

Hidden Saints (Stephen Freeman)

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The first Sunday after Pentecost is traditionally

observed as the Sunday of All Saints in the Orthodox Church – both those that are “hidden” and those who have been “revealed.” These are some thoughts on the “hidden” saints – by far the most numerous.

It is surely the case that most saints are hidden. St. Paul says that “our true life is hid with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). I believe that it is for our own sakes that these things are hidden. We’re told that the Theotokos “pondered these things in her heart” (Luke 2:19) which is a world away from walking around asking everybody, “What do you think about this?”

There is much about our life with God that remains hidden and should remain hidden (except, perhaps in confession). We live in a voyeuristic culture that reveals what should never be revealed and finds itself morbidly fascinated by hidden things. The hiddenness of the heart is part of modesty and humility and is a hallmark of authentic Orthodox spirituality.

There is much about modern American spiritual life that runs counter to this. Some segments of contemporary Christianity are almost as voyeuristic as the popular

culture itself. The same can be a temptation present to Orthodox within our culture. Some of this varies from Orthodox culture to Orthodox culture – but, in Russia, for instance, the baptismal cross is commonly worn “next to the skin,” and is not worn like a badge.

In America it is easy for a cross to become little more than jewelry. At such a point, it probably needs to become “next to the skin,” in my opinion (take it for what it is).

By the same token any number of things associated with the Orthodox life, even icons, can be used in a way that has more to do with American “show” than with any particular act of devotion. We Americans have a sort of “clubishness” about ourselves and we tend to want to fly the colors of our groups (hence all the sports paraphernalia sold). But the saints and their icons are persons, or personal representations, given to us as “windows to heaven.” Some restraint should be shown in how we use their images as well. There are many things like this for us to give consideration. Do I pay more attention to my outward self and the signs of my allegiance, or do I concern myself with the hidden things of the heart? Forgive me if anything I’ve said gives offense. If it leads you to think on the hiddenness of the heart, then my purpose was served. I intended nothing more.

Some final thoughts on the hiddenness of saints. This is from Archimandrite Sophrony’s Saint Silouan the Athonite:

For the superficial observer, the Staretz [Elder] continued to the end of his days to be an ‘ordinary’ man. He lived like all good monks in general, fulfilling his tasks of obedience, abstinence, observing the monastery rules and traditions, taking communion twice a week – three times during Lent and other fasts. His work in the store-house was not difficult – for a man of his physical strength it was even easy, requiring comparatively little time although it did demand his presence during the daylight hours. To the end he continued tranquil and good-tempered. There were never any outbursts, no ugliness, external or internal. Like a really experienced ascetic he showed nothing outwardly, standing before the Father in secret, as the Lord commanded. To the end he stayed remote from mundane interests and indifferent to the things of this world. But deep in his heart the fire of Christ-like love burned without cease.

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