

CHALLENGE

THE PULSE OF ORTHODOX YOUTH

'Throwing Stones'

by Steven Christoforou

No conversation happens in a vacuum. Words spoken long ago continue to echo in our minds long after they're articulated.

When I speak to you today, you're not simply hearing me and my words: you're rehearsing words uttered by mouths long silent. Thanks to our broken nature, and our poor choices, that context tends to be terrible. Our interactions are judgmental, hurtful, violent. Even a loving, peaceful gesture can trigger a flood of dark memories. I may approach you hoping to offer a comforting embrace, yet you may see in my outstretched arms the memory of abuse suffered long ago.

It's difficult enough growing up and making sense of one's sexuality. It's tragic that we add layers of shame, judgment, condemnation, and even violence to that confusion.

For some reason, we love dividing the world in two: Democrats and Republicans, saints and sinners, good and evil. We do the same in matters of sexuality: we label people as good and wholesome on the one hand, vile and deviant on the other.

We see the world as divided between the forces of darkness and the forces of light. "We," naturally, are the good guys.

"They" are not. "They" are the problem.

That kind of thinking is the problem.

The responses to the US Supreme Court's recent decision in the Defense of Marriage Act case have been emotionally charged, in both directions. Some see it as the day a community, long discriminated against, finally received a level of respect and acceptance. Others apparently see it as the end of the world.

Before we attempt to critique this decision, let's be honest: as a society, we have a terrible record engaging with homosexuality and the gay community. Our "arguments" have usually been judgment, contempt, and even violence. The fruits of our "ministry" have been depression, promiscuity, drug addiction, and suicide.

Some will respond that Christ was very clear about sin, and that so should we. It's true, He didn't shy away from telling sinners to "go, and sin no more." But we have to remember that Christ had a credibility that we lack. When a crowd of people wanted to stone a woman caught in adultery, Christ took mercy on her.

He disarmed the angry mob, saying that he who was without sin should throw the first stone. The crowd dispersed, dumfounded. With no one left to condemn the poor woman, He addressed her directly and gently: "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." (John 8:11).

Yes, we need to be clear that the Church will not bless same-sex marriages. That would be incompatible with our Christ-centered understanding of who we are and what our salvation is. (To be sure, we should say more about this, and we will, though it will have to wait for a later post.)

All that said, have our dealings with LGBTQ people been compatible with our understanding of human nature and salvation?

Have we joined in the condemnation of the gay community, expelling them from our community? Do we joke about them behind their backs? Do we revile them to their faces? Even if we don't, are we sensitive to the cross they bear, to the dehumanizing effect of the hateful words they have endured? Are we aware that their families may have disowned them? Do we care that they may have attempted suicide in their despair?

I once heard a great story about the remarkable late 19th/early 20th century author, G.K. Chesterton.

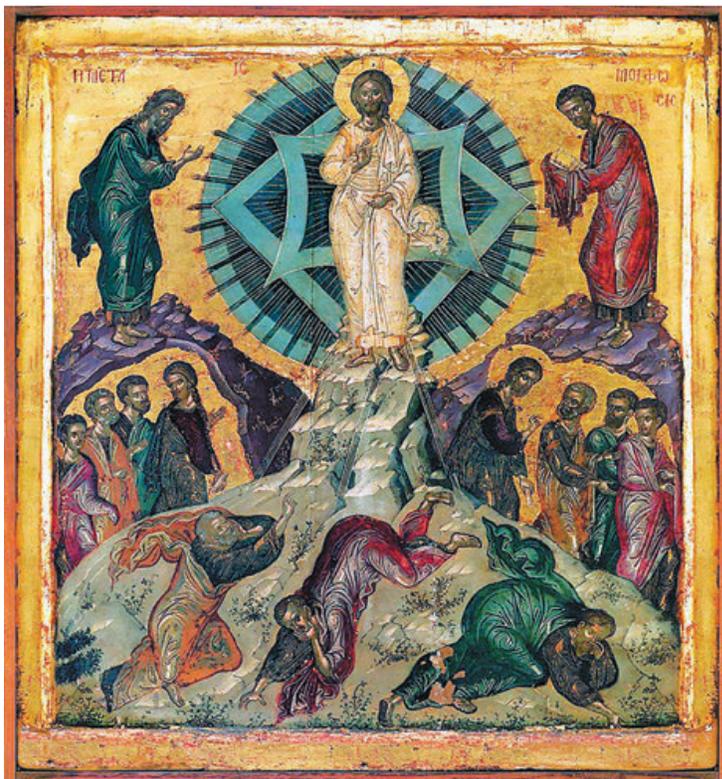
A newspaper asked several famous writers to offer their thoughts on what was wrong with the world. Chesterton provided the most succinct answer of all: "I am."

We read the same in our Communion prayers, and acknowledge that Christ "came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the first." Not you, not him or her. Me.

So, how are we supposed to respond to the DOMA decision or discussion of same-sex marriage? We should do what we should be doing anyway: praying, fasting, giving alms, loving our neighbors. Maybe we'll be able to have a deeper conversation when the world looks at us Christians and sees the genuine love of Christ.

Until then, I'm what's wrong with the world. Forgive me.

Steven Christoforou is the Youth Protection/Parish Ministries coordinator for the Department of Youth and Young Adult Ministries of the Archdiocese. He is a 2013 graduate of Holy Cross School of Theology and also graduated from Yale University and Fordham University School of Law.



The Feast of the Transfiguration

After six days Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John His brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. And he was transfigured before them, and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became white as light. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with Him. And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah." He was still speaking, when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him." When the disciples heard this they fell on their faces, and were filled with awe. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. — Matthew 17:1-8

Anthony Coniaris, in the book Daily Vitamins for Spiritual Growth, the following about the Feast of the Transfiguration: "Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and John as the glory of His divinity flashed through His body and His clothing. This glory was always with Jesus. The wonder of it was that it was repressed. Jesus did not add anything to his nature at the Transfiguration that He did not always possess. He merely revealed Who He already was. He was always divine and at the Transfiguration His divine glory was revealed. It flashed through His physical body."

Jesus Christ was transfigured and it revealed that which He already possessed... the glory that was within Him. When God created man, He took special care to create mankind in His image. We might feel pressure to conform and be like the crowd. But truly living a Christ-centered life can free us from those pressures and help us transform into the best Christians we can be. Our own personal transfiguration will simply reveal what God bestowed upon us from the beginning.

When considering your own transfiguration in Christ, here are some questions to ask:

- Is the image I portray to others who I really am?
- Is the image I portray to others who God really wants me to be?
- In what ways can I transform to show that I am created in the image of God?
- What things make it difficult for me to really transform into a strong Christian? If I change in positive ways, how will that change or affect the people around me?

OCF 'First Forty Days' Program

It seems like our students just graduated from school. But time flies! Freshman orientation and class registration for college students is just around the corner. In getting prepared for the first days of college, it is important for college students to prepare their spiritual life as well.

Last year, the North American OCF Office launched an exciting new program to reach out to incoming first-year Orthodox college students at colleges and universities throughout North America, named The First Forty Days. As its name implies, during the first forty days of the 2012 fall semester, local OCF student leaders and chaplains will work to make personal contact with all new incoming

students. They will be given information regarding the OCF chapter on campus and nearby Orthodox parishes. The intent of this program is to foster a personal connection with our students so that young college students will stay connected to Christ and His Church during their years in post-secondary education.

To accomplish this, OCF needs the help of all Orthodox Parishes in North America. Each parish is asked to provide the North American OCF Office with some basic information concerning their high school graduates who will be attending college in the fall on a downloadable spreadsheet. It is asked that parishes download the spreadsheet, fill out, and

email it back to contacts@ocf.net. OCF will organize the information for all of its chapter leaders for the fall semester. Parishes are also asked to include in the email their parish name, jurisdiction, address, phone number, and email address so that OCF can stay in touch with them in the future. All information received by OCF will remain confidential and will only be released to endorsed OCF chaplains assigned to a particular college. When requesting the information from the students, parishes are asked to please make their students and parents aware that this information will be used in this manner.

For further information, contact OCF at info@ocf.net.

