

**February 19, 2012**

The Sunday After Theophany

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

Each first week of Lent, when Orthodox Christians chant the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete, they encounter a traditional allegory of (mostly monastic) piety: the active and contemplative lives symbolized in Leah and Rachel, the two wives of Jacob. The modern Orthodox newcomer, unless his education included exposure to Dante, may find this reference both bewildering and arbitrary.

The underlying premise of the Leah/Rachel imagery is Jacob's stature as a biblical visionary. It was Jacob, we recall, who beheld---at Bethel---the heavenly ladder used by the angels to facilitate their ministries on earth. The monastic fathers, inspired by this scene, took to searching out mystical meanings in the other details of Jacob's life. Speculations about Leah and Rachel---as symbols, respectively, of the active and contemplative lives---were part of that exegetical search.

In fact, comparisons between the active and contemplative lives had classical roots; both Aristotle and Cicero wrote on the subject. Theorists generally agreed on the superiority of contemplation but admitted the prior necessity of action; the contemplative life required active preparation and support.

When the Christian monastic fathers took up this theme, they relied on Holy Scripture. For example, in the gospel story of the two sisters in Bethany they found an outline of the difference between the active and contemplative lives. Martha, busy about many things, was the activist, while Mary, who concentrated on the one thing necessary, was the contemplative.

The monks applied the lessons of this comparison to their own situation: although their ultimate goal was to pray with a pure heart---to sit in peace at the feet of Jesus---they quickly discovered that this was impossible without a great deal of prior activity, chiefly the purging of their vices and the acquisition of basic virtues. In short, in order to imitate Mary, they found it was first necessary to imitate Martha. The lesson seemed obvious.

These monastic fathers perceived the same process in the story of Leah and Rachel. Rachel was Jacob's first love. When he entered the chamber on the bridal night, he fully expected to enjoy the embraces of Rachel; that is to say, he sought the joys of contemplative prayer. Imagine his surprise when he discovered that the life of contemplative prayer would not come so quickly. Instead of Rachel, the shocked Jacob found Leah in the bed. He was begetting children!

Jacob had never planned to marry Leah, but now, he discovered, he could

never enjoy the embraces of Rachel until he had begun to father children by Leah. According to this allegory, the more fruitful life was the active life. Leah was the wife who bore Jacob the greater number of children. In short, while the monk longed for the joys of mystical prayer, he was obliged to keep fathering these children of the active life: repentance, discipline, patience, long-suffering, and so on.

St. Gregory the Dialoguist, whose Presanctified Liturgy is so important a part of Orthodox Lenten observance, joined this Leah/Rachel comparison to the story of Martha and Mary. He wrote: "After the embrace of Leah, Jacob attains to Rachel, in that every one that is perfect is first joined to an active life in productiveness, and afterwards united to a contemplative life in rest. For that the life of contemplation is less indeed in time, but greater in value than the active, we are shown by the words of the Holy Gospel, wherein two women are described to have acted in different ways. For Mary sat at our Redeemer's feet, hearing his words, but Martha eagerly prosecuted bodily services.... Now Martha's concern is not reprov'd, but that of Mary is even commended. For the merits of the active are great, but of the contemplative, far better" (*Moralia in Job* 6.61).

Although this sort of biblical interpretation is a bit out of vogue nowadays, its roots are deep (in Philo the Jew, for instance) and its history long. In one of my favorite instances of it, Richard of St. Victor elaborates a variation on the theme: Rachel represents the attainment of Wisdom. "What," he asks, "do we call the bed chamber of Rachel except Holy Scripture?" The student of the Bible, however, when he pursues Wisdom in its pages, discovers he must first come to grips with Justice; "he suddenly finds himself in the embrace of Leah." Justice precedes Wisdom as a necessary condition; a man cannot be wise without first learning to be just (*Benjamin Minor* 4).

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