



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

# ROAD TO EMMAUS

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## II. EMPATHY

### The Discarded Image<sup>13</sup>

This tendency to disembody the human person even hijacked the women's movement, at times took it away from a struggle for women and for their dignity, and left the movement unable even to agree that there is such a thing as "woman." I mean, the movement has become terrified of saying what is unique about women, or defining a woman as anything more than "a human being oppressed by men," for fear that any concrete discussion of the differences between men and women will lead to oppression of women. But then we are back at square zero: A woman is defined wholly in terms of what men do to her! This drive to disembodiment now tries to remove even marriage from a firm connection to gender.

Many theologians have traced this disembodiment of the person to the Reformation and Descartes and the Enlightenment. The modern thrust has been to strip the human person of his or her basic nature, leaving only the intellect and the will. This of course is gnosticism, and it is destructive of both men and women.

In fact, however, the denial of basic human nature, the distancing of our "real self" from our bodies, has roots hundreds of years before the Reformation. It is traceable to errors in sacramental theology in the West. The disconnection of human personhood from actual human nature actually began the moment we lost our vision that the reality of the world depended on its being a sacrament, a symbol, of heavenly realities. Because if the world is not an icon, then neither is marriage, nor gender, nor anything else about us. In that case, our human form would be as arbitrary as the form of the world itself, and chastity would no longer make sense.

RTE: How have we arrived at such a discordant view of human nature?

<sup>13</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, discusses the older Western vision of the world as an icon, and laments its loss.

DR. PATITSAS: The first moment of this blindness about the world and our bodies is connected to a confusion about the body of Christ himself. Theologians began debating whether the Eucharist was really Christ's Body and Blood, or only symbolically so. The manner of the sacramental change was debated from the 9th to the 16th centuries at successive Roman Catholic Church councils, including those of the Lateran and Trent, where transubstantiation was finally defined in 1551. But none of these councils hit upon the correct answer, the answer that would recognize that the world is meant to be an icon: The bread and wine only become fully real as bread and wine when they become the symbol of the Body and Blood of Christ. And they are really the Body and Blood in a symbolic way, with "symbolic" meaning not "fake," but the highest level of reality.

The Western Church correctly discerned that saying the Eucharist is only a symbol and not really the Body and Blood of Christ, is clearly heresy. But to phrase the question in this particular way is a trap and has no good answer. Once you pit the symbolic *against* the real, once you forget that this world is real only *because* it is the symbol of the heavenly realm, then everything about created order becomes by definition arbitrary.<sup>14</sup> God could have made some other world, or not have given us a gender, and so forth. And if the world's form is arbitrary, then it is no longer beautiful or holy, but is just an imposition of divine will. The world is just a power play, in other words, a dead object. And once *we* have the power, we can change the world to whatever suits us. The world is then no longer a "second book" of revelation, no longer an icon. This will become the philosophy of the Enlightenment, but its source was centuries before in an accidental mistake within sacramental theology.

The secular philosophers of the seventeenth century still thought rather naïvely that the human mind was somehow exempt from being a mere product of power. I mean, the Enlightenment came to see creation as a mere artifact of the power wielded by natural processes, and yet still believed that the mind had access to reason in an absolute sense and could see real truth. As we have said before, Darwin, Marx, and Freud show us that the materialist

<sup>14</sup> Church councils of 1078 and 1079 which first stated that the change of the gifts was real and *not* symbolic, though held in the Lateran in Rome, are not listed as "Lateran Councils" because they were local rather than ecumenical councils for the West. *The Christian Classics Ethereal Library* entry on "The Berengar Controversy" tells us that in 1078 Pope Hildebrand asked the Mother of God, through a holy monk, for guidance on this theological matter. He "received as an answer that nothing more should be held or required on the real presence than what was found in the Holy Scriptures, namely, that the bread after consecration was the true body of Christ."

position is nonsense. Either the whole world, including our minds, is an icon of heaven, or our minds are also a product of natural forces and not capable of more than instrumental truth. The philosophers who revelled in this discovery seem sinister to us, and they are in part, but they were right to show that the Enlightenment was based upon the self-contradictory idea that we, alone of nature, were somehow not part of nature.

RTE: Then in what sense is the world itself a living symbol of the heavenly realm rather than a dead object? Is there an “England in heaven,” of which the earthly England is an icon, as C.S. Lewis once wrote?

DR. PATITSAS: I am so glad you brought up Lewis. He is very much a neoplatonist, a person who thinks that the world exists through its participation in the divine life, and that the world is an icon of heavenly realities. His whole life’s project was to point out that if the world is not an icon, if our minds are not made in the image of God’s own reason, then a real understanding of truth would be impossible because our minds themselves would be nothing more than survival mechanisms which may or may not be able to grasp absolute truth.

There are two ways to think about the basic fact that the world exists by participation in God. One is to say that the earthly England is an icon of the heavenly England. The other way is to say that the England below, or anything else in this world, exists because God has imparted being to it, has given as a gift certain heavenly attributes which, when mixed with creation, look like England. Either way is okay to express it, but the point is to take this from the divine perspective: The world and all of creation are in Christ a window, a potential window, into heaven. And thus the world’s order is not arbitrary, for God made the world, and He made it good. But as we know, God *alone* is good (Luke 18:19). If we meditate on this, we will see that the world is an icon.

This vision of creation as heaven’s icon begins to be lost with a glacial slowness in the West, as we said, from the moment when, already in the eleventh century, a Western council pits the real *against* the symbolic. The opposite is the truth: The more symbolic we become—the more we can say, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ in me”—the more real we become, the more ourselves we become. This is Christian faith: Only a saint is fully human. We must reject the deadening of the world, its being stripped of divinity and

separated from God, whether this deadening is perpetrated by the Enlightenment or, almost six hundred years before, by sacramental theologians. As C.S. Lewis insisted, that way lies the abyss.

## The Natural Law as Icon of the Logos

RTE: But by emphasizing the Natural Law, which holds that the truth about God and morality is partly knowable through creation, doesn’t the West retain an understanding that the world is an icon?

DR. PATITSAS: St. Paul himself tells us in Romans 1 that we can learn of God and our human condition through nature, and so for us Orthodox the Natural Law is an icon of the Logos. It is an icon both in the sense of being a means of participating in Christ and in the sense of being a foreshadowing, an image of the real, divine law which will absorb and transfigure the Natural Law itself.

But as the West very slowly, over those eight hundred years or more, loses its sense of nature’s iconicity, the Natural Law itself comes to seem a dead thing. It may still be true, it may still be powerfully accurate, but how many are arguing that the Natural Law is beautiful? Creation is dead, is not a sacrament or an icon, and therefore neither is its inner principle, the Natural Law, any more alive.

For example, the real strength of a Natural Law argument against artificial birth control is to be found in the refined Beauty of the sort of mature marital relationship that can forego its use, that can even fast from relations at certain seasons. But a Natural Law argument against contraception had come to seem merely an arbitrary statement flowing from the power of the Latin Church, derived from their claimed monopoly on Truth. We have come to read the Natural Law as Truth and Goodness—i.e., as “Teaching Authority”—with Beauty in an ancillary position. This is partly a stereotype and, in fact a stereotype that many Roman Catholic theologians are working to make outdated. But this caricature had enough grounding in reality that few of us could realize what was at stake in the Latin Church’s stance against birth control. And only now that the utility—the goodness—of the position that is skeptical of contraception is made evident in the collapse of populations throughout the world, are we taking the teaching seriously again.

A teaching, by the way, which was held universally, although with more of a “Beauty-first” emphasis, in Orthodoxy also until the 1970s. Since the earliest centuries the Orthodox Church has been wary of birth control that did not rely upon abstinence and the natural rhythm of fertility.

But when Beauty-first is lost in the West, the Natural Law, too, flips and becomes something onerous. When you are forced to push the Natural Law from a Truth-first or a Goodness-first way, it is all but impossible to both maintain the validity of a moral teaching and allow for the necessary pastoral exemptions that a wise confessor would discern. If you put Truth or Goodness first, then to allow an exemption to the Natural Law is to commit an act of logical inconsistency or enter upon a slippery slope to its total unravelling, and the whole teaching is lost. Whereas if you put Beauty first in teaching the Natural Law, then the teaching remains as a shining theophany, an inspiration and living guide, a Guardian Angel almost, even for those too weak to follow it. Loving and respecting the unattainable Natural Law transforms us from the inside out. Eventually, either we or our descendants *will* have the strength and opportunity to follow it.

Forgive me, but I could almost laugh just now, thinking of the ways that my own confessor, trained through immersion in the Beauty-first way of the Natural Law by the old masters of the Pskov Caves Monastery, has “overlooked” sins I could not part from, until all at once they no longer held such an absolute power over me. I laugh because there is such a tremendous release of false tension when you enforce the Natural Law in a beauty-first way; you find that the Cross the Natural Law imparts really is “natural”—the easiest thing you could do, in the end.

It will help us to see that the Natural Law is living, is an icon, if we call it by another name which C.S. Lewis uses for it in his book, *The Abolition of Man*. There he calls it the “Dao” (or “Tao”). That sounds more accurate to our deadened ears than the term “Natural Law,” which we nowadays hear as an arbitrary imposition handed down from a scholastic, logic-chopping elite. No, the real Natural Law is what we understand the Dao to be: a mysterious principle within created order, a principle that is beautiful and good and true, and that imparts life. Our highest joy is to live according to it. It is an icon of the Logos, of the Divine Law, and of the Way.

If the Natural Law is this Dao, this beautiful Logos, then why do the Protestant Reformers tell us that they felt like wild animals caught in the trap of a Natural Law Empire? Precisely because the West had lost a full and proper

sense of the world as an icon, as a second revelation of God. Natural Law had become a power, an intellectual force to be obeyed, a weapon wielded by a Church which also no longer saw even itself precisely as icon. From such a system, humankind had to escape.

RTE: How did the Reformers make their escape, as you put it?

DR. PATITSAS: If nature is dead, if nature is not an icon, if it is just the imposition of a tyrannical will, then let’s try to cut around it and go straight to God—Who will save us not through any transformation of our natures, but merely by his will to declare us arbitrarily saved. We’ll get rid of the sacraments, we’ll jettison tradition, and we’ll even begin to cut ourselves free of human nature. That way a person could be free of arbitrary church authority, and even free from a world that itself seemed to be arbitrary. It is the ultimate irony that the Reformers were all such terrible iconoclasts, and that the Reformation leads to the greatest destruction of art in world history, when it was the very lack of a Beauty-first approach, of the remembrance that the world and the Church were icons, that had caused their crisis to begin with!

It didn’t happen all at once, but the trend in Protestant thought, all the momentum, was to deny human nature entirely and to place the center of a man in his will—the same sort of will that in God’s case could supposedly make any world He liked, or call any sinner a saint if He wished. The entirety of the spiritual life is reduced to the cultivation of a finely honed and tough willpower for God, which then becomes misidentified with the “faith” of St. Paul.

But what is a human will without a human nature? In effect, the Reformers were willing to chew their legs off (human nature) to get free of that trap of a non-iconic Natural Law, and this turned out to be a path with no logical end, as today people even surgically alter their gender, or try to, and claim a right to disturb the natural order of marriage. But there is a better way, a balanced Christian anthropology that takes both human nature and human will into the realm of the human *hypostasis*, or person.

Well, this is a big topic, but the point for now is this: Christ came to save us as *persons*, which means not just our wills or our intellects, but our bodies and our entire natures, as well. Our bodies, and purity, and gender—all of this functions as an icon with eternal significance. And they are beautiful—deeply and permanently beautiful—as well, since their very reality is attained in their becoming symbols of heaven.

## Reasons Why Chastity has Become More Difficult

RTE: In our war and trauma interviews you said that we theologize firstly not with our minds nor even with our hearts, but with our bodies. Is that what you mean here?

DR. PATITSAS: I think so. If the world is not an icon, then where would we find beauty? And why would beauty matter when we did find it? But what is more beautiful than the face of a truly chaste person!

You and I have discussed many times the absolute purity that we have seen on the faces of chaste people. This Chastity can be present even in a child who is pre-sexual if that child is spiritually pure, so Chastity is not mainly about sex. And of course we also know with sadness how the face of the person who loses their purity often changes so completely. Before, they were naïve, but happy; now they are wise, in the sense that Adam and Eve became wise, but they feel themselves naked of grace and hide from God in the cool of the evening night club. They may even stop coming to Church until they begin to recover their Chastity in marriage and wish to raise pure children.

We wouldn't need elaborate moral theologies if we could just stop insisting on being so blind! The person who falls for the first time enters a new realm of worry, anxiety, sorrow, sometimes bitterness. Their very appearance often changes. Anyone can see this—anyone who is not blinded by twisted moral reasoning, that is. And anyone can see the extent to which repentance can utterly renew the face, the countenance that is the window of our personhood.

But it is the important transition from chaste eros to agape and empathy which takes art. Because it is exactly out of empathy for their beloved, and in attempting to celebrate the goodness of bodily nature, that the young person rebels against a gnostic anti-body culture and consents to lose their virginity—not realizing, meanwhile, the holiness of marriage. But eros and agape are not different things. *Agape is the amplification of eros*, and so love for our spouse must include Chastity, not leave it behind, nor discard it as a naïve stepping stone to wisdom. Sex outside of marriage may seem to be celebrating the body, but so often it ends by destroying it, and always it mars it. It may be undertaken as an attempt to show empathy for the beloved, but

*Opposite: Russian Old Believer women and girls praying near Moscow, Russia, 2010.*



it does not end that way, and always it implicates our beloved in mortal sin. As another one of my students once told me, Orthodoxy is about balance; in this case, the attempt to balance agape with eros, romance with chastity.

Our young people are not meant to face the transition from eros to agape entirely alone, but today to face it alone would actually be an improvement. In fact, they often now face the transition in the teeth of opposition to Chastity from the culture and deceived by the abandonment of a living belief in Chastity by those around them. What if it turns out that young people today are just as interested in Chastity as their more religious forebears, but that we adults have designed an economic, educational, moral, and even urban system that makes young marriage all but impossible, officially “irresponsible,” a kind of crime against society? Well, I think this is exactly the case. The collapse of sexual purity among young people is but the punishment for the idolatry of the older generations. It is bootless to moralize at the children without also repenting ourselves.

*“Eros and agape are not different things. Agape is the amplification of eros, and so love for our spouse must include Chastity.”*

So who has the greater blame? We who have renounced idealism can scarcely parent a pure child into adulthood. And even if we have regained that idealism, we may have not yet completely recovered the thread of an Orthodox worldview.

RTE: Then are you suggesting that an entire social change is necessary before a person can be chaste?

DR. PATITSAS: “Marriage is a social institution, and it works best in the context of broad social support.” That is a quote from my dissertation director, Robin Darling Young, and I think it is correct. Social organisms like nations and families and communities live and die according to complex webs and pathways of interaction.

One feedback loop is that sexual immorality weakens marriage, while in turn the weakening of marriage makes sexual morality harder to attain.<sup>15</sup> And when either is weakened, religious faith suffers, which then makes both morality and marriage harder to understand. Also, when there are few jobs, or when education is organized as endless progress into impractical generalism, or when welfare support payments include cruel incentives not to marry or work, we can then see what happens to the family, because since 1965 it *has* happened: 40% of American children are now born to single mothers. Many times the parents of the child marry soon after, which is very good. But for many who are not among the privileged, marriage has become an unaffordable “luxury good,” in the words of a recent book.<sup>16</sup>

## Fighting Smart

RTE: Then what encouragement do you offer to the young person who sees all this and says, “I want to follow the Christian path, but everything is arrayed against me?”

DR. PATITSAS: We must not emphasize the obstacles we face, although they do exist, but rather the power of the Cross to conquer all. I would say, “If you see that the course is hard, and full of obstacles, but still wish to succeed, then I have a counter-intuitive suggestion: Run to your Heavenly Father, and accuse yourself for the ways in which you have consciously or unconsciously participated in sins against chastity. Of course you are not to blame for what went before, but by going against the grain of self-justification, by taking the responsibility even for sins that did not originate with you, you will become stronger. This is the shortcut to adulthood and you will amaze the world by what you will accomplish.” The fact is, many of us among the older generation are praying exactly for this, that you will do better than we did. In this we too would be saved.

The world is only messed up because there’s something wrong with us, with each of us. Since those who love us, and those who live alongside us, put up

<sup>15</sup> Mary Eberstadt’s *How the West Really Lost God* (Philadelphia: Templeton Press, 2013) lays out an entire web of feedback loops through which moral practice and belief influence each other, and is worth reading.

<sup>16</sup> June Carbone & Naomi Cahn, *Marriage Markets: How Inequality is Remaking the American Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

with us and help carry the burden of our mistakes, let us do the same for them. When we are willing to repent—cheerfully—for other people’s mistakes, we find ourselves liberated from many of our own temptations. So, no, I don’t think that we have lost agency, or the ability to do the right thing. We just have gained the possibility of even more heavenly crowns from actually doing it!

RTE: You mentioned that it is an art to move into relationship while preserving our chastity. Can you say more about this?

DR. PATITSAS: The world doesn’t understand and has lost hope in the possibility of Chastity, partly because it seems impractical, even unrealistic. You and I have both heard young people say that they just wanted to “get it over with” and lose their virginity. This doesn’t seem very erotic or wonderful. It is as if we face an awesome and holy challenge, and our only response—before we have even tried—is to ask where we can turn in our weapons and surrender.

People just don’t remember how to win the battle with sexual temptation, and this we see most acutely in the most destructive forms of sexual sin. These temptations are like uninvited guests that, if we let them in much at all, may soon claim our very identity for themselves. Since we’ve forgotten how to keep them at bay, we’ve bitterly concluded that these temptations must be normal—which is to say, we blame our Creator for their victory over us and after that we can become full-blown blasphemers. For even when we surrender to these alien forces, we aren’t happy to function as the “hosts” of such parasitical powers; a bitter estrangement from God arises in our breast, because we secretly blame him for not delivering us from these sins.

In the case of same-sex attraction, in particular, the rules for resisting the temptation are almost entirely different than those for resisting temptation in general. To fight it in the way you fight many other temptations will guarantee that its force only becomes stronger in you over time. But who is left to know these things, to show these ways? And thus many have fallen and will continue to fall. The tradition still exists, though, and is even being strengthened among some spiritual fathers.<sup>17</sup>

Well, we weren’t meant to live in sin, and there is a royal part of us that will always resent this slavery, however much we call it freedom. And that

<sup>17</sup> Some people who are facing same-sex attraction recommend Fr. Mario Bergner’s “Redeemed Lives” program. They say that his gentle approach comes close to the heart of how traditional Christian morality liberates rather than suppresses our deepest identity.

resentment can spur us to a more concerted search for a genuine spiritual doctor—but it may instead result in an ever-growing desire to re-crucify Christ by opposing and destroying his Body, the Church. I wonder if this is why Elder Aemilianos of Simonopetra Monastery said, “Wherever you see schism in the Church, know that there is scandal behind it.”<sup>18</sup>

Some people who have lost their Chastity have wound up on anti-depressants, or soon thereafter mutilate themselves with absurd tattoos and inappropriate piercings, or in some way act out their sorrow by damaging their bodies further through promiscuity and drug use or just smoking. And this sorrow is no small thing, for although we were meant to be sons and daughters of God, through our passions we have instead become enslaved to hostile powers. This sorrow and these acts of self-mutilation and self-medication are in fact part of “the whole creation groaning for deliverance” in the Holy Spirit (Cf. Rom. 8:19-22). They are a kind of proto-repentance, a cry going up that is honest and direct and can be answered if we will let it.

Another reason we have lost respect for bodily purity is that we moderns have a tendency towards gnosticism, the belief system which in the early years of the Church was the greatest competitor with Christianity. Gnosticism privileges the mind and denigrates the body; its first practitioners were intellectuals, false mystics, pagan Greeks—and not Jews.<sup>19</sup> And the gnostics always descended into either licentiousness or self-mutilation when it came to sex. In either case, they could not accept the significance of the body for eternal salvation. The Jews knew that the Christian teaching on sexual purity would be almost too much for “the nations,” which is why they insisted upon it up front, in the very first Apostolic Council (Cf. Acts 15:1-30).

But while we moderns are gnostics in our spiritual lives, our economic science is comically materialistic. Despite every evidence that economic development is mostly about innovation—that it is centered in the “artist’s moment” wherein we discern the *logos* in some thing or material or problem, and

<sup>18</sup> Elder (Abbot) Aemilianos (b. 1934), re-founder of Simonopetra Monastery, of Ormylia women’s monastery in Chalkidiki, and of monasticism in Meteora.

<sup>19</sup> When the Da Vinci Code films and books came out, based loosely on the gnostic Gospels, I asked myself the question: Isn’t it true that the actual Gospels were written by Jews, from Palestine, who knew Christ personally—or, if written by a Greek (St. Luke), by one who knew the earliest Church and its Jewish leaders? And isn’t it also true that the later gnostic accounts of Christ’s life were almost all written by Greeks who’d never set foot in Palestine, who lived a century or more after the actual events? For salvation “is from the Jews,” not from gnostic philosophers who have no idea what to do with either the body or with sexuality. Greek Orthodoxy is distinctive among Christian faiths for its mature embrace of Hellenism—that is, an embrace of Hellenism through the filter of a strong Semitic emphasis on the unity of soul and body and on the way of the heart.

embody it so that it may be shared with others<sup>20</sup>—we remain terrified that the finitude of today’s resources must lead to the lack of tomorrow’s bread. Some people are even so terrified of overpopulation that they try to break the link between sex and children by promoting only those uses of sex that will not lead to children. For these sophisticates, lust is our only defense against starvation.

But I think the bigger fault is that we in the Church have not always based our instruction about Chastity on Beauty, but instead may base it on a goodness divorced from Beauty; and goodness understood in bourgeois worldly terms. “Sex outside of marriage is bad because you will get a disease, drop out of school, and go on welfare. When what you should do is not burden the health care system, become economically productive, and pay lots of taxes so the State can buy a shiny new coat of armor.” Is this an ecclesial message, or a public service announcement?

Well, I shouldn’t overdo it here, because the concern with disease and poverty is an expression of the fact that fornication so often leads to dissolution. And in the old days, before abortion and birth control, the Beauty of the Church’s teaching lined up perfectly with the practical Goodness of making it in the world.<sup>21</sup> Now that link seems to have been broken and many of us would like to restore it.

But some in the Church do really seem to be motivated by a moralistic impulse that reduces Orthodoxy to concern with individual piety. In particular, I find it shocking that some spiritual fathers can be so bold in their direct contradiction of St. Paul’s command that abstinence within marriage be only by mutual consent and for a short period. Not because “the church does not belong in the bedroom,” for the marital union is an icon of Christ and the Church and so of course the Church blesses some things and not others, but because neither is the confessor to make alliances with the wife against the husband, or with the husband against the wife.

Instead let us try to inspire: Marriage that unfolds from a pure life is a tremendous adventure and an enormously counter-cultural act. Few things will throw you more directly into maturity than a Christian marriage when the entire world is screaming at you, not to wait, *but simply not to believe in love*. Few adventures are more dangerous, more rewarding, or more of an inspiration to the Church than a young marriage that follows on the success-

ful fight for Chastity. And in contemplating entering into marriage, just as when you are thinking of buying a stock and in a thousand other examples in life, once all the danger is gone, so is much of the reward. If you have your parents’ blessings, then just jump and start reaping those rewards, and facing those dangers together.

Also, we adults might try taking the main responsibility for the loss of Chastity today, since we have designed our society so that people reach adulthood with no real economic abilities, shielded from reality, immature, and with no attention having been given to the formation of their eternal soul. They may not even know what the teachings of the Christian faith are in these matters, or why they matter, or how to win the fight.

To sum up, we Christians are not meant to oppose sex, but to promote eros.

<sup>20</sup> I draw this account from *The Economy of Cities* by Jane Jacobs (New York: Random House, 1969).

<sup>21</sup> I found this idea in Ross Douhat’s *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012).