

The Sickness that Is Arrogance (Varnavas, Metropolitan of Neapolis and Stavroupolis)

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In its desire to prepare us for the great and bright battle of the virtues, Holy and Great Lent, the Church, has adopted a period of preparation, that of the Triodion. This period starts with tomorrow's Sunday, with an important parable related by our Lord: the Publican and the Pharisee.



From the Church of Saviour, Kalymnos

The parable says that two people went to the temple to pray. Two went, but only one fulfilled his aim: the Publican. The sinner, the wretch, the good-for-nothing. He who was so ashamed of his actions that he didn't dare even raise his eyes. He who asked for no more than the mercy of God. And he achieved it. With remorse and humility, he gained divine forgiveness.

On the other hand, there was the "outstanding" Pharisee. The virtuous, the righteous person, the observer of the commandments of religious law and sacred traditions. He who did everything he could to avoid falling into any transgression. The Pharisee stood to pray, but in fact he had no need to do so. It was another obligation for him, another duty for him to perform. And so, in essence, he stands before God bringing all his righteousness with him. He lists his virtues. He tells God how wonderful he is. He sets out all the reasons why he's different from other people, who are wallowing in sin. He points out to God how superior he is to the insignificant Publican who is sitting, heart-broken, in a corner of the temple.

It doesn't seem as if the Pharisee's lying. He doesn't look as though he's pretending. But he's suffering from a great and terrible disease, which, alas, is endemic among the ranks of the pious: arrogance. In the end, he doesn't need God or his fellow human beings. He's conscientious in performing his obligations and that's an end of it. Or rather, he does need God and other people, but only to recognize his worthiness. In reality, that is, he's interested only in himself. Nothing

else. His ego and all his “good” deeds that show off his worth are his world. And this is the strange thing: religiosity eventually ends up as atheism! That’s where hardness of heart leads people.

If we want to be honest, however, we ought to recognize that the scourge of arrogance and pride doesn’t affect only the pious, but the whole of society. At work, in the family, in the company we keep, what interests us most is recognition, our own ascendancy. At bottom, we think everybody else is wrong, they’re unfair, they sin and we’re the only ones to do right. And sometimes this isn’t restricted to ourselves, but extends to circles with ourselves at the centre. It’s only our own family that stands out, our own friends who have any value, our own region that contributes to the country, our own professional group that serves society. The others are unjustly favoured and we’re the only ones to be treated unfairly.

This is why the tradition of our Church is so clear: people and their societies prosper only if they manage to root out conceit. Only if they’re able to empathize with their neighbours and care about them will they ever be able “to see the face of God”, literally and metaphorically. God forgives and grants His grace where he sees humility, self-awareness and self-censure and turns His face from haughtiness, no matter what “virtues” it may have.

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