

MAY WE HAVE THIS DANCE?

Or

Who Wants To Be A Wallflower in the Next Life?

by

Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

Some twenty-three years ago, when I was a freshly-minted, green-horn bishop, several Greek-American faithful approached me, wanting to speak to me about what they felt was an important matter.

As it turned out, what they wanted to talk about was dancing! "Your Grace," they said, "we are going to have to have dancing at some of our Church affairs, either at our Church halls on occasion, or at our picnics. This is absolutely necessary, because if we don't do this, we are going to start losing our youth."

I listened to them carefully. These were faithful members of our Church, sincere and concerned parents. They didn't want their children to leave the Church and be seduced by the "world". They thought Greek dancing was modest and appropriate enough for Church gatherings. And, after all, many other apparently "Orthodox" groups were doing this also, and furthermore, back in the old country, the villagers would have their festive meals and dancing in the village square, just after they had finished the Divine Liturgy for some major feast.

In addition, had not the Prophet David himself danced (in the altogether, as a matter of fact) in front of the Ark of God? And in Psalm 149:3, does it not say, "Let them praise His Name in the dance; with the timbrel and the psaltery let them chant unto Him"?

These parishioners had done their homework well.

But thanks to the many vigils I had attended as a monk, and the many sermons of the Church Fathers I had heard in those vigils and at our monastery meals, I was not caught off guard.

I asked, "This will be Greek dancing, you said?"

"Yes," they replied.

"Well, as you know, there are many other nationalities in our Church, as well. If we have just Greek dancing, won't the others feel left out? After all, the Russians and the Ukrainians have their national dances, too. So do the

Serbs and the Bulgarians. And our Romanians (boy, can they dance!)* will say, 'Why are we excluded?' As for the Arabs, well, that's another matter... And then the many American converts will rise up and demand that *their* dances be included — and have you *seen* some of those modern American dances?! (Square dancing is only for squares.)

"I think we're opening a can of worms here," continued I.

I told them, further, that if some people felt that strongly about dancing, there were many organizations that sponsored this sort of thing, and there were many places to which one could go for it. The Church's purpose was, on the other hand, quite different. Furthermore, we have to consider what the Saints of the Church have to say about all this. Even though we may never have heard it from any other Orthodox priest, we need to hear it now.

Listen, for example, to what Saint John Chrysostom says concerning this very subject in the sermon he gave on the commemoration of the beheading of Saint John the Baptist:

Hearken, ye maidens, or rather ye wives also, as many as consent to such unseemliness, at other person's weddings, leaping, and bounding, and disgracing our common nature. Hearken, ye men too, as many as follow after those banquets, full of expense and drunkenness, and fear ye the gulf of the evil one....*even now, after the coming in of so high a wisdom (i.e., the Christian Faith)*, for a dance's sake many of these effeminate young men give up their very souls, and that without constraint of any oath. For being made captive by the pleasure, they are led like sheep, wheresoever the wolf may drag them....

For where dancing is, there is the evil one. For neither did God give us feet for this end, but that we may walk orderly: not that we may behave ourselves unseemly, not that we may jump like camels (for even they too are disagreeable when dancing, much more women), but that we may join the choir of angels.

For if the body is made base (by dancing), thus making itself unseemly, much more the soul. Like this is the dancing of demons, like this, the jesting of such as are servants of the demons.

(From *Homily 58, On the Gospel of St. Matthew*)

*Some say that this is why our Father John Fleser needed to have *two* hip replacements.

This is serious stuff.

Yes, in the Old Testament, we see references to dancing, but now, "*after the coming in of so high a wisdom [i.e. the Christian Faith]*", are we to revert to the old ways, following the shadows and the types, and not adhering to the light of the Good Tidings that bring us grace and salvation?

Should we return again also to those malodorous animal sacrifices, instead of partaking of the Unbloody Sacrifice of the Lamb of God? (Come to think of it: can you imagine what those ancient temples must have *smelled* like, with all that fetid blood and gore running all over the place? Phew!)

Also, what do the Holy Canons have to say about this matter of dancing?

Christians, when they attend weddings, must not join in wanton dances, but modestly dine or break the fast, as is becoming to Christians.

(Canon 53 of Laodicea)

And also,

Members of the priesthood and of the clergy must not witness the plays at weddings or banquets; but, before the players enter, they must rise and depart.

(Canon 54 of Laodicea)

"The plays at weddings or banquets" meant also the "playing" of musical instruments for dancing.

As a monk, I was ignorant of that last mentioned Canon, but as a bishop I observed that, as soon as the dancing began at weddings, many of our clergy would arise from their tables and go to the head table to congratulate the bride and the groom, and their relatives, and then depart forthwith. I was deeply impressed by that action. I thought to myself: "The clergy of our Church have just taught me something important." And the admonitions of the Saints of our Church came to my mind.

"This is a high standard. Who can keep it?", you will ask. Whether one can keep it or not is not the right question to ask, especially for an Orthodox Christian. It's not as high as learning to love our enemy, is that not so? Not wanting to kill your kid brother or kid sister sometimes is also a high standard, but most of us manage to keep it, because we know the consequences if we don't. Well, there are spiritual consequences too, when we do not keep the commandments of God, or the counsels of the Saints.

But you already know all this, because you've been reading the Lives of the Saints, right?

As Orthodox Christians, we prefer — as the Church's hymns say — "to dance for joy with the angels eternally."

May we have *this* dance *Please?*

May God grant it.

The Moral of the Story:

Christ placed the Church into the world in order to save the world.

Satan is always trying to place the world into the Church in order to destroy the Church.