

Dedicated to our new calendar friends

I AM A MAN UNDER AUTHORITY

Or

Pray, Pay, and Obey

— Part One —

By Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

Like Socrates, the philosopher in ancient Athens, I seem to be dying from the feet up. So, I am trying to record some memories on paper before whatever it is that is afflicting me finally gets to my brain.

Whenever I hear the gospel reading about the Roman centurion, I remember an incident from my seminary days. But first, let me refresh your memory about what the gospel account says:

When Jesus was entered into Capernaum there came unto Him a centurion, beseeching Him and saying, "Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented." And Jesus saith unto him, "I will come and heal him." The centurion answered and said, "Lord, I am not worthy that Thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed. For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, 'Go', and he goeth; and to another, 'Come,' and he cometh; and to my servant, 'Do this'; and he doeth it."

(Matthew 8:5-8)

As I said, whenever I hear this, I remember an incident from my seminary days. At that time, there was a fine young man from Pennsylvania attending classes at the seminary. Let's call him Leo Burkhart (not his real name). Leo had been a Mennonite, but had converted to Orthodoxy. He was a serious young man, and he was very bright and diligent in his studies.

He also had some concerns. He told us that he had come to Orthodoxy because he had read some Orthodox literature (in those days, there was not much in English), and he was immensely impressed. The loftiness and the profundity of the Church's doctrine and spirituality had really gone to his heart. I recall his saying that he had read also the newly-published book, *Three Byzantine Saints*, and he marveled at the spiritual achievements of the saints described there.

But, as I mentioned above, he also had some concerns. His concerns were these: he saw *nothing* of what he had read about Orthodoxy in today's "Orthodox" parishes. Instead, he saw a very secular spirit, a spirit of concern about *ethnic* identity that prevailed over concern for an Orthodox Christian identity. In the parishes he had attended, the parishioners knew more about the gods of Mount Olympus than they did about the Saints of the Church. The Fathers of the Church were virtually unknown in the parishes. Hardly anybody knew what the Church feasts were all about (since the highly abbreviated services were all in an ancient language, completely

foreign to them.) Nobody had heard of the Apostle's Fast, and what fasts *were* kept were not kept very seriously, even by many of the clergy. "This is America," they said, "we work hard here, so we can't keep all those insane fasts, like they do in the old country."

Furthermore, gambling, belly dancers, social affairs on Saturday evenings (instead of Vespers, or a vigil for the Resurrection of Christ) were predominant. Whenever anybody mentioned the "canons of the Church", there was always somebody else to mention how outdated, or antiquated, or irrelevant the canons were. Then, of course, there was also what he was presently hearing in the classes in the seminary....

So Leo had concerns, and he told us about them. Some laughed at him and told him to "lighten up" and not take things so seriously. Others suggested that he talk to the bishop about this, and see what he had to say. So Leo did just that.

The very next day, Leo walked from the seminary to the Greek jurisdiction's diocese house, which at that time, was in Jamaica Plain (a suburb of Boston). When he got there after a twenty-five minute walk, he was cordially invited in by the bishop himself.

Leo carefully explained all his above-mentioned concerns to His Grace, who listened to him attentively and silently. When, at last, Leo mentioned the canons, the bishop finally responded (whereas to all of Leo's other concerns, he had been silent), and the bishop's thoughtful response was this: "My boy, many years ago, our archbishop asked me to prepare a study about the canons — a paper concerning which canons were applicable today. After a long study of all the canons, I came to the conclusion that only *one* canon is applicable today."

"Only one?" responded Leo. Later, as he was relating all this to us back at the seminary, Leo said that he thought to himself, "My gosh, there are 777 holy canons, and only one is still applicable?" So Leo asked the bishop, "Which canon might that be?"

"Obedience to the bishop," responded the bishop.

Flabbergasted, Leo looked steadfastly at the bishop for a moment, and finally said, "Well, thank you, Your Grace." With that, he arose, got the bishop's blessing and left the diocese house.

Upon returning to the seminary, Leo told us, "Here I thought that I had converted to Orthodox Christianity. I didn't realize that I had actually become a papist."

Not long after that, Leo left the seminary, and I never learned what happened to him. I felt bad about Leo, because he was such a good and sincere young man. I was sorry, especially, about the bishop, who had so seriously misled Leo. Of course, there are a number of holy canons which concern themselves not only with the bishop's prerogatives, but also with his obligations. Indeed, there are also holy canons that mete out punishments to bishops when they are remiss in their duties. For example, there is the 58th Apostolic Canon, which says:

If any bishop or presbyter neglects the clergy or the laity, and fails to

* Apparently, nobody works in the old country?

instruct them in piety, let him be excommunicated; but if he persists in his negligence and indolence, let him be deposed from office.

In an earlier article ("The Trip to New Hampshire" — Part Two) I mentioned what Saint John Chrysostom says in his work, *On the Priesthood*, about how a priest and bishop should govern. In that article, I mentioned also what Saint Isaac of Syria said about this same subject.

In the Life of Saint John the Almsgiver, Patriarch of Alexandria, there is another interesting lesson to be gleaned (when reading this account, keep in mind that, in those days, the Patriarch of Alexandria was the second most powerful man in the Christian Roman Empire, and one of the wealthiest also, after the emperor himself):

The glorious man [St. John the Almsgiver] had a nephew named George. One day this nephew had a quarrel with one of the shopkeepers in the town and was grievously insulted by him. George was bitterly vexed, not only because he had been publicly dishonored, but more because it had been at the hands of a lowly fellow, and most of all because he [i.e., George] was the nephew of the Patriarch; so, weeping bitterly, he went to see the Patriarch in his private room. When the gentle Patriarch beheld him so distressed and tearful, he inquired the reason for his state of misery, wishing to learn what had caused it.

George, however, could not himself give a clear statement because of the bitterness of soul which had overmastered him; accordingly his companions who had been present when this insult was put upon him by the shopkeeper began to explain the reason to the Patriarch. "It is not right", they said, "for your Holiness to be so despised that your relatives and kinsfolk should be insulted by abandoned creatures."

Then he who was indeed a true physician wished first to treat his nephew's inflammation, as it were with a soothing salve, and afterwards, by his wise words, to cut out and remove the source of pain as if by the knife. Accordingly, he began to allay his suffering by these words: "What? Did someone actually dare to open his mouth and shout recriminations at you? Trust me, child, and I, your father, will do a thing to him today at which all Alexandria will be astonished." When he saw that his nephew was calmed and had shaken off all his grief (for he imagined that the Patriarch would proceed against the man who had insulted him and have him scourged and paraded in public by the overseer of the market), the Patriarch kissed his breast and said to him, "Boy, if you are in reality the nephew of my humbleness, prepare yourself to be beaten and insulted by everybody: for true relationship is not declared through flesh and blood, but through the virtue of the soul."

He immediately summoned the overseer of the shopkeepers and ordered him never in the future to accept from that shopkeeper either his

customary "tip" or the public taxes or the rent for the shop, for this shop, too, belonged to the Holy Church.

All were amazed at the Patriarch's unshaken magnanimity, and understood that this was what he meant when he said, "I will do a thing to him which will astonish all Alexandria", i.e. to show him favor instead of taking revenge on him.

(chap. 16)*

If the Greek bishop had really wanted to edify our young convert, Leo, he could have told him, not that all are to obey the bishop, but that the bishop himself is the servant of all the faithful, as Saint John Chrysostom points out in his work *On the Priesthood*. Or, the bishop might have told Leo that a bishop must be free from rancor and spitefulness, even when others offend him, and he might have quoted this text from Saint Isidore of Mt. Pelusium:

If you were wounded by words and you exploded in unrestrained fury, how can you be a worker in the vineyard of the Lord? (Matt. 29:1-16). Because, he who is struck on the one cheek and can turn the other (Matt. 5:39) is the one of whom the Lord speaks, when He says that *he* is the one that hath borne the burden and the heat of the day, meaning that he hath fulfilled His commandments perfectly.

(PG 78:249bc)

Perhaps the best thing our Greek hierarch could have told Leo regarding the role of a bishop is what we hear in the hymns of the Church during Holy Week:

Let your rule be contrary to the order found among the peoples of the nations. For tyranny and an insolent mind are not My portion. Let him, therefore, that would be chief among you be as the least of all.

[*Troparion of the 8th Ode of the Matins
of Great and Holy Monday*]

I think this would have helped Leo a great deal in resolving his concerns. Maybe it might have given him enough encouragement to survive the secularized parish life and even our "Latin Captivity" seminary classes....

Instead, Leo left. Maybe he was trying to find an *Orthodox* bishop.**

**Three Byzantine Saints*, translated by Elizabeth Dawes and Norman Baynes, Oxford, 1948

**After more than fifty years, I have just learned that Leo left for Greece to continue his studies there. However, I have no idea what happened to him after that.