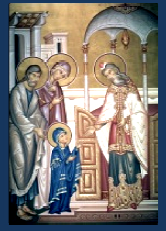


August 12, 2012

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young

Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple Skete



Foolishness for Christ

St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians 4:9-16

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In this morning's reading from St. Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians we heard these words, so famous to us in our Orthodox Christian spiritual tradition:

"For," he writes, "we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. *We are fools for Christ's sake...*"

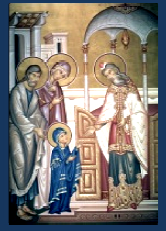
This concept, Foolishness for Christ, is very well known to any Orthodox Christian who knows more about the Faith than just going to church on Sunday, but it is almost entirely unknown to Western Christians except as a more or less abstract concept. (Some Catholics think that their Francis of Assisi was a Fool for Christ, but actually the life of Francis does not bear this out at all.)

This morning I want to speak about this spiritual phenomenon concretely within the context of Orthodox theology and experience and mention some ideas concerning how this sort of divine foolishness might apply to us today.

What we call "Holy Foolishness" is well-known to educated Greek, Russian, and all other Orthodox in the old world Orthodox countries and cultures. But other than reading about it in books, it is almost unheard of among Orthodox in the West, however--and I'll talk about why that is in a moment.

Basically, a "Fool for Christ" is a man or woman, sometimes a monastic or a member of the clergy, but often a layman, whose spiritual gifts—for example, the ability to read hearts, prophecy, and work miracles—are so great that these individuals voluntarily cover themselves with a form of what worldly people see as foolishness or even madness, idiocy, or mental illness. This they do not on their own, but with the blessing of a spiritually gifted elder (often himself a saint), who knows the mind of God on this matter and sees that by taking on Holy Foolishness the "fool" can thus protect his humility and prevent himself from falling into pride because of the way others will, mock him, or even try to harm him or lock him up.

At any time in the Church's long history there has never been more than a few Fools for Christ in a given generation and this is because it is, in the Church's understanding, actually the very highest expression of spiritual growth and maturity. But those of us with worldly minds and habits, who are not ourselves steeped in the Gospels and in genuine Church life (which is way beyond parish gossip, church bazaars, fund raising, etc.) are usually repulsed by



Holy Fools and we turn away, finding them at the very least inexplicable and distasteful. You and I live in a culture that is obsessively fixed on externals and we most often judge others by how they are dressed, how clean they are, what their education is, how they speak, whether they are “nice” to us, and so forth. Perhaps there is a place for this kind of approach in certain professions, but as Christians it is not the approach that should govern how we view anyone.

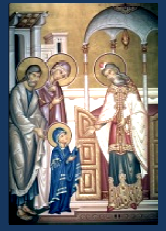
When my wife and I first converted to Orthodoxy and learned, through our reading of the life of Blessed Feofil, the Fool for Christ at the Kiev Caves Monastery, about the charism of Holy Foolishness we completely misunderstood it and this had to be carefully explained to us by our spiritual father who, step by step, sorting it all out for us and revealing the mystery of full meaning of St. Paul’s words in today’s Epistle. In a letter he wrote to me our spiritual father explained:



“Blessed Feofil was not someone merely with unusual habits or of a different culture; what distinguishes him is not that he impressed people or stood out from the crowd or had an abnormal ‘life-style’ [our spiritual father intensely disliked that term, which has become so fashionable in our time]—rather,” he continued, “all this is a result of the fact that he [Blessed Feofil] truly ‘had God for his father’ and lived *fully* the life of grace in the Holy Spirit, and thus human logic simply can’t understand him. In his dealings with people he paid no attention to the normal politenesses of society because he was acting as God directed him for the benefit and salvation of (other) people....Actually, to understand Feofil, he could even be compared with the Prophet Moses—someone quite ‘foolish’ in appearance (he couldn’t even talk clearly), whose whole life is based on the fact that he was a God-seer and God spoke to him, and in defiance of all human logic made no sense at all, and was attended by numerous astounding miracles.. In both cases [Moses and Feofil], Divine ‘logic’ prevails.” (*Letters from Father Seraphim*)

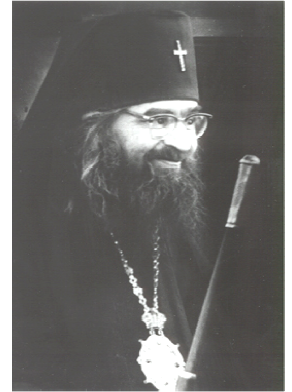
This was indeed a real “revelation” to us because for the first time we realized that we had rather middle class cultural views and expectations of everyone and everything, both in the Church and out, and we didn’t yet understand the incredibly radical power of the Holy Spirit working in the lives of those few who *really and completely*—unlike the rest of us—yield themselves up to God and this divine power. Yes, it was a revelation.

In Russia over the last century, in spite of vicious Communist persecution and oppression, and in Greece during the same period of time, in spite of increasing Westernization and degeneration of the general Greek culture, Holy Foolishness has appeared in a few remarkable and quite famous instances, and some of these Fools for Christ have



also been canonized by the Church. So, they are by no means *unknown* in contemporary Orthodoxy. But why are they relatively unheard of here, in the American Orthodox experience?

We do have *one* notable example of Holy Foolishness here, in the life of St. John Maximovitch, who died in 1966 and whose incorrupt relics lie in his cathedral in San Francisco. Almost unique in Orthodox history he combined in himself, through the power and gift of the Holy Spirit, the charism of Holy Foolishness, and being a modern Father of the Church, together with also being a ruling bishop. His Foolishness was not extreme, but those who knew him, were close to him, or who saw him in his day to day life were quite aware of it, and my wife and I were privileged hear stories about this from several people who had known him. There were also numbers who absolutely misunderstood and loathed him, including even some of his brother bishops—and in this way St. John did indeed protect himself from pride, in spite of the fact that he was almost constantly working wonders and miracles right here, in America.



When I asked our spiritual father—way back then—why this “gift” of the Holy Spirit wasn’t to be found in America, he pointed out the example of St. John of San Francisco, who had died only 4 years before and had been his spiritual father, and then added that Orthodoxy in America hasn’t reached a level of spiritual maturity yet through which this gift might be manifested by God the Holy Spirit. We have still a long way to go, he said, before we are “ripe.”

And so this brings everything right home, doesn’t it? It’s certainly true today, as it was decades ago, that American Orthodoxy isn’t very mature, but at the same time our spiritual father explained that there is a new way in which we may in fact actually be Fools for Christ, if not exactly always “Holy” Fools. Today, just to be a conscious and practicing Orthodox Christian in the *full* sense makes us already somewhat ‘foolish’ in the eyes of others. In fact, traditional Orthodoxy is already seriously isolated from the rest of the surrounding culture. But, still, we must remember that the foolishness of the Fools for Christ is of a different dimension; *we’re* foolish because we try to follow the Lord, but the Holy Fools *did indeed* follow Christ, and not only externally but internally. That’s the difference.

It is an astonishing thing that Orthodox Christianity has survived in the West and, in a few—a very few—places, seems to be even flourishing. We must never take Orthodoxy for granted, for the forces which are lined up against us are very fierce, overpowering in fact. But so long as we continue to “*try* to follow the Lord,” thus imitating in a very small and weak way the genuine Holy Fools, then we too are Fools for Christ’s sake. In this sense, then, we

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are very much in the tradition of St. Paul who, elsewhere in this same Epistle, defines holy foolishness with these words:

“For the preaching of the Cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.” (1 Cor. 1:18)

Let us, therefore, never cease to preach the “foolishness of the Cross”; let us never cease following it, embracing it, and being willing to climb up on to the Cross with our Lord Jesus Christ, there to suffer with Him and then be resurrected with Him to eternal life.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.