

Theory & Practice

"The Poor or Jesus?"

When Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper and the Pharisee, an adulteress woman came suddenly and poured forth precious myrrh on the feet of Jesus, and wiped them with her hair. Judas complained saying that this expensive myrrh could have been sold and the money distributed to the poor.

It was his right to object and question what the woman had done. What those people did is often the position of those who claim that they prefer to serve humanity and the poor and care for the necessities of man.

It is often taught that there is a life of contemplation or meditation and a life of service and work. The first lifestyle concerns itself with prayer and seclusion, with fasting and knowledge, etc. But the second goes out to the brethren and establishes services and institutions to help the poor, the sick and the needy, etc. Some denominations have divided their monasticism into two styles, contemplative and active.

Many times we are faced with the question of what to choose, the contemplative or the working life. In our Orthodox Church where monasticism is not separated into contemplative and working, we fall into this trick, trying to confine monasticism to the contemplative world and the priesthood to the world of service. The subject goes beyond its limits, claiming that the contemplative life is of a higher spiritual degree and the life of service is of a lower degree, lower than the contemplative one.

If this separation is legitimate, we cannot deny that Christ preferred the ones who belong to the first style, that is the contemplative.

How then can we allow ourselves to choose what is lower in spiritual life?!

In reality, the Orthodox vision of Christian life does not make this separation, neither in monasticism, nor in priesthood or in the laity.

The contemplative and working styles have nothing to do with the separation spoken about above.

If contemplation is turning to the service of Christ, and work is to be in the service of our neighbor, Christ has united Himself with the poor and the sick..." What you have done to the least of my brethren, you have done it to me." If we want in a contemplative way pour forth myrrh on the feet of Jesus, we have then to pour it as service at the feet of the poor.

What is work and what is contemplation?

Contemplation is the fruit of work. In other words it is the goal of work. The service that is not clothed with contemplation is unfruitful.

Service and work are the first stages in the spiritual life. Contemplation or meditation is the second stage. The first stage is keeping the commandments. One of the commandments is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself. In this stage come also prayer, fasting, vigils, ascetism, service, the desert, charitable organizations, readings, studies, and all other works and labors of virtue.

The second stage is the contemplation of God through offering all the labors mentioned above. We work to see God. We have the right and the duty to choose the style of our work. All ways to serve and pray are labors to purify and prepare us for the vision of God.

The poor are the icons of Christ. I look at them and I see Christ. I care for their food and clothes. The charitable organizations are other "icons" in and through which I see Christ. Every tool and creation is the icon of the Lord.

I ought to see God in science. Jesus wants us to reach new scientific discoveries, but He is the aim of every research and study.

Children are the icons of the Lord. Don't you see in children the icon of their father? In this way also we see that children are the brothers and children of Jesus. I suffer to raise them to the full stature of Christ.

"Theology" is an expressive icon and inner experiences that reveal the face of Christ to us.

Organizations are His tools that emit the savor of His labor and sweat.

We are a company of people who are moving from blindness into vision. We ask our way to see the face of Jesus. Some of us are in monasticism, others in the work, and the ways are various. The more we work and labor honestly, the more we see the light, and the icon of Christ becomes clearer.

Vision and contemplation start with service and become clearer until the face of Christ shines on us.

We work till the light of Christ permeates all, or till we become men of clear and stable vision as St. Paul the servant who said, : It is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me." The continuous shout of the Christian is the vision that is sought, "Show me your face, my meditation is pleasing to you." I rejoice in the Lord.

Amen.