

Homeric Stitchings

by Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

Recently, a couple of papers have appeared, taking issue with some articles I have written. Since what I write is what I find in the Church's history, tradition, the Church Fathers, the Lives of the Saints and holy canons, I find this criticism odd, especially since the ideas expressed in these articles are not my own. God willing, and where it is necessary, an appropriate response will be prepared to clarify various misapprehensions of what I and other fathers have written in our articles.

However, this matter reminds me of something I read once in the Life and works of Saint Irenaeus of Lyons.

The Saint speaks of those who distort the words of the Gospel and seek to lead people astray by altering the message of the Apostles. The Saint explains how these people would use various tricks to accomplish this. One trick, writes St. Irenaeus, was to employ the device known, in Greek, as *omirokentímata* — "Homeric Stitchings." That is to say, they would take phrases out of Homer's famous works, but rearrange them in a patchwork manner, so that the message they conveyed was entirely different from that of Homer's. So, anyone who heard them would say, "The words are the words of Homer, but the message they are imparting is completely different from Homer's." It was an entirely different composition – but it used Homer's words.

Another trick that these people use in changing the message, says St. Irenaeus, is to take the small squares of glass or stone (called "tesserae") which make up a mosaic, and re-arrange them. Hence, the mosaic of a king or an emperor, for example, could be turned into the mosaic of a pig or a jackass, simply by rearranging the same tesserae as those used in creating the mosaic of a king!

These are old tricks. Today, we would say that these people are quoting the Gospel or the works of the Church Fathers "out of context." Or, that they are "cherry-picking" phrases from here or there in order to create a false impression of what the original writer actually was saying.

This happens all the time, and the reader must beware and be on his guard lest he be bamboozled by these literary sleights of hand.

What is the lesson that we glean from all this?

Simply this: if you had been reading the Lives and works of the Saints, you would have known all this information already, instead of waiting for an old bishop in Boston to spoon feed you these little tidbits of patristic wisdom in occasional articles on the internet, and you would not be hoodwinked by someone who is trying to buffalo you, or "pull a fast one" on you.

If you are not reading the Lives of the Saints, you still haven't finished the elementary school level of a Christian education. There are many wonderful lessons there.