

DONATISM

Even if your bishop is secretly living in sin with a call-girl, divine grace is still operating in the holy mysteries that he performs in church. His liturgies, his holy unctions, his marriages, his ordinations, in short, all the sacraments at which he presides are fully valid.

Many in Greece believe, in fact, that if it is discovered that a priest is serving unworthily, people will hot-foot it to be present at his services with great eagerness! Why? Because, they say, divine grace has to work *overtime* in his services to compensate for his unworthiness!

Needless to say, this tidbit of folk theology is humorous, but not really accurate.

In reality, a priest's virtue, or lack thereof, has absolutely nothing to do with the validity of the holy mysteries he is performing. Neither does the virtue, or lack thereof, of his bishop have anything to do with it.

The only thing that matters in both and in all such cases is the confession of faith of the clergyman in question.

Saint John Chrysostom says: "Let each man attend to his own affairs. For if the priest teaches perverted doctrine, though he be an angel, do not obey him. But if he teaches the truth, take no heed to his life, but to his words "(*On the 2nd Epistle to Timothy*, Homily 2.4).

Saint Anastasius of Sinai is more blunt: "A priest must not err in the dogmas concerning God; as for everything else, you are not the proper judge, if, indeed, you know your own limits and have not completely lost your mind."

If a bishop or priest is tried by a canonical ecclesiastical court, found to be guilty, and removed from the priesthood, *then* and only then can he no longer perform the holy mysteries. But up to that point, all the sacraments that he performed are valid and completely in order.

This is because it is divine grace which effects the holy mysteries, and not our so-called virtue. In any case, who is so deluded as to think that he has *any* virtue?

If the validity of the Church's holy mysteries depended on our personal virtue, the Church would have closed her doors long ago!

This is confirmed by Saint John Chrysostom. In the prayer that he reads quietly during the chanting of the Cherubic Hymn, the priest recites the following awesome words:

None is worthy among them that are bound with fleshly desires and pleasures to approach Thee, or to draw nigh unto Thee, or to minister unto Thee, O King of Glory. . . .

"*No one* is worthy to serve Thee." The message of Chrysom's prayer is crystal clear.

The message of the Donatists was very different. For one thing, the Donatists taught that if one apostatized from the Christian Faith, one could never be forgiven. Secondly, they believed that if a clergyman had fallen into some sin, the holy mysteries performed by him had no grace and were invalid.

However, the Church rejected these pernicious and ungodly doctrines of the Donatists, because, it reasoned, God, not man effects the holy mysteries and Christ opened His arms to receive and forgive repentant sinners. Of these latter, Saint Peter himself — the very chief of the Apostles — was the most conspicuous example, for upon his repentance he was reinstated, despite the fact that he had denied Christ three times with oaths!

It is always good for all of us to bring to mind the words of St. Ephraim's Prayer for Great Lent:

Yea, O Lord King, grant me to see mine own failings
and not to condemn by brother. . . .

As for those who are unworthy and serve in the Church's holy mysteries, — if, indeed, they are unworthy — God will judge them. He will take care of them.

The Holy Metropolis of Boston has published a pamphlet on the subject we have touched upon here. It is filled with accounts from the Lives of the Saints, writings of the Holy Fathers, and quotations from the ancient *Paterica*. It is found also on our Metropolis' website (<http://www.homb.org>). It is entitled *Scandals In the Church*, and it really should be read by everyone who wants to get the Orthodox Christian, and not Donatist, teaching on this subject.