



Brief Patristic Messages



The Enlightened Zealot

*“The servant of the Lord must not strive,
but be gentle unto all”
(II St. Timothy 2:24)*

*His Eminence, Metropolitan
Cyprian of Oropos and Fili*

OUR PIOUS lay brethren in Christ would do well to pay particular attention to the question of zeal.

The holy Fathers say that the person who is not possessed by genuine zeal in Christ

“never arrives at peace of mind,” seeing as he forgets that *“the root of the wisdom of God is forbearance and meekness.”*

(Abba Isaac the Syrian)

It is truly a blessing to find a person who is aflame with longing for the glory of our Lord and the observance of His holy Law. It is, however, very disheartening if, even when such a blessed soul is finally found, he should be found in danger of being captured from the right, by the Evil One, with his undiscerning zeal which is *“not according to knowledge.”*

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Saint Nectarios of Aegina gives us, in a few lines, the image of the genuine Christian zealot:

“The zealot who has knowledge, being stirred by love for God and his neighbor, does all things with love and self-denial. He never does what might cause his neighbor sorrow. His zeal is enlightened and according to knowledge, and it never impels him to misconduct.”

The blessed zealot in Christ is the model of the true Christian, whose primary traits are fervent love for God and one’s neighbor, meekness, religious tolerance, forgiveness of wrongs, and, generally, all of the fruits of the Holy Spirit dwelling in his heart.

The enlightened zealot who has knowledge is beneficent and considerate to everyone, does not act improperly, does not wound his brother, rejoices at another’s progress and sorrows over his misfortunes; he is aflame with desire that the Divine word be disseminated, that the Faith be confirmed, that the world be made transformed in Christ, and that the demon be exorcized.

The genuine Christian zealot of true faith presents a heart of fire—yet one that is also sympathetic—, knowing that the truth separated from love not only does not benefit, but rather resoundingly demolishes and breaks to pieces, the unity of the Theanthropic Body.

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On the contrary, the unfortunate Christian who is animated by a zeal not according to knowledge is a ruinous person.

There is perhaps no more unfortunate person than the zealot of the Divine Law who is without knowledge; for, though he believes that he works for the glory of God and has an easy conscience, in reality he completely subverts the Gospel of Grace and Love.

Let us see how the Saints of Orthodoxy perceive the zealot who is without knowledge:

• *his zeal is a “corrupting fire, a consuming fire” • “destruction precedes him and desolation follows” • “he prays to God to send fire down from heaven to consume all of those who do not accept his principles and beliefs” • he “is characterized by hatred for those of other religions or beliefs, envy and persistent anger, an impassioned resistance to the true spirit of the Divine law, an irrational obstinacy in the defense of his own convictions, a passionate zeal for dominance in everything, ambition, contention, strife, and turmoil.”*

(St. Nektarios)

Orthodox spirituality has always deemed necessary the guidance of zeal by love, that it might not go astray:

“The zeal of piety is good, but when held in check by love.”

(St. John of Damascus)

The marvelous epistle of St. Dionysios the Areopagite to the monk Demophilos, in which he expounds in a God-inspired manner on the issue of the excesses of undiscerning zeal, bears witness to the fact that this temptation of pious people is an old one.

But may the genuine zealots of Patristic piety stand in opposition to the demon of misguided zeal, calling to mind the patristic counsels:

“We will not approve of your rages that are foreign to genuine zeal, even should you invoke Phinees and Elias a thousand times.”

(St. Dionysios the Areopagite)

Let us likewise remember that our Savior, through the Holy Apostle Paul,

“instructs [us] to educate with meekness those who refute the teaching of God”; “The ignorant must be

taught and not punished, just as we do not chastise the blind, but lead them by the hand.”

(*Idem*)

May the pious never forget that the criterion of the genuineness of our love is not undiscerning zeal but the refutation of all of our passions:

“Struggle to love all people equally, and you will collectively expel all of your passions.”

(St. Thalassios)

As is the case with every other ascetic practice, our zeal for piety is of dubious purity and genuineness if it does not generate love and humility in our heart:

“Every study and every ascetic practice performed with great labors which does not result in love, in contrition of spirit, is in vain, and in no way does it end up being useful.

(St. Symeon the New Theologian)

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Let us pray to the All-holy Spirit to vouchsafe us blessed and holy zeal according to knowledge, that we might become true builders of the Body of Christ. Then we shall struggle and pray, not that fire be sent down from heaven to consume all of those who do not accept our principles and beliefs, but that the Divine Comforter might come and unite us all in His love and His Truth.

Hence: *“The zeal of piety is good, but when held in check by love”!*

*Second Sunday of St. Matthew
Saints of Athos, 20 June/3 July 2005*

