



272. June 5/18, 1979 Beginning of the Peter-Paul Fast

Categories : [Letters](#)

Date : October 10, 2016

Dear John [Hudanish],

May the blessing of the Lord be with you, and give you a profitable season of the Fast!

I'm glad to hear the services went well on Pentecost. However: beware! No matter how "right" you may be on various points, you must be diplomatic also. The first and important thing is not "rightness" at all, but Christian love and harmony. Most "crazy converts" have been "right" in the criticisms that led to their downfall; but they were lacking in Christian love and charity and so went off the deep end, needlessly alienating people around them and finally finding themselves all alone in their rightness and self-righteousness. Don't you follow them!

Specifically: if you have a Russian congregation used to a regular choir singing—let them keep it, don't fight with them over it, don't insist on doing things the "right" way! You are making much too big an issue of it, and you are offering most unfair criticism to those who disagree with you. People who stand in church while the choir sings are not offering their "private prayers"—they are praying with the priest and singers, and often praying much better than the singers, who are usually so absorbed by the mechanics of following the music and text that they pray very poorly.

The attitude toward the little Woodburn mission which you reveal in your letter is a very dangerous one, both for you and others. I will tell it to you straight and pray that you have the courage to accept it and act on it before it is too late. The "zeal" you are showing for English services, congregational singing, etc.,—is not primarily zeal according to God, is not based on Christianity; it is, on the contrary, only stubborn self-will, a symptom of the "correctness disease" that plagues so many converts and leads straight to disaster. If you do not fight against this passion now (for it is a passion), the Woodburn mission is doomed, and you yourself will very likely lose your own faith and your own family. I have seen this "convert-pattern" in practice too often not to warn you about it.

You are still new to Orthodoxy, and yet you wish to teach those older in the faith (and from the way you describe it, you are "teaching" them quite crudely, without the slightest tact or Christian charity). Plain common sense should tell you that this is no way to act; Christian love should make you ashamed of your behavior and anxious to learn more of basic Christianity before daring to teach anyone anything. I haven't heard from anyone in the Woodburn area, but I can image how your behavior must offend and hurt them. There is nothing mysterious about the fact that you are alienating people; your behavior, as you have described it yourself, is exactly the kind that drives people away and causes fights in the Church. Don't hide behind "English services" and "no-



partitura” singing: these are only half-truths which your pride seizes on in order to avoid basic Christian humility and love.

Look for a moment at how it must seem to others: you couldn’t get along in the Portland parish and had to drop out; now, in your “own” parish, you drive people away. It simply cannot be that others are always to blame and you are always innocent; you must start correcting your own faults and living in peace with the Christians around you.

How do you do this? You begin by accepting certain basic Orthodox principles:

1. All questions regarding church services (language, kind of singing, etc.) and behavior in church (including head coverage of women, etc.) are decided by the priest who serves. You are not to be a “policeman” who enforces “church laws” according to your understanding of them; it’s already clear that you are going to drive everybody away doing this, and in any case, people come to church hoping to escape the cold legalism of the world that surrounds us—have pity on them!
2. Realize that you are still a new convert and have much to learn, and are not to be a “teacher” of others, save in the sense that every Orthodox Christian is a source of edification (or the opposite) to others by his behavior. This edification is given first of all, of course, to one’s own family, and this is a place where, according to what you have told me, you are very weak. You seem to have some Old Believer “patriarchal” ideas about the family (many of which are totally inapplicable to family life today, and produce disasters when insisted on), combined with a lack of genuine love and concern for your family. You’ve indicated in earlier letters that you and your wife might just drift apart, that Stephen may not end up Orthodox—but how can a Christian husband and father realize such terrible things and not be filled with zeal to correct himself before these disasters happen? (For if these things do happen, you will be to blame: because you did not give your family an example of living Christianity to inspire and warm them, but only some kind of legalistic, soul-less “correctness” that only feeds the ego.)
3. Begin to humble yourself in your relations with others, to act towards them first of all with compassion and love; go out of your way to see things the way they see them and not give offense to their feelings. Cease to be an egotist and learn to live in peace with the Christians around you. This can’t be done overnight, but you can start.
4. Start studying seriously the ABC’s of Orthodox Christianity. Have you read *Unseen Warfare* recently?—that’s a good place to start.

About the Woodburn parish: you will have to resign yourself to the fact that, at the present time, this is a Russian parish, where services will be conducted mainly in Russian and in a way that does not seem strange or novel to those attending. There is room in the Church both for “Burlingame”-style services, “Etna”-style, and “Woodburn’-style—which, by the way, is not the same as “Burlingame” style at all, but rather something in between. If you are going to make war against “Burlingame”



style services, you are not only needlessly offending the Russians who are used to that, but are also insulting your own bishops (who, after all, allow Burlingame to exist). There is a half-truth in your observations on these matters, but the kind of services you want cannot be dictated to people who find them strange; they must develop gradually, naturally, and in peace. (This is precisely the “Platina-Etna” way, and not the externals which you want to copy.) Otherwise they are not God-pleasing. These questions are not as important to you as you think they are right now; just a few months ago you thought quite differently and were idealizing the Assurs and your Russian services. Your ideas of “correctness” are largely dependent upon your whims and moods. There is plenty of spiritual food for you and your family in the present state of things: public Russian services once every two months, with much even then in English (sermons, Epistle and Gospel, confession); and the rest of the time the church is your family chapel for whatever English prayers you have a zeal for. To have English Etna-type public services now in Woodburn would be an insult and competition to the nearby struggling Portland mission, while there is a need for a Russian mission in this area. What will come in the future, God will show; but it will come naturally and peacefully if at all.

I’ve said enough, perhaps more than you can digest at once. I do not call on you to “abandon all your ideas,” or to become a totally different man overnight. I only want you to start working harder on yourself and to be more compassionate to others, and to relax on trying to be so “correct.” This is not so impossible, and I think you will never find happiness and spiritual peace unless you do this.

I hope you do not accept his letter as an impossible dose to swallow, as earlier you found Fr. Georges letters. Your absence of spiritual rapport with him made it very difficult for you to receive whatever good he could give you. I have been bold to write this letter to you knowing that you freely asked me to be your spiritual father and that a spiritual rapport does seem to exist between us. I would urge you to continue to look to the “Etna model” of Orthodoxy for inspiration and guidance: but not the external side so much as the inward side that is the source of its strength. Look at Fr. Alexey's attitude toward his wife, his children, other people, the way he tries to put Christianity into practice; compare this with your own attitudes, and start to soften your heart.

Please forgive me if any of this is hurting; I mean you only the best, and am very concerned at where your present behavior is taking you.

With love in Christ,
Unworthy Hieromonk Seraphim

P.s. No, you should not have khitons made for you and your sons. It would make you too “special”— you’re thinking too much of the outward side of prayer.

P.s.s. Yes, God willing, one of us will come to Woodburn sometime in August for services.