



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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III.

THE TWOFOLD ANOINTING

The Beautiful Art of Asceticism and the Good Fight for Morality

Besides, individual moral effort—the supposed response to the supposed fact that sex is bad because teen pregnancy is a public health issue, a kind of disease (you can see how the other side is still stinging from the Virgin Birth in Bethlehem even after 2,000 years!!!)—doesn't take us very far. We need ascetic effort as the bigger share of things. Ascetic effort is not exactly the same as moral effort.

RTE: What is the difference?

DR. PATITSAS: Giving the moral advice, “Don't do it,” no matter how many scare tactics we put behind it, has no effect if we haven't shown a young person a real experience of Beauty and Chastity. Even the person giving the advice has to possess Beauty and Chastity, or the moral advice will be a dead letter. There is nothing in empty words to draw them upwards towards Christ.

Jane Jacobs, the city-planner, said that you can't directly fight emptiness or poverty or blight in a city neighborhood. When you try to, for example by knocking down bad buildings, the area often just becomes more empty and the blight gets worse. You have to encourage, instead, the good things that *are* happening there commercially or culturally. You have to find them and feed them.

In spiritual terms, feed the good eros by pursuing beauty and don't fight the morality battle as your first priority. Or, as Christ said, “The devil driven out finds his old house empty, so he comes back with seven of his friends” (Matt. 12:45). This is the message for our time, for our struggle, and it is as true in urban planning as it is in spiritual life. You almost never win by fight-

ing temptation head on. Or, as we said when we opened this interview, death must be conquered and hope reawakened before sin can be defeated. Or, let Christ come and drive the demons away for you—that way no dangerous vacuum follows our self-help efforts.²²

Understood accurately, asceticism is about Beauty; it's about attempting to be the sort of artists who won't betray what they have seen of the beautiful. For example, we don't fast in order to be good, but so that our devotion, our eros for Christ's Beauty, is absolute. Moral effort only matters when it continues that ascetic effort into the arena of Goodness. Moral struggle has to be an amplification of asceticism, never a substitute. It has to be the working out of all that Beauty entails. In fasting you love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and then this unfolds into your ability to, like Christ, die for your brother as if he were yourself.

RTE: What if we can't fast due to medical or other physical reasons?

DR. PATITSAS: You have not done something bad in weakening your fasts in those cases—it may often be even necessary and good. Also be careful of a danger from the other direction, that when you do fast you aren't looking to Christ, but are only shoring up your own self-control, self-regard, and general sense of moral superiority. Fasting may strengthen your willpower, but it also may exhaust it. What is important is that it gives you something deeper than willpower, the habit of self denial. The saying goes that in combat you don't “rise to the occasion,” through a burst of willpower, but that you “sink to the level of your training.” Fasting is that training and it prepares a part of our minds and souls that is more basic than willpower.

Now, sometimes people react to that danger of self-righteousness by stopping the fast completely. But the answer is to see that if fasting and asceticism are about the Beautiful, then you must use them to fall more deeply in love with Christ and not to fall more deeply in love with yourself. Self-love is the defeat of eros, the mother of the passions, and fasting helps us cure self-love.

But if your moral struggle betrays the good eros which is the foundation of morality, then you will have sawn off the branch you are sitting on. This

²² And of course this again points to the strong connection between the sacraments of Holy Communion and Confession, that both are a turning to Christ and a touching of the hem of his garment, so that power should go out of him, staunch our wounds, and that He might fill us with himself.

is what happens when we focus on the evils of sexual immorality instead of first supporting the movement towards Christian marriage and family, or towards monasticism; really, towards Christ. Our message becomes nihilistic. “Don’t” is all we have to offer.

St. Paul looks at sexual purity in both ways, as both the right response to Beauty, and as a struggle to preserve our moral Goodness. But we only seem to remember the second and overall much harder way. Yes, sexual sin is something that can keep us from God, can lock us out of the heavenly kingdom: “[Although they know] the righteous judgment of God ... [they] not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them,” he says, referring to homosexual acts in particular (Rom. 1:32). And, “Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:9). This is the ethical side: Temptation comes to all of us, and we fight against it.

But for St. Paul the other direction was more important, and to me far more surprising. In the first chapter of Romans St. Paul says that sexual immorality isn’t so much a sin, as it is the *punishment* for sin! It is the consequence of a prior sin; sexual falls are the handing over of our lives and bodies to humiliation because we have already sinned in another way. If we are having trouble in our own battle with temptation, it may be because, although we struggle and struggle to be good, we have skipped a prior step. This is such a wild perspective on things!

St. Paul describes the typical four-part sequence through which we descend into sexual immorality. First, there is the revelation of Beauty—God’s Theophany. Second is how we respond. What if we fail to respond to Beauty in an orthodox liturgical way? What if when we see the Beauty of God in nature or in the Church, we don’t give praise or repent? We may fail to leave ourselves behind and entrust ourselves to this vision, this Good News of Christ. We might not respond in faith or eros, in other words.

Third, if we have failed to acknowledge Christ’s Beautiful Theophany, and have not fallen in love with him with all that we are so that our very lives become a liturgy, we instead become idolatrous. We worship created things, whether in the form of idols or by becoming materialists. Another form of idolatry is obsession with our own moral perfection, when we regard that perfection as our own achievement rather than as a gift and a fruit of synergy with God.

Following idolatry, as the fourth step in the sequence, God allows us to be turned over to sexual uncleanness. And God allows this final step out of love, so that in our humiliation we will return to him.

So if we are going to defeat sexual sin, and while we are at it clear up our confusion about what Chastity is, then we have to return to Theophany, to Beauty. We have to fall in love with Christ more deeply. This is what St. Elder Porphyrios meant when he said that “you don’t become holy by fighting evil”—he was reminding us of the first step of Christian life in St. Paul: doxology, which Paul usually called “faith.” Or, perhaps what St. Paul calls faith, we are in this interview calling “chaste eros.”²³

This is what St. Porphyrios called the easy way: Struggle ascetically first, and then struggle ethically. Struggle easily to be faithful first of all in your devotion to the *One* God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—by falling in love with God’s amazing beauty. *Then*, purity will be given to you, in large part.

Asceticism comes before moral struggle, and it is the struggle of the artist to create honestly and within the bounds set for his art. Asceticism is Chastity in our devotion to God. It is rejection of self-love and every other form of idolatry. In other words, we should struggle to keep our eye sound, rather than focus on resisting the negative.

It is easy to conflate ascetic struggle with ethical struggle, because we naturally feel guilty when we eat meat on a Friday, and so our lack of asceticism seems like merely a moral failure. But we must preserve some distinction in our understanding: We fast because we choose not to idolize food, and instead to feast on our vision of God, and on God’s very Body and Blood. Asceticism is first of all for Beauty, and only then becomes a struggle for Goodness.

If we take Scripture’s warning against sexual sin seriously, then we have to accept the whole sequence that St. Paul describes in the first chapter of Romans. We have to see that sexual immorality, serious as it is, is usually a punishment for sin, more than a sin itself. And that our primary and initial

²³ Since “faith” and “chaste eros” are the same thing, we can see that St. Paul’s, “we are saved by faith alone,” and St. Porphyrios’, “No one ever became holy by fighting evil; instead, fall in love with Christ,” have the same meaning. And we can also see why “faith without works is dead,” for our chaste eros/faith is for the Crucified One, and therefore loving him includes the living desire to be crucified with him; thus, true eros unfolds into agape/works. We then become true—that is, are saved—and we see that the state of salvation is to liturgize, i.e., to practice an eros of self-offering to God that alone is able to unfold into the correct sense of agape/service to our fellow man and the creation. Still, “faith alone” is sufficient, for within true faith is already found the essence of both agape/works and philia/friendship with Christ. “Chastity and Empathy,” the title of this interview, could therefore also be written, “Faith and Works,” but with the understanding that works are an *amplification or flowering* of faith, not a substitute nor even a counterpart, just as agape is an amplification and a more developed form of eros.

battleground against such sin is in the focus on theophany—Beauty First. This is what I meant when I said earlier in our discussion that sexual immorality is not equivalent to the loss of Chastity, but is rather the consequence of losing Chastity—of losing our focus on Theophany.

St. Paul also shows us how to combine his two understandings of sexual purity, of its being both a gift and an arena of struggle. If the primary sin is the failure to respond to God's self-revelation—is our failure to liturgize in an orthodox manner and thus we instead become idolatrous—then St. Paul shows that the unethical use of our bodies is also a sin against liturgy, “for your bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit” (Cor. 6:19). Sexual sin is the failure to use our bodies liturgically; it is a kind of idolatry of the flesh, of our own or another person's flesh. It is a kind of non-Eucharist, a theft and an unlawful appropriation of something not made by us, an underestimation of a gift belonging also to Another.

“Eros requires Chastity, and Chastity always means the forgetting of self and the discovery of the other.”

If our lives really begin with God's self-offering, and if we are meant to leave ourselves behind and run to him chastely in response, then the opposite of Chastity is not a rich erotic life; far from it. The opposite of Chastity is SELF-love, the total defeat of eros. Eros requires Chastity, and Chastity always means the forgetting of self and the discovery of the other.

Then, we can discuss agape, empathy, and being crucified together with Christ for the life of the world.

Imitate Creation's Eros for Christ

The Enlightenment project was to desacralize the world in order to liberate man from the power of religion; as we said, the first scientists attempted to complete the western journey that so alarmed C.S. Lewis, away from seeing the world as an icon. In a non-sacred world reason was supposed to reign supreme and men would no longer serve mythic powers or church officials, the philosophers of the Enlightenment said. But this meant that the Enlightenment, despite the fact that it partly raises up nature and its wonder, was launched upon a negation of eros and beauty, of icon and theophany. It had to be, for to leave room for real eros would make the sort of calculating reason such philosophers preferred secondary and, the brightest minds thought, leave man a slave to the old ways.

That is why we moderns only talk about two of the three Socratic transcendentals, truth and goodness. Truth, we call science, and Goodness, we call technology or public policy. But there is no room for aesthetics, for letting Beauty spark our souls into life. To moderns, aesthetics is just opinion, prejudice, oppression. Beauty tempts us, we moderns think, to do bad things.

And so Beauty is the only thing we moderns agree is ugly, because disagreement about it will divide us—especially Beauty that rises to the level of Theophany; vision is the only thing we moderns agree cannot be seen, because it would undermine our rationalism; eros is the only love we are denied, for it dislodges the self from its position at the center of the world; and Chastity, by demonstrating the iconicity of the cosmos, is seen as our greatest enemy, the thing which must be minimized, ridiculed, and in fact vilified.

I think that in the Epistle to the Ephesians, St. Paul makes it clear that Chastity is a necessary preparation for marriage. In that Epistle he argues that in pursuing Chastity we are training ourselves to see the world as icon, as gift. After that, we can see our husband or wife as an icon, of either Christ or the Church. Our stage one total eros for Christ, “Love the Lord your God...,” is proper preparation for stage two agape, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” because loving that neighbor is inseparable from understanding him or her to be an icon of Christ. Beauty first, then Goodness.

And then we can see the real challenge that Chastity brings: You love Christ so completely, only then to discover that since He is the Crucified One, you must now fulfill this love by consenting to be co-crucified with him. In that



next step of co-crucifixion you have Goodness as well as Beauty, which is what makes you True.

Our main problem with the spiritual life these days is that “we just don’t feel like it”—we lack eros. A world without true holiness is good enough for us, so long as we have an abundance of the technological fruits of the Enlightenment.

RTE: How do we overcome our complacency?

DR. PATITSAS: St. Seraphim of Sarov was asked what differentiates our age from the age of the apostles. He answered, “Only one thing is missing: a firm resolve.” And this resolve comes from gazing again and again at ultimate Beauty, especially in the lives of the saints. This resolve is not “willpower” as we use that term today, but a fiery love; it is, in fact, the bright fire of chaste eros, or faith. Such a faith is sufficient to save us, because it is the living seed of true Christian liturgy.

RTE: We are often urged to use willpower to attain both spiritual and material goals, but it can be very isolating. How does willpower differ from a Beauty-driven resolve?

DR. PATITSAS: “Willpower” in the sense that it is used outside the Church is aimed only at goodness or truth. We know an effective way to lose weight would be to eat differently, and so we struggle with diets. We know that pornography is bad, so we disconnect the internet. This is fine as far as it goes, but our main focus ought to be outside ourselves, on Christ, or on the joy of healthy foods and exercise, or on the chaste beauty of the Church services.

By making our bodies instruments of liturgy—in other words, by loving the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength—we arrive at total eros for God. This all-consuming eros for Christ and the Holy Trinity is, as we have said, Chastity. When this is realized, unclean desires can find no place in us, are pushed aside. Chastity only has meaning for us Orthodox when we “begin with Beauty.” We are not to make a display of our virtue for its own sake, or to subsume it for some worldly social purpose like “lowering the rate of teen pregnancy.”

Opposite: Orthodox Christian wedding, Tallinn, Estonia, 2014.

Moreover, out of the first of the two greatest commandments flows the second, “To love your neighbor as yourself.” Agape should always be anchored in Chastity. This is why, while we welcome good done from anyone, we in the Church are cautious about love shown in some name other than that of Christ. Out of eros for Christ flows agape for our neighbor; out of Chastity, genuine empathy can arise, be sustained, and be without blemish.

Otherwise, the same voices who speak for women’s rights, will denigrate men; or the same voices who will speak up for the child in the womb, will bless wars and invasions that result in the deaths of other people’s children. People can love Christ—Ultimate Beauty and Goodness and Truth—in ways we don’t understand at first, of course, too. And we are ready to make common cause with anyone who does, or even tries to, join agape to eros.

But let us be wary of do-gooders who lack the erotic dimension, who lack the consequent wildness of real persons.

We must learn, rather, from the creation. In his vision Elder Aemilianos’ saw that every created thing—rocks and trees and animals—is in fact continually reciting the Jesus Prayer, by virtue of their very existence.²⁴ They, too, exist erotically when they cry, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me!”, for in praying this they leave themselves behind and run to him. And for them, also, this eros is amplified in agape, when they conclude the Prayer by identifying themselves as, “the sinner!”—in other words, as a creature made out of utter nothingness, wishing to join in the overflow of Christ’s self-emptying love for the world! They, too, trace the path through Beauty to Goodness, and in so doing arrive at their logos—that is, exist or become True.

If the elder’s vision was genuine, then all of creation prays this way, except for us! We alone are the missing link.

Distinguishing Real from Apparent Beauty: The Presence of the Holy Cross

RTE: Up until now we’ve spoken about our response to Beauty as being chaste eros, which is what you believe St. Paul meant by “faith.” If from the beginning you had directly called Beauty “the Gospel,” or “Theophany,” or

²⁴ Elder Aemilianos of Simonopetra tells the story of his birth in the Spirit, in which he saw a vision of the whole creation reciting the Jesus Prayer.

Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I don’t think we would have been as challenged by the idea of “Beauty First.” Having taken it from this slightly different angle, the whole picture is in a new and deeper light. And it reminds me of what the good news of the Gospel is supposed to evoke in us: delight, joy, and a desire to turn towards Christ.

DR. PATITSAS: I really wanted to emphasize Beauty, to cast the Gospel in this light, because I feel that in denigrating Beauty—as we do when we reduce all of life to science and technology, our culture’s names for as much Truth and Goodness as we will admit exists—we in the West are suffering. We are losing our respect for the feminine. We are losing our sense of being at home in and belonging in the world. We are making family life impossible, and Church membership as the Bride of Christ impossible. We can’t worship properly, or celebrate deeply. So many millions of people are lost in drug use because we have lost our joy through these self-inflicted cultural wounds.

And I wanted to emphasize Beauty-first in solidarity with C.S. Lewis, who devoted all of his novels and his theological writing to this one point, that the world is beautiful because it *really is* an icon of heavenly life. Lewis did not follow the decline all the way back to its origins in the 11th-century Lateran councils that first separated the symbolic from the real.²⁵ But he insisted that we *should* try to trace the failure in Western Christian theology back to its origins, or we would never really overcome it.

RTE: For those who feel that they have never deeply experienced the Beauty you speak of, or seen real Chastity, or encountered Christ, how does one start to develop this primary aesthetic sense? God can seem very far away.

DR. PATITSAS: He can, and then in his seeming absence we may panic and make things worse. But in fact Christ is closer to us than we are.

Beginning with Beauty can be done very practically, in a simple moment-to-moment application. Although eros is the first stage of reason, it operates in us like feeling, but in the sense of intuition, or it operates like that certain knowing that we all possess, which goes beyond all opinions and emotions.²⁶ So often Christ stands at the door and knocks—I mean, He imparts to us

²⁵ See Fr. A. Schmemmann, Appendix Two in *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1970).

²⁶ I learned this from Eric Perl in his *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Albany, NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 2008).

some spiritual prompting—but because we don’t yet see a moral or logical dimension to this prompting (neither Goodness nor Truth are as yet clearly in play), we don’t respond, we don’t react. We are tragically cold to Beauty—we have not cultivated our intuition and our theological senses. And in the case of these intuitions, by the time we find out *why* we should have prayed or helped or changed our course, it is often too late.

I think this is the meaning of the Parable of the Sower and the seed that falls on different types of soil. This parable isn’t only about whether or not we accept Jesus Christ as Our Lord and Savior on our first hearing. In reality, the Sower continues to sow beautiful seeds of theophany within our hearts on a daily and even hourly basis, such that even those outside the Church have the divine law written on their hearts (Rom. 2:13-15). But do we listen? Are our hearts ready to receive and bear fruit in the most practical sense by welcoming these promptings and joining our own efforts to them?

God’s initiative in our spiritual life is always primary, and his prompting in our hearts is a kind of theophany. This is in fact the *usual* way that He speaks to us. And it is precisely through our aesthetic sense that we can most immediately recognize these seeds as *his* action, and not as something else at work. We learn what his prompting “feels like,” “tastes like,” as opposed to when it is our own passions, dark forces, or just our emotions or bodily feelings operating.

This is why “discernment” as a category of insight in Orthodoxy is not about reading a crystal ball. It’s not magic. Discernment just means that our aesthetic sense is so refined by grace and asceticism, that we know at once *which* promptings are from the Holy Spirit and which ones aren’t. Discernment, even for elders, is not about reading other people so much as it is about reading themselves.

But for someone like me, while I am ignoring these small promptings that are the actual encounter with Beauty in my life, I am giving in to all kinds of “pleasures” and opinions and emotional highs and lows that really aren’t Beauty at all. Isn’t it amazing how just a glance at an icon can often wake us up from such temptations!

“Beauty First,” we have been saying, implies developing a healthy Chastity. If we’re going to hear the “still, small voice of God,” we’ll have to give no mind to (i.e., not direct our *nous* toward) the clamor of our own passions, opinions, and prejudices. One problem I have with contemporary psychology is that it encourages us to devote so much attention and significance to that clamor.

Beginning with Beauty means that you start by cultivating and not suppressing the divine eros at work within you. But eros toward what? And so fasting is immediately part of eros—we’ve gotten so attached to so many false beauties, or to true beauty but in false—selfish—ways. The Church talks about fasting, almsgiving, and prayer: This is our three-part psychotherapeutic program, and although to our dull ears it sounds pietistic and weak, in the interviews on trauma, and then on Beauty, we could see the awesome power of this sequence.²⁷ Cleanse your ability to appreciate Beauty through fasting; contemplate Goodness by actually practicing empathy/almsgiving; and in noetic prayer steadily become one with Christ, who is Truth.

Yes, our culture is wary of beauty. It is afraid of being seduced. But is it afraid of being seduced because it wants to be faithful to God, as Eve failed to be in the Garden? Or is it afraid of being seduced because it is afraid of that conversation with *actual* Beauty that will follow our fall into socially accepted but false beauties: “Who told you that you were naked?” I think our culture is afraid of Beauty because, while it can learn Truth and it can master Goodness, Beauty will always render it vulnerable and interdependent with others and dependent on God.

So, yes, we have scriptural warnings that Beauty can pull us away from God. But real Beauty is the sign that we have found the truth, or that we are ready to put away our selfish desires and pursue something outside ourselves. Or, falling in love with Beauty is even the proof that we are leaving “the world” behind entirely and are ready to dedicate ourselves to God without counting the cost.

An Eye for Beauty

RTE: Please give some guiding principles to distinguish the Beauty that saves from the merely pleasurable and attractive that seduces.

DR. PATITSAS: At the heart of genuine Beauty we always find the same Principle, the same Logos, the identical Someone—Christ, and in fact, Christ crucified for the life of the world. I mean, within true Beauty we always find the ultimate Goodness Who is Christ in his dying for us on the Cross. So

²⁷ See Footnote 1, above.

Christ Crucified is our measure, our criterion, of whether or not what we see is truly Beautiful.

The ancient Greeks called the Beautiful “the radiance of the Good.” So, all beauty is the radiance of Christ’s Cross, we might say. Just read some of the hymns for September 14th; I think we do in fact sing exactly this.

Let’s say that you tell me that this building, or this painting, or this musical composition is beautiful. Then show me now Christ, and Him Crucified, within it. I once thought this standard was too high, too literal, to cover every form of beauty in music and painting and building, but the Austrian-English architect Christopher Alexander in *The Timeless Way of Building* convinced me otherwise, although he does not speak of Christ openly.

RTE: One of the things students appreciate about your courses is exposure to Christopher Alexander’s thought. In *The Timeless Way* and in his other writings, so many people have found a reconnection to their innate ability to recognize and create beauty. But before we speak about Alexander and his ideas, can you say more about how the Cross is present in what we find truly Beautiful?

DR. PATITSAS: This can be relational—not relative, but relational. I mean, my wife will remain beautiful to me precisely because I am crowned to her. Through the sacrament, my desire for her beauty includes Christ and His Cross of self-sacrificial love for her. It is possible, within limits, to find someone else’s wife beautiful also, so long as an appreciation of her beauty includes the cross of *not* desiring her in an improper way, the cross of resisting sexual expressions of love for any beautiful person who is not my wife, the cross of not acting in ways that make her husband jealous.²⁸ This is how we are to understand the beauty of someone who is not available to us through marriage.

If, however, we pass into sin, then we ourselves have converted God-created Beauty into the wrong kind of beauty, into something that negates the Cross. Stolen beauty turns bitter in our mouths; it becomes ugly because we ourselves have attempted to remove the Cross from within it.

The existence of the Holy Cross within Beauty is relational in other senses.

²⁸ I don’t mean primarily physical beauty. Infidelity can also begin with admiration for the beauty of the spirit or of the mind of someone beside our spouse. Locate the cross within that beauty, and find a mature balance.

For example, the ascetical calling that we respect the seasons of life—when it is and isn’t proper to eat, marry, and so forth—shows us that the beauty of a thing exists to the degree and in the way that the thing relates to Christ and to his will for us to become “priests,” to join ourselves with him as co-celebrants of his eternal liturgy.

Therefore the same object—food, for example—may be truly Beautiful if we eat in a spiritual way, or at one season, and a mere appearance of Beauty if we eat in a worldly way, or at the wrong season. Moreover, how we relate to what we encounter also partly *determines* whether it is truly Beautiful. We are called to be co-creators with God of the world, and thus we ourselves will help to determine whether a thing is formed—that is, whether it is truly part of the “cosmos,” the Greek word that means both created order and beautiful thing.

How often do we see a holy person showing appreciation for some overlooked person or place or even object, such that suddenly its inner radiance is almost blindingly bright! This is the meaning of proper “nationalism” in the Church, by the way, just that we should love all nations equally—and yet have some of the fervor of a partisan for each!

RTE: I’ve seen this with experienced spiritual fathers in Greece and Russia, who are able to bring out the beauty in what before seemed rather ordinary.

DR. PATITSAS: Related to this shifting presence of beauty in a person or place is the fact that if the Cross is at the center of the thing for which we feel eros, it will be because either we or God have put it there. And if it is placed there by God, the presence of that Cross is meant to be confirmed by our assent to it; this happens when we are willing to embrace the part of loving something beautiful that involves the Cross, and not just the part that makes us feel like “kings” and “lords” in a worldly sense. Our calling as Christians may be to rule, to lead, but then it is always to rule and lead at our own expense, as my friend and colleague Olga Meerson once put it.

So, yes, “Beauty First” means that we’ve got to distinguish between Real Beauty and merely apparent beauty. We need a three-fold spiritual development: of our discernment, of our artistic skill at ignoring false beauty, and of our passion (in the wonderful American sense of passion, meaning “sustained and committed longing”) for the really beautiful.

“Beauty” includes all that God has done throughout salvation history, throughout the life of the Church, and in our own lives up to now. “Beauty First” is another way of saying, “Pay attention to Theophany.” And where

do you most readily find Theophany? The list is not brief, especially when you multiply the particular instances of nature and good art, as well as Liturgy, Holy Scripture, Pilgrimage, Saints' Lives, Hymnography, Church Art and Architecture (indeed, all the ecclesiastical arts, including incense and vestment making), and so on. But do we approach these sources as if they *were* beautiful, and fall in love with them? Or have we lost that wonder from our lives?

RTE: These sources are rich, but how can we know when it is God at work prompting our hearts, and not more worldly aesthetic appreciation or self-satisfaction?

DR. PATITSAS: This takes experience and training. And one form of training comes from just being immersed in the Tradition—Tradition is a record of prior Theophany, of Beauty, and it re-presents that Beauty to us. As we enter that current and learn to swim in it, it teaches us what is real Beauty, and what is false.

When a child is raised in the Church in a healthy way, what he has above all is an unshakable sense of how Orthodoxy “tastes.” He grows up knowing the theological aesthetic of the Church, and this will carry a person most of the way home if he is faithful to it. This is part of what Dostoevsky meant when he said that “Beauty will save the world”: He was talking about the saving power of the memory of attending Presanctified Liturgy as a child.

We start with eros and the willingness to fall in love, but also with the readiness to have our eros purified through fasting. When we begin with Beauty, we make Chastity and Unknowing our first allies and friends.

RTE: Is this “unknowing” the same as the willingness to be surprised? C.S. Lewis seemed to be renouncing Enlightenment rationalism when he called the account of his conversion, *Surprised by Joy*. St. Mary of Egypt also “unknew” herself and turned to the Beauty of Christ.

DR. PATITSAS: Unknowing is another term for chaste eros, or for the fasting that is also feasting. Therefore it is very much an openness to surprise, the act of real listening, but one balanced by an ability to ignore the clamor of the world.

The Mystery of the Twofold Anointing

RTE: Let's go back to your idea that to love Beauty in the right way means that we consent to the Cross that we find within it. In lectures you've emphasized that “Anointing is always dual,” or that within any genuine anointing from God there is both the Cross and the Resurrection.

DR. PATITSAS: And when a person is genuinely anointed, he or she becomes both a king and a sacrificial offering: the two states are inseparable for Christians. In fact I've been told that this was true to some degree throughout ancient Indo-European, Near Eastern, and other sacrificial religions. It is a human truth present in the Natural Law as seen in many places, which finds its final expression in Christ and His Cross and Resurrection.

The first example I received from the person who taught me about the Twofold Anointing was the anointing of animals before ancient sacrifice. The anointing would seal the perfection, the unblemished state, of the offering. It was given only after the priests had inspected the animal for flaws and found the offering to be perfect. But the moment that the priest anoints the offering as perfect, as “the best,” he is in this very gesture also marking it for death.

We personally may want to be the best, but in fact in true religion we only sacrifice “the king” of what exists; we give our very best to God. The thing which is “the best” is also destined to die, to give its life for the life of the world. To be chosen, anointed, in Christ is exactly like this, and to follow Christ is both to be counted worthy of eternal life *and* to be called to give our lives here and now for those around us. We receive a Cross to carry at the same time that we receive the foretaste of our Resurrection!

This is why Christ's halo, in iconography, is unique. It includes the circle of perfection but also the Cross. While a saint-martyr may carry the Cross, there is only One with such a halo: Christ, the only perfectly anointed one! Incidentally, *every* icon of Christ is an icon of the entire Holy Trinity, for He is the image of the Father (Col. 1:15) and his halo is the symbol of the Holy Spirit, proceeding from the Father in order to rest upon the Son (John 1:33).²⁹

This idea that anointing is always dual applies here, in our eros. If we have seen what is Beautiful, if we have sensed it and have fallen in love with it, this means that we have been anointed as “little Christs”—that we have been cho-

²⁹ Every Orthodox icon of Christ is thus a presentation of the Orthodox doctrine that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father in order to rest upon the Son.



sen by God precisely both to die and to be reborn through our love for that Beauty. We know a thing to be truly Beautiful because in the ecstasy of loving and desiring it some self-denial arises. We forget ourselves, at least for some moment. The depth of its beauty corresponds to the depth of that self-denial.

The concern that the object of our eros should include the Cross means that for Christians desire and Chastity are inseparable. They are one thing, a single movement. Eros in Christ implies Chastity. Fasting and Feasting seem separate to us in our fallen state, but they form a single twofold response to the Beautiful.

In Christ, the Cross and Resurrection are not always so sequential. Rather, we experience them simultaneously, in the ecstasy of at once living for our beloved and dying to ourselves. This coincidence of the Cross and the Resurrection is what is so uniquely characteristic of Orthodox art and Orthodox spirituality.

To fast is to feast chastely; it is to so feast on Christ and on what Christ brings you, that nothing else can tempt you. To feast is to fast chastely; it is to leave behind every false beauty and partake of only what is given to us in Christ. Cross and Resurrection coincide.

Or in terms of eros, to fast is to be so overcome by eros that we forget to eat. It is to be so intoxicated by the divine wine that you cannot drink wine here. Thus, St. Paul cautions St. Timothy to be careful how he fasts, lest he damage his body (I Tim. 5:23)—the body which your Bridegroom desires!

In terms of beauty, to fast is to leave behind every partial beauty and all partial estimations of what is beautiful, and love the true beauty. What first drives us to fast is a vision of his Beauty.

Yes, many times this vision of his perfection will remind us of our present, and we hope temporary, ugliness. And thus out of mercy Christ proclaims, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” That is, He does not just show us the Kingdom, leaving us with despair at our own unworthiness, but promises us that repentance is possible, and that He will help us to repent, since it is now not a “self-improvement program,” but *an act of obedience for which He provides the main energy.*

RTE: You’ve previously emphasized this twofold character as a way to know whether an anointing is genuine, and you’ve used the well-known terms

Opposite: Fresco, St. Gregory Palamas.

“joyful sorrow,” or “bright sadness”—χαρμολύπη in Greek—as that special quality which marks the Orthodox aesthetic.

DR. PATITSAS: In my course lectures I try to connect these terms to the duality of genuine anointing and I argue that we can tell whether an action is truly ethical by the degree to which it embraces both the Cross and the Resurrection.

The person who taught me that “anointing is always dual”—an idea I’ve never heard anywhere else, although it feels exactly right—was my dissertation director and mentor, Robin Darling Young. She was advising me at a crucial moment in my research about Orthodox Holy Week. I was connecting what I was reading in Holy Week to St. Gregory Palamas’ teaching about the Holy Trinity. He emphasized that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father in order to rest upon the Son; earlier Orthodox Fathers had begun to speak the same way, using the *filioque* as a positive opportunity to clarify a position that both Orthodox and Roman Catholics would hopefully recognize as correct. But St. Gregory also pointed specifically to the Gospel of John for a scriptural proof of this teaching. The Baptist had been told that only him upon whom the Spirit descended *and remained* should be recognized as the Christ, as the truly anointed one.

“The twofold anointing is the joyful sorrow, the bright sadness, the sober ecstasy of our faith.”

It seems to me that at Christ’s baptism in the River Jordan we see the universal Christian view of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father in order to rest upon His Only Begotten Son. Well, when I said this, Robin responded rather cryptically, “But you must first of all remember that anointing is always dual.” And then she went on to give those examples of ancient cultic sacrifice.

It’s a wonderful idea, because a twofold anointing—an anointing that confers both Cross and Resurrection—explains so much about the Gospel, about iconography, about the way Orthodox Christians conceive of faith and piety. The twofold anointing is the joyful sorrow, the bright sadness, the

sober ecstasy of our faith that we just mentioned. It is the clear measure of the Orthodox sense of aesthetics; neither too light, nor too dark, nor a dull middle. But rather a fullness and a clarity and a coincidence of being king and being sacrificial lamb—a balance and coincidence of opposites that is synonymous with Life itself, for only Christ achieves it fully.

By the way, in Greece the term I hear used more recently for bright sadness is the *Stavroanastasio Ethos*—the Cross-Resurrection Ethos. It is a beautiful way of expressing this coincidence of the opposing aspects of the twofold anointing. For those of us who know this coincidence from our experience of the Church’s life, it is our most precious possession—which it should be, for it is the very life of the Holy Spirit, bringing Christ to us.

From Beauty to Goodness

RTE: Is a vision of Beauty always an anointing?

DR. PATITSAS: I think that if it is, then it is also true that in some cases the Cross within this vision is easily carried, while in others we find its Cross all but impossible to carry. Some beauty is so intense that it can wound, for it startles us too greatly with its reminder of how unworthy we are of it. St. Silouan said of an ecstasy granted to him that if it had lasted even a second longer, he would not have survived!

And some beauty that we see is not meant for us in particular, or for us in the first place, so the Cross of glorifying God, of giving everything back to God, can be overwhelming in that case. We would so love to be the owners and occupants of that perfect house we just visited! But instead the blessing granted through this particular unpossessable home is not for us to live in it, but just the assurance that, “In my Father’s house there are many mansions; I go to prepare a place for you; if it were not so, I would not have told you that it was!” (John 14:2)

So, it can take some real hard work to get there in our response to Beauty, to see everything beautiful truly as an icon and not an idol, as something leading upwards and not downwards. If our first criterion of real Beauty is that we always find the Cross of Christ within it, then our second and twin criterion is that it is at least within the realm of possibility that this beauty will inspire in us an eros that is in fact chaste. Such a response is possible

when we see our own spouse in privacy, but not when we invade other couples' privacy; I think you can see what I mean here.

In a healthy response to real Beauty, we experience a coincidence of the two opposites of feasting and fasting.

These are then two simple rules for evaluating what appears to be beautiful: Is the Cross of Christ within it? And, is it possible to love it chastely?

When we urge each other to “begin with beauty,” we are of course talking about cultivating a pure eros for Christ. And this eros—“love’s mad self-forgetting”—makes us wild and free at the exact same moment that it brings a deep and unbreakable order to our lives. On the one hand, we become exactly who we are and are thus free of everything false, but on the other hand, we “could not be otherwise” than what we thus become. Although eros releases us from false rules and false imprisonments, it makes us more specific, more concrete, in a way. This is another example, and a lovely example, of the twofold anointing, when in Christ we experience a wild abandon that is infinitely precise and ordered.

Pastors, parents, teachers—they are all afraid of urging us in the direction of cultivating eros. Part of the fear is wise and justified, for to give oneself wholly to this total love is to risk so much. But if we do it right, if our eros is pure and for Christ, then it always includes this Cross, and is chaste. And that is what keeps us stable, what grounds us and prevents us from “going off the deep end.” Coldness is not the answer, but Chastity.

St. Paul said as much in 2 Cor. 12: “Because of the abundance of revelations—because the ardor of my eros for Christ was so all-encompassing and total, I was given a thorn in the flesh, to remind me that I was still human! That I was still a mortal man with a body and limitations!—And to show me, too, that even the greatest saint will often need to rely on ‘non-saints’ when he is sick.” Well, I may be implying that last part, but I think he wouldn’t mind.

In other words, the twofold character of anointing is what pushes us into the second step after Beauty, which is Goodness. For in the Cross that comes within eros, we see our dependence not only upon God but upon others and upon the whole of nature.³⁰ We see that we are radically implicated in the great cosmic liturgy of self-offering and poverty, of need and desire, of life

³⁰ This, too, is an approximation of the quote about eros in Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*, cited above. In editing this interview it occurs to me that Bloom’s argument must also be broadly allied to the Beauty-first approach, or he would not have defended eros so strenuously.

and death. We see that Beauty is the radiance of the Cross, just as the Resurrection is the radiance of Christ Crucified, and that if we are to gain this beauty it will only be because we have consented to become beautiful in the same way—by living out the Cross.

Agency Through Eros

RTE: In your last two interviews you brought out the concept of “moral luck,” an idea most of us hadn’t heard of. Then you showed how Orthodoxy resolves the challenge of true moral responsibility, of how we can be free and responsible even though our lives are also a product of our times and environments. How does moral luck relate to Beauty, Chastity, and marriage?

DR. PATITSAS: The term “moral luck” may be unfamiliar, but marriage is the perfect example of the practicality of the idea. People fear the loss of control that will come with marriage, and some marriages do end disastrously. But we all also know couples who have more freedom, more financial success, and even more fun than we do as single people precisely because they *are* married. In a happy marriage people take the Orthodox path: Rather than trying to be free by escaping responsibility, they become freer still by accepting responsibility for the care and even the mistakes of others.

In the Orthodox way you overcome moral luck—you attain your full human agency, your capacity to act freely in the world—by forgetting yourself, by taking on the weaknesses of another, by seeing that the whole world is a vibrant offering from God meant to be joined by us to the body of Christ. In the secular world you attain moral agency by going in the other direction—by focusing more and more narrowly on yourself, by cutting off the weak and troubled around you, by seeing the world as something dead that can be manipulated.

In short, in the Enlightenment you deny both eros and agape and move straight to the truths of science, the usefulness of technology and of an ever increasing willpower, and you deny that Beauty even exists so that you can be “free.” You may end up helping many people along the way, and for this the rest of us should be grateful, but this approach also always threatens to descend into inhuman permutations that cancel out all the good that science and technology offer. Of this we have had too much proof.

And such a world will tend to see marriage and eros as the loss of agency, whereas the Church says, “No. Move into the choice of your particular Cross, and you will attain real agency.” Besides, to deny both eros and agape is like imprisoning yourself in the berserk state, in a cold fury of isolation.

RTE: Might such an emphasis on eros make us impractical, or incapable of coping with the ordinary aspects of daily life?

DR. PATITSAS: Well, we are starting with love, the eros love, but then we move on to seeing the agape, how to make this pursuit something sustainable in and for society. That is, having seen our vision of the Beautiful, we then have sufficient motivation to ask what sort of cross will be hidden within that. No good path is broad; no Orthodox path is without crucifixion. If we can just commit to carrying that particular cross, we will become Good and at the same time the Beauty will be ours.

*“The only cure for bad eros
is good eros, and plenty of it.”*

In a consumerist culture that is really hand-in-glove with this Cartesian view—which believes that the world is not an icon, that the world is not a gift, that it’s not bound up with a self-offering of God to us—it cuts the erotic dimension right out of creation. Creation is just a dead object, a fixed thing. People are taught to look at the world that way, themselves that way, their lovers that way. Now people begin to feel that eros itself is a sin, rather than the one thing that could deliver them from our contemporary secular idolatry!

Now, of course, in an Orthodox culture parents are also trying to be careful of whom their child will marry, to make a wise decision—but that’s in an Orthodox culture where there is a widespread rejection of materialism and reductionism.

We said before that, “The only cure for bad eros is good eros, and plenty of it.” Well, this works in reverse, too. If you condemn the healthy erotic impulse in your children, then what follows is that people fall into sexual sin. If when your son or daughter falls in love and wants to get married, if you don’t bless them or haven’t at all prepared them for that moment, if you

manage even somehow to prevent them, then they are less likely to remain on the Christian path.

Well, the young people sort of draw their own conclusions, and those are: “What the Church is asking me to do isn’t blessed by my parents or really possible within my society anyway, so we have to have sex when we can and get through college. Doing that, of course, probably means it won’t work out, so we’ll have sex with someone else.” Then that becomes the new way.

What the parents don’t see is that the idolatry of the preceding generations has in fact led to the punishment of sexual sin in their children. We have idolized money or career or the contemporary educational system or whatever created thing, and God says, “Fine. You want to live in those places, go ahead.” These things are all necessary, but how much thought have we given to alternative ways that would allow our young people to have both Chastity and these other necessary things?

Although there are many factors to it, I think that one reason behind the growth of homosexuality in America is that traditional marriage seems impossible, so people pursue something that seems safer because it does not promise children and it does not involve the dreaded other gender. Well, traditional marriage seems impossible because we have neglected Beauty and criminalized eros.

RTE: In Greece there is a saying, “Either marry young, or get tonsured young,” with the implication that this will lead to a good life. But there are some Christians who do neither. What can you say about this?

DR. PATITSAS: A single person in the world can be that good son or daughter who provides solace to his or her parents in their old age. In that way they resemble a married person, present for nieces and nephews and providing invaluable help in their communities. A single person in the world can also often give more attention to the Church, and in that way they resemble a monastic. It is often a middle state.

When St. Anthony the Great became the “first monastic” (as he is sometimes called) in Egypt in the third century, his first act was to get the advice of more experienced monastics. In other words, there were already people like you are describing, who lived unmarried in the world, but to one or another degree dedicated their entire lives to God in prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and vigil. From the example of St. Anthony, therefore, we see that this third way of life is highly blessed. It is the very wellspring of monastic life, in a way.

RTE: So we have that freedom, too?

DR. PATITSAS: Well, it's not clear how much freedom we have in any given situation. I mean, God's Providence circumscribes our choices so that our life in him is truly synergistic. I spent my late teens and early twenties trying to join the military, but each time developed problems with my health so that my entry was proscribed for a limited time. I finally understood that God had other plans—although when I got my Greek citizenship I tried one last time to enlist somewhere, and was again denied, this time on account of my age.

Too, those who had the freedom to marry or become monastics, by not doing either while they were still young, may find their choices narrowing later on, and regret this. Finally, a person may wish to do one or the other, but simply must acknowledge that they can find neither an appropriate spouse nor an appropriate monastery. This is the hardest calling in a way because of its uncertainty and ambiguity, but it can be so fruitful for society and the Church.

Salvation is interpersonal; it comes in community. But it is true that some just know, from the beginning, that for them that communion will be best realized by a single life in the world. There *are* people with special callings. ✦