel? 'It would be better for you to visit all the brothels of Syria, rather than to refuse to venerate the icon of our Lady Theotokos!' Likewise in your case, Mr. Kokoris, it would be better for you to visit all the world's brothels rather than to violate the Tradition and order of the Catholic Church! Truly, as the Gospel says, it were better for you 'to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven halt or maimed' (cf. Matt. 18:8) rather than, having both hands and feet, to create this gehenna of fire, this contemporary chaos, confusion and uncertainty that has overtaken us thanks to your apostasy!

"Indeed, the commandments 'Thou shalt not commit adultery; Thou shalt not kill; Thou shalt not steal; Thou shalt not bear false witness; Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment' (Rom. 13:9) are only degrees on the spiritual thermometer that show how much the body is ailing. However, the thermometer cannot, of itself, cool the fever. And neither can the various 'anti-inflammatory' good works—which have their place, and are also required for those that are ailing—neither can they, I say, kill the virus of sin. This virus can be killed completely *only* by the "deifying Blood" of Christ the Master. Only this Blood 'deifieth the spirit, and wondrously nourisheth the mind,' and, in God's infinite love, is offered to us from Christ's wounded side 'unto healing, and purification, and enlightenment, and protection, and salvation, and sanctification of both soul and body, unto the averting of every phantasy and evil deed and diabolical operation working noetically in our members, unto confidence and love toward Him, unto amendment of life and stability, unto an increase of virtue and perfection, unto fulfilment of the commandments, unto communion with the Holy Spirit, as a provision for life everlasting, and as an acceptable defense at Christ's dread tribunal' (cf. Second Communion Prayer of St. Basil the Great).

"Since you new calendarists and ecumenists have sinned in matters of the Faith, therefore, and since you have changed the Tradition and order of the Catholic and Apostolic Church, it is ironic that you should condemn us now for reasons of morality. . .

"As I said above, however, we bypass these subjects and we don't get involved in straining out such gnats. As long as the Faith is kept inviolate, that which the Holy Spirit addresses in our liturgical texts to Christ our Lord is applicable to all: 'Withhold not, because of my sins, the grace of Thy Holy Spirit from these Gifts here spread forth. . .for Thou Thyself art He that offereth and is offered, and that accepteth and is distributed. . . Thou that sittest on high with the Father, and that art invisibly present here with us.' Therefore, by the degree that the priest or the bishop is unworthy (as long as they do not stray from the exact confession of the Faith by even one jot or one title), by such a degree is the [grace of God] that which in actuality imparts the holy Mysteries to us more radiantly and resplendently.

The matter, however, has an ecclesiastical dimension, and this alone is what is of interest to us. Perhaps you will hit the ceiling, Mr. Kokoris, but that is your problem. We, 'the garbage cans'—according to your own loving and noble expression—we, 'the weak

things, the base things, and the things which are despised' (cf. I Cor. 1:27, 28), we 'the poor,' (James 2:5) and 'offscouring' (I Cor. 4:13), we who bear 'the reproach of Christ' (Heb. 11:26)—even if only three of us are left upon the earth—whether you like it or not, whether you agree or not—are, according to the Fathers, authentically and truly the Orthodox Church, 'having this treasure in earthen vessels' (II Cor. 4:7).

Editorial Note: The Synods of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (in 1975), the Moscow Patriarchate (in 1969) and the Syrian Patriarchate (in 2001) officially and synodically resolved that it is allowable, under certain circumstances, to impart holy communion to the non-Orthodox.*

* See our previous articles, "Just for the Record," Parts 1-5 for more information.