

What is Gained is Greater than What is Rejected

A few years ago my husband and I attended a wedding in Las Vegas. We had our six-year old granddaughter with us. The entire trip consisted of pulling Leah away from one evil sight after the other: “Don’t look at that, quick, turn your head! Don’t listen to that! Don’t go over there! Don’t touch that! Get away from that!” Even at the zoo, the most harmless place we could think to take her, she was invited make an offering to a statue of a pagan idol, a situation I narrowly averted. Las Vegas is an extreme example of the world. Everything we saw was incompatible with our desire to live our lives as Christians. We couldn’t wait to abandon the place. We rejected it.

The *Online Etymology Dictionary* gives a medieval origin of the noun “reject” as a “thing cast aside as unsatisfactory.” [1] To reject something in this sense is like throwing an undersized fish back into the lake because it is inadequate to meet the needs of the hungry angler. Likewise, a monastic will cast aside the meager offerings of the world because they are not adequate to feed his soul which is hungry for God.

The world of Las Vegas is a scrawny, meager world and not the satisfying world God originally created for us. He who partakes of this world will always be hungry. Las Vegas is an extreme example but one can smell the sickly odor of this world all around us: TV, radio, books, magazines, the Internet, schools and even in the decisions of the government. These things seem very normal and even filling to many people and to reject them, that is, to cast them away and throw them back in favor of a life of monastic asceticism seems contrived, cultish and self-absorbed. The Desert Fathers had much to say about the spiritual advantages of rejecting the world. In *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, this story is told about Abba Arsenius:

While still living in the palace, Abba Arsenius prayed to God in these words, “Lord, lead me in the way of salvation.” And a voice came saying to him, “Arsenius, flee from men and you will be saved.” Having withdrawn to the solitary life he made the same prayer again and he heard a voice saying to him, “Arsenius, flee, be silent, pray always, for these are the source of sinlessness.” [2]

One common objection to monasticism is that it’s a waste of one’s life, time and talents; that God created mankind to enjoy the world and not lock oneself up for a life self denial and misery. Along with this is the argument that *all* Christians are to be out in the world proclaiming the Gospel and doing works of charity. To those who embrace this objection, the monastic is worthless as a Christian because he or she is not occupied with the business of the active Christian life that one finds out in the world. This point of view completely undervalues the worth of the prayers of the monastic on behalf of the whole world. The busy Christian with his or her committees, casseroles and causes may often find it difficult to “pray without ceasing” [3] yet prayer is of ultimate importance. To suggest that the rejection of the noisy world, enabling one to pray without ceasing, is without value is to say that prayer doesn’t really matter, that it has no real effect, and that *busy-ness* is what gets the job done in the Christian world. In a sense, monasticism is an attempt to return to Eden. Adam and Eve were able to converse directly with God in the Garden where “praying without ceasing” was not even an issue because the conversation between God and man was free-flowing and natural. The monastic attempts to get the conversation going again without the distractions of the world. The thing gained is greater than the thing rejected.

Can this state of prayer without ceasing be of benefit to those in the world? Yes, it can be of great benefit, as St. Seraphim of Sarov famously said, "Acquire a peaceful spirit, and around you thousands will be saved." [4]

Another objection to monasticism has come from parents who equate the monastic life with that of a cult and believe they have lost their sons to a sinister organization. They compare the monastic fasts with food deprivation, vigils with sleep deprivation, monastic obedience with brain-washing, and so on. One Orthodox family has expressed their objections on the Internet and were answered by their monastic son, Father Theologos Pantanizopoulos on the web site *Athos in America*. [5] Without being at all desirous of entering into the controversies surrounding that particular monastery (St. Anthony's in Arizona), we can address the objection to the idea of obedience to a spiritual father which the Pantanizopoulos parents found to be so cultish. In *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* it is written:

The old Men used to say: 'if you see a young monk climbing up to heaven by his own will, grasp him by the feet and throw him down, for this is to his profit ... if a man has faith in another and renders himself up to him in full submission, he has no need to attend to the commandment of God, but he needs only to entrust his entire will into the hands of his father. Then he will be blameless before God, for God requires nothing from beginners so much as self-stripping through obedience.[6]

When a monastic takes on this obedience, what is he rejecting? While it might seem that he (or she) is rejecting personal freedom, he is actually rejecting his own willfulness and exchanging his will for the will of God. Americans value personal freedom above everything and to voluntarily give this up is shocking and un-American. However, the freedom gained by abandoning one's own will is greater than anything one can find in the Bill of Rights. Again, the thing gained is greater than the thing rejected.

I believe this essay can be summarized with this saying of the Lord: *But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.* [7]

[1] "reject.". Web. 23 July 2014. <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=reject&allowed_in_frame=0>.

[2] Ward, Benedicta. "Arsenius." *The sayings of the Desert Fathers: the alphabetical collection*. London: Mowbrays, 1975.

[3] I Thessalonians 5: 17 KJV.

[4] "Seraphim of Sarov." - *OrthodoxWiki*. Web. 23 July 2014. <http://orthodoxwiki.org/Seraphim_of_Sarov>.

[5] "Athos in America: Father Theologos Pantanizopoulos responds." *Athos in America: Father Theologos Pantanizopoulos responds*. Web. 23 July 2014. <<http://www.athosinamerica.org/>>.

[6] "The Spiritual Father in Orthodox Christianity," Orthodox Info Web 23 July 2014 <<http://orthodoxinfo.com/praxis/spiritualfather.aspx>>.

[7] Matthew 6:33 KJV.