

September 12, 2004

The Sunday Before the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

This is a message from Father Patrick that appeared on the Touchstone web page on September 3, 2004.

THE HANDMAIDEN

Because this web site is devoted to the comments of *Touchstone* editors on current events and concerns, it never occurred to me that I would be writing here about a small Eastern Orthodox publication called by a lovely name, *The Handmaiden*. This modest publication, founded only a few years ago and produced quarterly by Conciliar Press in California, is dedicated to the spiritual, moral, and domestic concerns of Christian women. It was conceived with the idea of providing distinctly Orthodox views on prayer, Bible reading, the cultivation of virtue, the responsibilities of wives, the education of children, the care of the sick and poor, the consolation of the bereaved, and similar important matters, including the problems of advanced aging. It is no surprise that narrative and personal testimony are the chief literary form of this journal.

I don't believe the circulation of *The Handmaiden* has ever been terribly large, but it has provided a fair number of the fairer sex with what is promised in the Mission Statement inside its front cover, "a beacon of light, a place where Orthodox Christian women and others who are interested in Orthodox life and spirituality can come together to learn, share, relate, and grow." One cannot fail to note the distinctly feminine atmosphere conveyed by the juxtaposition of those five verbs.

To gain some idea what I have in mind to say here, I make a quick comparison with the purpose statement inside *Touchstone*. In that latter statement, composed entirely by a handful of unfeeling, insensitive men, there is nothing about coming together, learning, or growing, and most emphatically nothing about sharing and relating. Whatever else we *Touchstone* types do, we deny with proper execrations that we have ever come together to share and relate.

Indeed, we are hard pressed to declare what, in the context of a publication, those five verbs even mean, and the thought of pursuing the subject gives us a touch of the weeby-jeebs. We men instinctively suspect that "sharing and relating" may lead to what women call "bonding" and sometimes wrongly accuse us of doing when they're not around.

(By the way, the only one of these five verbs that appears in the *Touchstone* statement is "share," which is used only as a participle, referring to "shared belief in the fundamental doctrines." This use heightens, not diminishes, the contrast.)

To mention the unambiguously feminine tone of *The Handmaiden* is scarcely a criticism, of course. We expect women to be women, and we look for them to do, when they get together, whatever it is they do when they get together. We men are not entirely certain what this is, but we see teacups left over afterwards. We also suspect that it involves relating and sharing, whatever that means. Anyway, the rest of us are glad just to stand off and let the Lord's maidservants have at it with all that relating and sharing.

From time to time, they even ask us to help them. For example, I have received requests to write for *The Handmaiden*, requests that I vaguely recall having agreed to. At least I was told yesterday that I have published a thing or two in that journal. (I can only hope I did not, by inadvertence, "relate and share" in the course of doing so.) It seems, therefore, that I have written for *The Handmaiden*.

What I have not done, however, at least until the past two weeks, was actually read that journal. I finally picked up the most recent issue, borrowing my wife's copy. I did so to find out what all the fuss was about. Complaints and groans were coming to me, both from within the parish that I pastor and from without, about the contents of the latest edition of *The Handmaiden*. These grievances all came from women, some of whom felt somehow betrayed, and they were threatening not to renew their subscription. This needed investigation, even if the effort meant some (I hoped) non-lethal exposure to relating and sharing.

So I grabbed the issue and looked into it. The theme of it was "Politics and Faith." This sounded interesting, even if my own preference would be to say "Faith and Politics." Since I had but recently written on the religious dimensions of politics for both *Touchstone* and *Again* (another publication of Conciliar Press), the subject itself was on my mind.

Right away this issue of *The Handmaiden* looked pretty good. Indeed, I found myself quoted twice in the first article, which, if I may say so, left a favorable impression. I don't really recall off-hand what two pronouncements I made, but I have the vestigial impression that they were wise and full of insight. Yes, I am sure that is what I remember.

The next article, "Why I am a Conservative," by Presvytera Sue Jacobse, was even better. I found myself in agreement with every word. So far, so good, I thought. So what was all the fuss about?

About halfway through the following article, however, reality suddenly asserted itself, rather like a baseball bat in the face. It was entitled "Why I Am a Liberal," by Georgette Comuntzis Page.

I am not certain what I expected the article to say, but let me declare at once that I was not discouraged by the word "liberal." In a political context, in fact, I feel great sympathy for the expression. "Liberal," derived from the Latin *liber*, means "free," and evokes impressions of the fundamental liberties guaranteed in our American citizenship.

Beyond the limits of strict etymology, "liberal" in a political context may also signify, for example, a particular view about the government's regulation of health care, the reform of curricula in schools, zoning laws in neighborhoods, the use of public funds for the redistribution of wealth, and various reforms in economics, political structures, and social programs.

In all such concerns, I believe that it is possible to be both a liberal and a Christian. Indeed, I believe that it is possible to be both a liberal and an Eastern Orthodox Christian. The Christian faith, as understood by the Orthodox Church, is compatible with a wide range of views on social and political matters. One may adopt this or that opinion about a proposed tax cut, or a particular health care program, or the decision to wage a specific war, sex education in schools, or any of a host of other matters, and still be a good, believing, acceptable Christian, even though one might be called a "liberal" as that word is currently used.

What I found in Page's article, however, was really quite different. In her account, which is entirely autobiographical, she described how she gradually rediscovered the Orthodox Church as an adult, after passing through years as a political activist of the sort that might, in some circles, be called "liberal." Page did not share many specifics about her political liberalism, except that she disliked Nixon and thought of herself as a hippie.

What did Page learn from that prolonged and sometimes painful experience? She discovered "that many Orthodox teachings fit with my liberal beliefs."

As an adult convert to the Orthodox Church, I found her statement striking. She discovered that *many* teachings of the Orthodox Church "fit" with her "liberal beliefs"? Something is surely wrong with the order here.

What are these "liberal beliefs" that Page finds compatible with "some" of the teachings of the Orthodox Church? Alas, she mentions not a single one.

Page does admit, on the other hand, that her "liberal stance has been *tempered*" (emphasis added) with respect to two of her former persuasions, neither of which seems to me particularly liberal: abortion and homosexual "marriage."

Of the first she writes, "In the past, I would have been squarely on the side of pro-choice; however, I'm now trying to find ways to help support women, particularly

young women, who need help in resolving their difficulties without resorting to this no-win solution."

Is there anything wrong with this? Well, truthfully, it is not very reassuring. Abortion, according to the teaching of the Orthodox Church, is not simply a "no-win solution." It is a terrible crime, the shedding of innocent blood screaming to God for vengeance. As the personal testimony of someone converted to the Orthodox faith, Page should have said, "Whereas in my former delusion I gave political support to the murder of unborn children, the sound teaching of the Orthodox Church has enabled me to repent of this terrible error and to devote the rest of my life in sacrificial service to prevent the further murder of those children."

According to the reactions of the Orthodox women readers who have contacted me about this most recent issue of *The Handmaiden*, Page's reluctance to declare plainly the truth of the Orthodox teaching on abortion was one of their two major complaints.

The other was her explicit ambiguity about homosexual "marriage." I cite Page's own words: "My jury is still out when it comes to gay marriage. I understand that marriage is a sacrament. And yet I know that gay couples sometimes want to be married. However, *I am not convinced* that gay couples should be united in the sacrament of holy matrimony" (emphasis added).

Once again, Page is not very reassuring. Her "jury is still out" on this question of consecrated sodomy. She is still not persuaded of an essential difference between human sexual organs and the two orifices of the human digestive canal. The Bible, the liturgical texts for the blessing of a marriage, all the Church Fathers, the structure of human biology, and the unbroken tradition of the whole human race—all of these sources together—have managed only to render Page "not convinced" on the subject.

I began to grasp why there is currently an uproar among Christian women accustomed to find in the pages of *The Handmaiden* the solid, dependable teaching of the Orthodox Church on those matters that are essential and important to their life in Christ. They have a right to feel offended. They are justified in their sense of betrayal. They know, by instinct, faith, and logic, that neither abortion nor homosexual "marriage" can be correctly described as falling under the categories of liberal or conservative. These two subjects are not open to discussion among Christians. For a member of the Orthodox Church, these are matters of radical affirmation, and those unwilling to affirm unambiguously the teaching of the Orthodox Church on these two points are outside the mind and heart of that church. Such a person has no business being published in what claims to be an Orthodox Christian journal.

Nothing daunted, nonetheless, I pressed on to "Why I am Neither a Liberal Nor a Conservative," by Heather Sullivan Zydek. Here I ascertained that, by Page's standards, Zydek is hopelessly conservative. Indeed, she even calls abortion a

"barbaric act." For my part, I am less sure that the refusal to approve infant sacrifice is so very conservative. It strikes me as distinctly "liberal," in the historical sense used by the Roman Republic in its invectives against Carthage, where the sacrifice of babies was routine.

Besides, Zydek would hardly want to be thought conservative. After all, she goes on to inform us, "most conservatives" are pushed along by "western, juridical, male-ego-driven" impulses that "oversimplify things" and lead to "bigotry and hate." Do I need to mention that some of *The Handmaiden's* loyal women readers were distressed to find themselves described as "male-ego-driven" and perpetrators of "bigotry and hate"?

However, I went on bravely into the further reaches of *The Handmaiden*, and my effort was rewarded. The very next article was "Women Making a Difference," by Fran Presley, one of the finer pens in the Orthodox Church and arguably the best writer (and certainly the most precise and careful writer) to appear regularly in *The Handmaiden*.

This journal now finds itself in a bit of a pickle. The decision to publish those offensive articles, particularly the one by Page, was made by the editors and the folks who manage Conciliar Press. They should recognize that they have some fences to mend. Their unwise editorial decision insulted their readers, to whom they owe a sincere apology that cannot be sufficiently humble and abject.

Those who, like myself, wish nothing but good for *The Handmaiden* and Conciliar Press, urge the folks who run that journal to do the decent thing and reassure their readers, along with the rest of us, that in the future we may find in its pages only such things as edify (that is, "build up"), nourish, unite, and enlighten. This is not a whit more than their readers deserve.

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