

BECAUSE OF THE ANGELS  
By Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

Recently, I had occasion to write a brief note to one of our clergy on the use of our church buildings for secular purposes. This, in turn, prompted me to write about the matter of sacredness, and what it means to us as Orthodox Christians.

I would like to quote parts of that letter, and of two other fine articles that deal with the same issue.

First, here is what I wrote:

[I have decided] that the use of our Church Hall for purposes of physical exercises, even temporarily, is inappropriate. Aside from the religious overtones which often accompany oriental "physical" exercises, there is also the issue of inappropriate dress (since these are the muggy, summer months, remember?). But more than that is the issue of the sacred character of our Church building. Even our meals in the Church Hall begin and end with prayer. The meals are an extension of the Divine Liturgy, and are a carry-over from the *Agápe* assemblies\* of the ancient Church. The holy icons adorn the walls in the hall, as they do in Church itself.

The one thing that we who live in the West are losing, or have lost, is a sense of sacredness. Some buildings, or objects, or people have been set aside and consecrated for sacred purposes *only*. They are dedicated *solely* to God. The buildings so consecrated are not to be used, for example, for concerts, or town meetings, or political assemblies, as they are in the cases of Roman Catholic, or Protestant, or Hindu, or whatever, structures. This is a concept that non-Orthodox Christians cannot seem to grasp.

As in Heaven, so also on earth, there is a sacred hierarchical order to all things. That is why our clergy dress the way they do and why our people live the way they do. That is even why our women cover their heads — as St. Paul says, "because of the angels."

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\*Originally, "love-feasts" celebrated by the early Christians in connection with the Lord's Supper, St. John Chrysostom, St. Ecumenius, St. Theophylact of Bulgaria, and Theodoretus say that the *Agápae* followed the Divine Eucharist, but were held *in the same place* where the Eucharist was celebrated. To this day, in the Orthodox Christian Church, the chief item behind the icon screen is referred to, not as an "altar," but as a "holy table" — a reminder of its original function in the *Agápe* meals of Christianity's early years.

That phrase, "because of the angels" is very intriguing. It opens a door that reveals many marvelous things to us. This, in turn, leads me to the next text, which I mentioned above, which deals with this issue of the angels:

I read in I Corinthians 11 that the woman's head is to be covered in worship. The modern Christian consensus [*sic*] tells me that this is a relative and obsolete command, dealing with some first-century problem in the city of Corinth. My high school literary skills tell me otherwise: The command is rooted in creation (*ibid*, v. 7-9) and in nature (*ibid*, v. 14). And if that weren't ironclad enough, I am to cover my head "because of the angels."

The angel detail is so cryptic, so off the wall, so without explanation, that it becomes the strongest argument of all. Where is the "cultural relativity" case now, where angels transcend all historical agitations?\*

From what I have seen in the Orthodox Christian interpretations of the Holy Scriptures, the phrase, "because of the angels" refers to the hierarchy that exists in the Church — a reflection of the hierarchy that exists among the angelic orders in Heaven and in the Church here on earth. One order differs from the other in its function and rank, and even in its outer appearance, both in Heaven and on earth.

The "Church Militant" — like any good army — has its hierarchy, its "chain of command": Generals, Majors, Captains, Sergeants, Privates, etc. Neither the Generals (the bishops), nor the Privates (the lay people) are infallible, and each needs the other and depends on the other. But, nonetheless, the functions and rank, *and even the outer appearance of each order*, distinguish the one from the other.

This hierarchy — both in Heaven and on earth — brings us to a better understanding of what sacredness is, and how it applies to our life. One of our priests — Father Seraphim Johnson — gave a talk about this at one of our conferences. Here is a small portion of what Father Seraphim had to say:

St. Dionysius the Areopagite describes the order and hierarchy which exists in the world, the order by which God rules over His creation. For the creation is orderly. We read in the beginning of the book of Genesis that the world was shapeless and void, but God brought it into increasing order through the process of creation, working through His uncreated, ever-existing Word. As St. Dionysius teaches,\* before God made the world, He created the Angels in three ranks of three orders each: the Cherubim, Seraphim, and Thrones; Authorities, Dominions, and Powers; and Principalities, Archangels, and Angels. The chief angels — the Cherubim — stand directly before God, although even they cannot see Him in His true being, since He cannot be comprehended by

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\* In *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

any created being. Each rank conveys God's grace and instructions to the next rank, order by order, until they are brought down to our created world. And similarly, our prayers ascend up to God through the ranks of angels, each rank purifying and transmitting the prayers it has received.

This is not to suggest that we have no contact with God; on the contrary, we ourselves fit into this blessed hierarchy, in which everything is done decently and in order [vid. I Cor. 14:40]. For the rank below the Angels is mankind itself. And as the Angels are divided into three ranks, so mankind is also divided into three ranks: the clergy (divided into bishops, priests, and deacons), the sacred people (monastics, divided into novices, professed, and schema-monks), and those being purified (divided into the initiates — the believing Christian laity; the repentant — those preparing for Baptism or those who have fallen into serious sin after Baptism; and the possessed — those outside the Church of God).\*\* Grace is mediated from God to the created world through these ordered hierarchies, showing us the beautiful and elegant structure which sustains the world. Each of us has a place in the hierarchy, a place which God has given us. Think how different this view is from that of modern science. In St. Dionysius's understanding of the universe, God's guiding hand is everywhere, mediated in an orderly and loving manner. There is no blind chance at work; there are no mindless "natural laws"; there is no purposeless evolution. Rather, there is meaning and purpose in every single act, because every one of our acts is either a proper participation in the process of passing on God's grace through our order and returning our prayers to Him through the Celestial Hierarchy, or it breaks the link in the hierarchy and damages the whole creation. For the point of the hierarchy is that each member must play his assigned role for it to work properly. Some of God's grace may fail to reach the repentant and the possessed, if the initiates do not transmit it. And the prayers of the initiates and those below do not ascend upward as well if the monastics and the clergy are themselves careless and impure. The significance of a hierarchy is precisely this: it only works properly if each rank performs its functions correctly. Satan's fall removed some members of the higher orders, and in a real sense weakened God's creation. Man's fall disrupted the hierarchy even more, since there are now no human beings who truly meet their calling in the Divine Hierarchy. If we look at the state of the world around us today, we cannot fail to see the disastrous results of the failure of Christians to fulfill their assigned functions. And the horrors of our world are substantially our fault, because we do not even see our role in sustaining God's creation, much less fulfill it....

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\*\* When we say "possessed", we do not mean only those who are possessed by demons, as we see, for example, in the Holy Scriptures (Matt. 17:14-15), but also those possessed by the demons of greed, carnality, gluttony, arrogance and anger, for example. There are also those possessed by the occult, magic, blasphemy, heresy, unbelief, secularism, and atheism, and many other "isms". So, there are *many* forms of possession.

The Divine Liturgy is the fullest expression on earth of God's hierarchy. At the Liturgy you can see the orders of the earthly hierarchy present before God's throne. The clergy stand at the front, immediately before the Throne of God, the Holy Table. The initiates stand in the body of the temple, the nave. The repentant stand outside the nave, in the narthex. And the possessed are completely outside the temple of God. The Liturgy is offered with beauty and order, raising our prayers to the Celestial Hierarchy to convey to God's throne, and in return bringing down God's grace to us on earth. At the Liturgy we join with the whole Divine Hierarchy in Heaven and on earth, and we truly see our place in God's creation. For this reason, our temples should be orderly, and all the people should be quiet and reverent, realizing where they are and what great order they are participating in. When the Liturgy is over, we must not lose sight of God's order for the world. We must continue to send our prayers upward to His throne in everything that we do; and we must look for His grace to continue to descend to us through our private prayers at every moment during the day. This is our calling as Christians. How different this is from what the world wants us to believe! We are not little lumps of meaningless flesh that live for a few years, seeking maximum pleasure, and then die and cease to exist. Rather, we are God's creatures, made by Him for a specific purpose and assigned a place in the order of the universe. Only you can fill the spot for which you were created. And if you fail to fill it, you detract from and damage all of God's creation. How awesome our role! How frightening to look at the world around us and realize that our failure to be what we were made to be is the root cause of many of the social and moral evils we see! One day our eyes will be opened and we will see God's creation as it is. I pray that day may be now, while there is still time for each of you to begin to take your place in it. But, if it is not now, it will be at the dread judgment seat of Christ, when it will be too late to do anything but gnash your teeth and cry out in rage, frustration, and grief. Seize the opportunity while you can. Learn to see the world as it truly is. And take your place in God's order with obedience, love and joy.

This is why a sense of sacredness is so vital to us. Everything — including ourselves — has a proper place in God's sacred and consecrated order and hierarchy. Our lives, our very church structures, our clothing (including our clothing as Orthodox clergy, monastics and lay people), our discipline and guidelines in life, all reflect the fact that we are called to be *sacred* — that is, dedicated, set aside, for God *alone*. In our holy Baptism, we become a people consecrated to God *alone*.

In our effort to succeed in this struggle to attain to this sacredness, it probably would be helpful to us to remember that what we really want to do is befriend the angels of God. We want

to be friends with them, *forever*. And they, in turn, will intercede for us. But first, we must befriend them.

With *that* priority settled well in our hearts, God, by His grace, will supply whatever is deficient in our frail efforts to attain to the sacredness of the Saints.