

Words and Attitudes, and the Way of Christ

In July of this year, I was invited to participate in the second Orientale Lumen Conference in Sydney, Australia. It lasted four days, and I was one of the presenters, along with Cardinal Kasper of Rome, and Metropolitan Bishop of Cairo. The conference was interesting, but it was best being in Australia the first time, and seeing believers there. These conferences arise from a papal encyclical, and the papers deal with problems and possibilities in the relationship between the Orthodox Churches and the West. My lengthy paper dealt with some of the main problems of language and mutual misunderstanding which keep the progress of conversations slow, and reconciliation still distant.

However, in our own diocesan life, I see some of the same problems at work right among us Orthodox. We are misusing important words. We accept without question the western meanings and uses of words which are foundational to our correct self-understanding, and we distort ourselves. For instance, we like to say that Roman Catholics are too legalistic, but do we not too often exceed them in this very attitude towards each other and ourselves? We often will say that in the west there is too much clericalism, but is it not so that not only clergy, but people in responsible positions, will often try to force others to obey?

The word "obedience" itself is so often used among us in the sense that because someone says a thing must be done, it must be so; or because an authority says something it must be followed. Obedience is NOT compliance out of fear; it is a cooperation willingly offered out of love.

And "authority" is another abused word. This is so often taken as one person's having power over another. Rather, it is having the responsibility to lead by a good and correct example. Sometimes a priest or a person in some position of responsibility will expect others to respect and/or obey just because of one's title or position. This "do as I say" attitude is wrong. Much better is the attitude of "I think I know the correct way, and I think you would be right and wise to follow."

Any time we begin to wield power in a worldly way, lording it over someone else, we reject the Gospel and the example of Christ. He, the Good Shepherd, loving and knowing His sheep, and loved and known by His sheep, said He is the Way. It is ours to walk in this Way. Those who are shepherds and persons in authority must always exercise this leadership following the example of Christ. Otherwise we, even bishops and priests, are not really Christians, only fakes.

It is within the context of our call to follow in the Way of Christ that we do not encourage the usual worldly voting process in parishes: because it divides, and puts people against each other.

Consensus, which we are so often unwilling to pursue, is the historic Christian way of talking about a matter until we all agree; and if we cannot yet agree, we do not act.

No Christian in a clerical or lay position of authority or responsibility ought ever dare to push matters by force. Patience must be cultivated. Love must prevail. If we take the short-cuts, we fail. Let us remember who we are, and whom we serve - Christ Himself. Let us take the trouble to pray about things and together to discover God's will for us in all situations. Let us recover genuinely Orthodox Christian attitudes and the correct understanding of words in our daily, scriptural and liturgical use, so that what we say and how we say it, the attitudes we hold in our hearts and display in our behavior, and, finally, what we do—are all together in harmony, and in harmony with Christ our Lord.

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