

# THE RULES

by Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

It was Autumn in 1987, and we were in a tourist bus heading for the shrine of Saint John the Russian on the island of Euboia, Greece. Euboia is a very large island, about 100 miles long, lying off the coast of Attica, and washed by the deep blue waters of the Aegean Sea.

We had just arrived from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and now were visiting some holy sites in Greece.

Our bus driver, George (I will never forget his name), was at the wheel, and we were approaching an intersection, where the bus came to a stop. Everyone who was on the left side in the bus could clearly see the two traffic signs that were on their side. One sign said: ONE WAY — DO NOT ENTER. The other read: NO BUSES ALLOWED.

After a momentary pause at the intersection, George began making a left turn the wrong way into the one-way street. Everybody on the left side of the bus erupted into a shout, "George, what are you doing?! This is a one way street! And it says, 'No buses allowed'!!

George reassuringly lifted his arm, and calmly said, "Fathers! Relax!! In Greece, all these laws are optional!"

(Which makes you wonder: how can anyone govern these people??)

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Rules, rules, rules. Rules are everywhere and can't be avoided. We need them, because if we didn't have them, there would be chaos everywhere. We would destroy ourselves in a flash if we didn't have the rules, regulations, admonitions, instructions, warnings, legislations, guidelines, commandments, holy canons, and the like to keep us in line, to teach us how to behave ourselves:

The Ten Commandments

The Scriptural precepts:

"Love your enemies." "Do good to them that persecute you." Pray unceasingly." "Keep the Sabbath." "Keep the traditions."

Do this, do that, don't do this, don't do that.

Even nature has rules for itself:

A virgin cannot give birth to a child.

The mother of a child cannot be a virgin.

Without a flotation device, a man cannot walk on the surface of the water.

The dead cannot come to life again.

Etc., etc., etc.

In his interpretation of the Gospel of Saint Luke 13:10-17, Saint Cyril of Alexandria asks: Who are all these rules for? — for God or for man? If the rules are for God, then, woe unto us!, says Saint Cyril. If, for example, God were to observe the Sabbath, and His providence and care for creation were to stop and "take a break" on that day, what would

happen to everything? The earth would stop rotating on its axis, the atmosphere would dissipate, the oceans would evaporate, worlds would collide. It would be a disaster.

However, thank God, the rules are for *us*, not God. God *makes* the rules. The rules may be strictly applied, or superseded later by better rules, as people mature. The rules may be suspended for a time, if need be. They may be relaxed or changed, depending on the circumstance. God, Who knows and sees all things far better than we do, knows when to apply the pressure, and when to relieve it. Just because He gave some of us the power to bind and to loose does not mean that He relinquished that power. *He* is the Head of the Church, not we, nor the pope of Rome.

In connection with all this, Saint John of Damascus writes:

"We wish to show you that the supremely good God is overcome by His love for mankind. For example, He says, 'Nineve shall be destroyed,' yet it was not destroyed, because His goodness overcame His justice [Jonas 3:4]. Also, as regards Hezekias, He said, "Set your household in order, because you are going to die, and shall not live," yet, he did not die [IV Kingdoms 20: 1-6]. Also, to Ahab, He said, "I shall bring on evil"; yet, He did not do it, but said, "Do you see how Ahab was pierced with sorrow? Because of this, I will not bring on the evil in his days [III Kingdoms 20: 25-27]." Once again, His goodness prevailed over His decision [to punish], as indeed happened in very many other instances, and His love for mankind will always prevail until the Last Judgment, at which time the end of this festival\* will come, and there will no longer be an occasion for succour..."

(Concerning Those That Have Reposed in Faith, 14,  
St. John of Damascus)

In similar fashion, one can only hope that the Scriptural admonitions concerning "the strait gate" (Luke 13:24), and "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matt. 22:14), and the like, will fall into the same category as God's warnings which Saint John of Damascus mentions above. But all this, of course, depends solely on God's mercy and our repentance.

So, according to what the wise Damascene tells us, God sets the rules, and He can also abrogate them, as He sees fit. God alone knows the heart of every human being that has ever lived on earth. So, given the fact that He alone has this knowledge, and we do not, only He is in a position to judge each person fairly.

In the meantime, *we* need the rules. We *need* to observe the commandments, we *need* to obey His teachings, to keep the traditions we have received, whether by word or by writing, we *need* to keep the holy fasts and the holy canons and the laws of God, because if we fail to do so, we will bring harm upon ourselves. But God has no need of rules, or of Sabbaths, or of fasts, or canons, and the like. He is in charge. He *sets* the rules for us, because we are His rowdy children.

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\* "Festival." St. John writes this, perhaps ironically, meaning the period of time before the Final and dread Judgment Day.

At this point in time, we can only *hope* that His love for us will prevail over His justice. That is why, in the Divine Liturgy, and in all our services, we repeat again and again:

"Lord, have mercy."

For now, we must keep, and hold on to all the rules.

Some years ago, one of the monks from Holy Transfiguration Monastery was driving me to Saint Mark's Cathedral in Roslindale, Massachusetts. It was a Sunday morning, so there were virtually no cars on the road. We came to a stop light at an intersection. I looked to the left. I looked to the right. No cars anywhere. I remembered George our bus driver and his "optional laws" back in Greece. So, paraphrasing the Gospel passage, I said to my driver:

"The law was made for man, not man for the law', Mark 2, verse 27. There are no cars, so you can go through the light."

Pointing to the red light, my monk-driver responded:

"Be still, and know that I am God,' Psalm 45, verse 10."

So, the laws are for man.

Furthermore, it is God's prerogative to be just, and it is also His prerogative to allow His divine justice to be overcome by His love for mankind and His "great mercy," as our hymnology tells us time and again.

Our duty is to obey the rules, and *hope* (and pray — as we always do) for God's mercy.