

SERMON - 1 Cor. 16:13-24, "Maranatha!", given Sunday, September 3, 2017

In his epistle to the Corinthians today, St. Paul says, "Let all your things be done in love." I know a young lady who lived very far from the nearest Orthodox Church. She was a very young girl, maybe 13 years old. But she loved our Lord so much, that every Sunday she would leave her home very early in the morning and take buses and public transportation for several hours in order to go to church. She was very scrupulous to get to church before the beginning of the Divine Services, even if that meant arriving very early. More often than not she would arrive even before the priest arrived and before the church was even opened. And she patiently waited for the church to be opened so that she could enter the place of her deepest love and her heart's desire.

Why would a person go through all of this? This young girl had deep love in her heart for the Lord, and for love we would do anything. This young girl had a personal connection with Christ. Fast forward a few years, the young girl grows up, studies theology in a school of higher education, and is tonsured a nun. Her love always burned within her and her entire life was profoundly driven by her love.

At the end of Paul's epistle, he uses the expression "Maranatha!". The most ancient translation of this Aramaic expression is "The Lord has come!" It is also translated as "Lord come." Fr. Joseph Purpura, Director of Youth Ministry in the Antiochian Archdiocese, writes that Youth Ministry is about developing in our youth the yearning for the very presence of the Lord...a great desire to really live as full human beings with an understanding that all that happens now is more than just preparation for our place in the Kingdom...our finding our permanent place now in the in the story of salvation as citizens of the Kingdom of God. Without this "Maranatha - this desire for "Lord Come" there is no "Memory Eternal." We can say that Youth Ministry is about guiding and helping our youth so that their names may be written in the Book of Life. Fr. Joseph writes that their eyes and their hearts must be opened to see God in each person and in each moment of their life.

First of all, we as parents, and teachers, and clergy must love the Lord above all things if we are to hope to pass this on to our children. One of the main reasons that the millennials say that they do not come to church is that they have no connection to Christ. If Christ is not the main focus and vision in everything that we say and do at home and in church, everywhere and at all times, then neither will our children have this vision and focus. Ironic and strange as it may sound, it is very possible to have a church where Christ may not always be the main focus and vision. The Lord said that He did not come to judge but to save. Neither does St. Paul judge and neither do I judge. The only one that we should judge is ourselves. Ancient Corinth was not unlike any major modern city today. The ancient Corinthians practically worshipped sports and it was the main activity and passion in their lives. The city was famous for its widespread prostitution. Sins of the flesh were so widespread at that time a euphemism for committing carnal sins was to "Corinthianize". War and corruption was rampant, slavery existed and the poor were trodden upon.

I learned, though, that no one wants to come to church to hear nor needs to hear about how bad things are in the world. Merely lamenting about how bad things are in the world and condemning the world is a big turnoff to our youth, and it serves no purpose. Our youth want to hear positive things about the world, they want to be optimistic and they want to learn how they can contribute as Christians to help make a better world. Fr. Joseph Purpura points out that our youth need formation and to learn how to fully engage the world as citizens of the world, but primarily as citizens of the Kingdom of God. Our youth need to learn to see the world through the lens of the Bible and to be comfortable and confident to practice their Christianity in a world that will often challenge and oppose their faith.

Remember the girl at the beginning of my sermon who loved the Lord with all her heart? That is where it has to start, to love God above all things, to put God in the first place in our hearts, and to prioritize and order our lives where prayer and worship in church are never compromised. In Jewish practice, a little handwritten scroll is placed in a little case and affixed to the doorpost of every door in the home. Written on the scroll are the words from Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21. These verses say, in part, the following: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead, inscribe them on the doorposts of your home and on your gates ... — to the end that you and your children may endure, in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers to assign to them, as long as there is a heaven over the earth.” Amen.