

"Looking to the Left and to the Right"

by Dean Emmanuel Stamatiou

From a young age we are taught to look to the left and then to the right and then to the left again before we cross the road. This very practical traffic rule applies not only to the roads but also to the spiritual path and journey of our Christian life. The hazards of any road are not always familiar and the risks can be quite significant, especially for the unsuspecting traveller. The hazards in a Christian's spiritual path are considerable and treacherous. Many of us have no familiarity or sense of the hazards involved on this spiritual path and what is required to safeguard ourselves from the risks that can lead to absolute disaster.

It was well known to the early fathers of the Church and those who achieved a spiritual life close to God, that Christians must be attentive and discerning of the hazards that lie to the left and to the right and by what means one can be prepared and protected against them.

The temptations of the devil come to us from the left and right spheres. To be caught from the 'left' incorporates what most people understand to involve sin. These influences from the 'left' says Father Michael (Practical Guide of Orthodoxy and Orthopraxia. Orthodox Kypseli publications Thessalonika, 1998 pp.61) "casts us directly into the so-called physical sins, such as: drunkenness, pleasure-loving, fornication, gluttony, adultery, murder and abortions, theft, anger, thievery from Churches, bestialities, evil desires, smoking, painting faces, adornments and every comfort of the flesh, fashion, money loving, card playing (gambling) and other things."

The temptations of the devil that come to us from the right are much more subtle and far less transparent than those that occur from the left. The attacks from the right are seemingly friendly, harmless, even uplifting and affirming of Christian ways. But hiding behind these attacks is the devil who is responsible for anaesthetising and immobilising many people of their spiritual struggle thwarting their spiritual pursuit even though they may be devout Christians, monks, priests and even the hierarchy of the Church. The craft of the demons that attack from the "right" is based on the art of delusion and deception. These influences can occur through thoughts, dreams and visions designed to convince the unsuspecting that they are in receipt of direct and 'prophetic' messages, all the while working through self esteem as if all is "given to them from heaven." (Orthodoxy and Orthopraxia pp. 60)

These delusions are often "accompanied" by pride, vainglory, hypocrisy, falsehood, egoism, heresy, and all the similar sins of the soul, with a purpose of leading the person to believe little by little, with the demon's cooperation, that God has chosen them especially out of very many people as "His own instrument." Such persons can often take on a cause to undermine and to "put down the Orthodox Church, together with the priesthood, which was founded by our Lord Jesus Christ and which has Apostolic succession." (pp. 59-60)

This influence from the right can go further so that people can even believe they have the power of healing and to perform miracles.

The means by which one can protect themselves from the crafty influence of the devil is through an earthly spiritual Father; the priest in other words. But it appears this sure antidote to fight the devil is much forgotten by Orthodox Christians today, a most powerful form of attack from the right today. The priest to many is regarded as no more than a social acquaintance, at best an important dignitary, a source perhaps of some spiritual knowledge and peripheral symbol of their cultural heritage, a talking point, one who has no vital role to play in the course of their life: other than perhaps for what is obligatory and involuntary. Involuntary in terms of the experience of their infantile Baptism and Chrismation which has not been activated and which bears no active meaning or significance in their everyday life: and obligatory in terms of their ritualistic ceremonial and lifeless participation and unwilling compliance to the Sacraments of the Church and God's Commandments during the course of their life until death.

Little do they know of the vital and important role of the priest in protecting them against the deception and delusion of the devil. Little do they know that the perceived dismissiveness of the priest is not to do with their person but for the correction of their ways, founded on the primary responsibility to set their relationship with God right through obedience and living a Sacramental life.

It is not the role of the priest to be pre-occupied with how to please, so that he can strike a personable social and working relationship with people. The relationship that the priest must always have foremost in his mind, is the guidance he must offer to ensure that his flock set their relationship with God along the right path, even if it is not what members of his flock may want to hear. Although kind words are useful in achieving this end, the use of flattering words are not, in that they appeal to pride.

In their relationship with the people of the early Church, the Apostles knew of the importance of this primary relationship with God which took precedence over all other relationships and dealings in the world ensuring that they always spoke the truth, and resisted at all cost the crafty deception and delusion of the devil. This grace and enlightenment from above protected them from inadvertently partaking in the attacks from the 'right' whilst imparting the Word of God to the people.

"But as we have been approved by God" said St Paul in his letter to the Thessalonians (1 Thess. 2:4) "to be entrusted with the gospel even so we speak not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts. For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness -- God is witness. Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ."

*from The Truth, 2000, Perth, Western Australia
Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia*