

WHAT IF?

by

Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

Not long ago, the following item appeared in the *Boston Globe* [September 19, 2011]:

A few years ago, Mikhail Gorbachev lectured at Harvard's Kennedy School. In the Question and Answer session, a student asked him to speculate on the difference to history it would have made if the 1963 assassination had targeted Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev instead of John Kennedy. Gorbachev gravely considered the question, then answered, "I do not think Aristotle Onassis would have married Mrs. Khrushchev."

"What if..." These types of questions always intrigue people. We love to speculate on these matters and to allow our imagination to run wild. What if Hitler had not attacked the Soviet Union? What if credit cards had never been invented? What if Osama bin Laden had died of the mumps when he was still a baby? What if the American government had a balanced budget?

We Orthodox Christians are not immune to these flights of fancy. What if the church calendar had never been changed? What if Ecumenism had never gotten off the ground? What if the "Latin Captivity" had never materialized? What if all our bishops were true monastics, as they were in the days of old, and not simply bureaucrats, businessmen, or ecclesiastical career men, as they are today? What if all Christians kept the fasts?

There's no end to this sort of thing. Since I do not possess the gift of prophecy, I have no answer to the questions asked above.

But I can guarantee one thing: we would find *something* to squabble about!

On other occasions, I have said that we Orthodox Christians are, as the Church Fathers describe us, the New Israel.* Well, it appears that we may have inherited many of the negative traits of Old Israel also. The prophets of old complained that Israel was a stiff-necked and contentious people, always giving God a hard time about this or that.

Apparently, as regards the New Israel, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

In the eleventh century, it seems the Orthodox Christians of the imperial city, Constantinople, had run out of things to argue about. What a distressing situation! How had things come to this? Unbelievable!

* See my previous article, "Judeo-Christian."

Obviously, something had to be done about this as soon as possible!

Thanks be to God (I speak ironically), the Christians finally found something to bicker about! They began to squabble among themselves about who was the greatest Church Father — St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian or St. John Chrysostom!

So, there were three parties — the Basilians, the Gregorians, and the Joannites (or Chrysostomites) each battling the other. The Basilians praised St. Basil above all the others because, said they, by his homilies he had explained the nature of creation; by his virtues he was like unto the angelic hosts, and he did not easily forgive sinners, but was serious and strict. Others exalted St. John Chrysostom above St. Basil and St. Gregory, and said that he was more compassionate, and that he had surpassed the others by the sheer volume of his works, and that he drew many sinners to repentance by his eloquence and sympathy. The Gregorians, on the other hand, maintained that St. Gregory was superior to the other two because his works were far more refined in how they were articulated, and that he surpassed even the ancient writers of classical Greece, as well as his contemporaries, in his writings.

In this life and death struggle among the three factions (I'm still speaking ironically), no quarter was given. Bitter words were exchanged. Families were divided. Lines were drawn in the sand. Proofs and counterproofs filled the air. Pandemonium reigned in the market-place. Tempers flared.

Things finally settled down, but only after St. John, the Bishop of Euchaita saw these hierarchs, who appeared openly before his very eyes and said to him, "We are close to God, as you see, and there is no animosity or strife among us. Yet, according to the different times and circumstances in which we lived, each of us, moved by the same Divine Spirit, composed varied teachings. Whatever we were taught by the Holy Spirit, this too is what each of us wrote for the salvation of mankind. There is neither first, nor last among us. If you speak of one, the other two are present also. Wherefore, teach those that bicker among themselves to cease their divisions on our account. When we lived on earth, and now that we have been translated here, our desire was and is to bring peace, unity and concord to the world, and not to separate people. For this cause, we ask you to unite our feasts into one day and to compose hymns for the three of us together, as it seems appropriate to you, and to surrender these compositions to the Christians. For we are one in God. Assuredly, we desire to contribute to the salvation of those who keep our common feast, since we possess some audience and authority before God."

Consequent to this apparition, St. John wrote a service extolling all three Saints together — the service, that is, of the Three Hierarchs that we still chant today on the 30th of January.

But, as true Israelites, isn't that the way we are?

If it weren't for the calendar change, we'd be arguing over something else: the length of our services, the length of the clergy's beards, the length of our women's dresses when they come to church, the strictness of our fasts, the strictness of our priests, *our* use of strictness and economia (which, of course, is the only correct use) versus *your* use of strictness and economia (which, of course, is the wrong use), etc., etc., etc.

The list is virtually endless.

The fact is, there *is* a solution to all this acrimony and (self-righteous) squabbling, if anybody is willing to listen.

The solution, indeed, may be found in the words of the Definition that precedes the decrees of the Fourth Ecumenical Council: "We follow in the footsteps of the Holy Fathers."

The Holy Fathers dealt with issues that 1) pertained to matters of the Faith: in these matters, there can be no compromise; and 2) matters that pertained to pastoral issues: in these matters, there is considerable flexibility.

If we Orthodox Christians could, by some miracle, come to the point where we would follow the example of the Holy Fathers in matters of the Faith (steadfast and uncompromising), and in other, secondary, pastoral matters (flexible and compassionate), the squabbling would subside. The Church Fathers have bequeathed us many wonderful lessons concerning the Orthodox Christian Faith and its application in a variety of life's circumstances. Are we willing to listen to them?

What if we *did* listen to them? Steadfastness in the Faith, coupled with flexibility in pastoral issues.

The possibilities are intriguing.