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Saint Mary of Egypt: An Intercessor for Canadian cities

Several years ago, a priest who works in inner city missions showed me a simple, yet remarkable, illustration. The small line drawing showed an icon of Saint Mary of Egypt, silhouetted against the easily recognizable skyline of the city in which we stood, walking amid the poor, the drug addicts, and prostitutes. "This," said the priest with a look of seriousness, "This is catechism they can understand."

The fallout from the secular utopian dreams of political leaders is easy to see on the streets of any major Canadian city. Blocks of crack houses crowd the streets of North Winnipeg, where a thriving community of Orthodox immigrants lived a generation ago. Drug-related shooting paralyze Toronto public housing projects that were supposed to be the jewel of the social engineers of the 1960s. Panhandlers and other homeless people are a regular fixture on central Calgary streets, the heart of the ongoing financial boom fueled by Alberta oil. Orthodox faithful, drawn mostly from suburban developments, rarely come to these neighbourhoods, unless called to do specific mission work with those whom the Canadian Dream left behind.

Nowhere is this urban transformation



more evident than in the area of East Hastings in Vancouver, British Columbia. Three decades ago, the sweet

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hopes of those who traveled west to this Pacific lotus land, began to crash amid the cycle of addiction, poverty, and prostitution. Today, nightly barrel fires in winter warm those who can stand to warm themselves in the chilly dampness, while many more lay passed out or dead in nearby alleyways, assured of free needles and advice on every means of preventing the communicable diseases that plague these streets.

A few years ago, during an afternoon

family walk through Vancouver's Chinatown, we were approached by one of the city's walking wounded, a woman who appeared to be in her fifties, staggering along in the clothes she wore the night before, hardly able to focus enough to see that the man she was approaching was accompanied by his wife. Yet as we approached her, it became clear this was not a veteran seasoned with years on Vancouver's streets: this was a girl, perhaps fifteen years old, feeding her drug habit by selling herself.

This was the face of Saint Mary of Egypt, whose early life bore many of the same earmarks as the life of the living skeleton who staggered down East Hastings.

Recently, I heard another priest who works in inner-city work declare, "Our parishes have abandoned the inner city". Of course for the most part, he was right. The Canadian Dream - the dream to come to this country, to become comfortable and middle class, to fit in, to escape all the ugliness of the old world - has arrived. Yet in its arrival, we have escaped nothing. As our inner cities grow, producing more children than our double-income suburbs ever will, even suburbia must come face to face with its own demons, addictions, and the passions of the human heart. For those who live on the streets of Canadian cities, these passions are an inescapable part of life every day. When you live in the street, work on the street, and die in the street, it is easy to relate to the life of Saint Mary of Egypt - it is catechism you can understand.

For those of us who are far removed from it, it is a catechism we must suffer to learn, in practical ways that begin with visiting the inner city we have left behind, seeing in each face the face of Christ. For those who cannot go - or cannot bear to go - financial generosity is a beginning.

Our bishop once reminded a parish, the reason we neglect to give away our money to people on the streets, is that we assume we will put it to better use than they will - which is almost never the case. In fact, it is acts of mercy which humble us to realize that our own spiritual condition is only inches away from the faces on the streets, and it is in showing such mercy that we begin to break out of the fakery that we call the Canadian Dream - the Dream that often blinds us to our own passions.

Holy Saint Mary, pray to God for us! 

God Save the King?

"Honour the king." - 1 Peter 2:17

While it is true that most Canadians support the Canadian monarchy, for most people, its relevance to daily life seems at best remote. The monarch who serves as head of state carries an ancient quality of governance, a quality inherited through Byzantium and Russia from the Old Testament: the quality of a ruler selected by God, not human popularity, and anointed by certain spiritual authorities in His name. The result of such appointment - replete with a crown symbolizing martyrdom, and the Byzantine images of throne and scepter symbolizing God's rule on earth - provides the Canadian monarchy something no mere republic can enjoy: leadership (however symbolic), based on relationship with a person, rather than a set of abstract ideas such as freedom, democracy, and the right to bear arms.

Monarchy doesn't matter much for many in Canada, but it does underpin all our institutions, laws, and stable government: no coups are allowed, since any such government would fail to get the approval of the duly constituted head of state. Even the opposition to the government remains "Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition", such that when even regional separatists advocate the breakup of the country, they are obliged to do so in an ever-nice, Canadian fashion. In a country with such potential for divisions based on region, language, culture, and politics, it's a worthwhile unity to enjoy.

What would be the implications for Canada, if the monarch of our country was an Orthodox Christian?

What would be the implications for Canada, however, if the monarch of our country was an Orthodox Christian? At first glance, most people would say this would make little difference, in a country who couldn't care less where His or Her Majesty might find themselves on Sunday morning. Yet the inherited experience of the centuries speaks otherwise. The anointed kings of the Old Testament were not simply someone who happened to be the king: they were God's anointed. The Byzantine emperors carried similar significance. This is the reason on the walls of Constantinople in 1453, the death at the hands of Muslim armies of the last Emperor Constantine Paleologus was a tragedy of biblical proportions: it was the end not just of a dynasty, but the kingdom which reflected God's Rule on

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earth. The murders of the Royal Martyrs of Russia in the twentieth century bore the same significance, signaling the end of the Third Rome, of Holy Orthodox Russia. Orthodox rulers have always been viewed by the Church as a sign of God's favour toward a country; their deaths have been interpreted as the act of the Lord removing His protective hand from an apostate nation.

Canada, like other countries who share the same sovereign as Britain, has little likelihood of inheriting such Divine favour - or so it would seem. Yet as our Queen celebrates decades on the throne, attention inevitably turns to what the future may hold for the monarchy. The collective opinion of Charles, The Prince of Wales, has warmed in recent years, after a decades-long roller-coaster ride in public opinion. Most Orthodox Christians, especially those with no personal ties to the United Kingdom, have paid little attention to the Prince's activities, beyond what the mainstream media reports. This is the very reason the prospect of an Orthodox Sovereign for Canada has missed most Orthodox.

For many years, The Prince of Wales has been an active (and contributing) steward of a number of Orthodox monasteries, including St. Catherine's on Sinai, and communities on the Holy Mountain of Athos. Introduced to these by his Greek Orthodox father, Prince Phillip, Charles makes regular pilgrimage to both, and is granted privileges of access reserved not just for Orthodox pilgrims, but only for Orthodox bishops. Media reports confirm his regular, private visits to the only Welsh Orthodox priest, in the priest's tiny cottage in the northwestern Welsh nationalist country. His Royal Highness' love for things Orthodox extended to the Anglican marriage blessing at Windsor Castle, at which a Russian singer sang the Nicean Creed - the original Creed used by the Orthodox, not the Latin version with the filioque Clause used by the Church of England, the

An Orthodox monarch has always represented God's favour toward a nation.

religion of which Prince Charles would become head upon his ascension. There are numerous indications that the Prince also receives the Holy Mysteries of Communion in the Orthodox Church, from the most strict monastic communities, which raises the question of whether in fact Prince Charles is actually Orthodox. Direct inquiries to those who serve as spokesmen for the Royal Family are met with demure silence: the royal method of avoiding a positive response to a complicated question.

If Prince Charles is an Orthodox Christian, what does it mean for the Church of England, the rapidly declining state

religion in a country that boasts better attendance in its mosques on a given day than in its own pews in a month of Sundays? His Royal Highness has already expressed reservations about taking on the role of head of the Church of England; of course, this is a role an Orthodox Christian could not accept. He continues to take his own sons (and heirs) on pilgrimage to Orthodox holy sites, and does so not in the manner of a royal tourist, but as a regular, humble pilgrim, traveling by foot, and staying in regular quarters (with a retinue of bodyguards, to be sure). By God's providence, should the day arrive that he assumes the throne, the implications for Anglicanism may be nothing at all, if Prince Charles gets his way.

For Orthodox Christians, the prospect of an Orthodox Christian king - indeed, an Orthodox King of Canada - should like all things pertaining to the Mind of God, not be interpreted for their outward meaning, but for their inner, spiritual significance. For an Orthodox monarch has always represented God's favour toward a nation, and perhaps in this case, it would represent the Lord providing Commonwealth countries, including Canada, a chance for repentance and salvation. As the drums of war beat with increasing ferocity around the globe, perhaps it will even be our last chance.

Canada: Doorway to a New Christian Commonwealth?

"They will come from the east and the west, from the north and from the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God"

- Luke 13:29

Some of us long for the good old days. In the case of some Orthodox Christians, the "good old days" often take the form of the Byzantine Empire - the height of Christian life among the Hellenes - or Holy Russia, the age of great monasteries and spiritual elders. Others may look to other, smaller Orthodox kingdoms, east or west, such as the Bulgarians, Ukrainians, Serbs, Anglo-Saxons or Franks.

For nationalists, there is something very comforting in nostalgia, the sense that the greatness of the past does not ever really pass away. Yet the earthly reality is quite different: Holy Russia crumbled into atheistic Communism, the Byzantines were overrun by Moslem Turks, and most Greeks and Russians today are not calling for a return of their Orthodox Emperors. Like everything carnal, nationalism finds its end in the dust of time - yet unlike

everything carnal, something about these great Orthodox Empires lives on in the heart of every Orthodox Christian, in every prayer, in each Divine Liturgy.

What is this essential quality that lives on? It is in fact the very opposite of the narrow nationalism that characterizes much Orthodox parish life in North America: it is in fact the essence of Orthodoxy, which goes beyond culture, which embraces the whole human race in the historic, Orthodox Christian Faith, to such an extent that Orthodox Christianity becomes the culture of an individual or a nation. This was evident in the multiracial - and multilingual - life of the great Orthodox Empires. In the case of Russia, it was Orthodox baptism - not bloodline or ethnicity or language - which determined citizenship in the Empire. The European Slav, the Scandinavian, the Asiatic, the Alaskan Aleut - all were equally citizens of the same Eternal Empire, since all shared the same baptism. This was the inheritance of Byzantium, whose genius transformed the pagan Roman idea of citizenship - loyalty to a false Imperial god - into the only eternal brotherhood of all those who call God their Father. Given centuries of politics, wars, and bloodfeuds, it is remarkable indeed that this sense of eternal citizenship continues to exist at all among Orthodox Christians the world over to this day.

The age of states made up of a single people or language is over. Immigration, and the international economy, have made this a thing of the past. This new reality is sometimes discouraging and confusing to Orthodox people, who struggle to find an Orthodox identity in a culturally diverse world. Yet cultural and linguistic diversity are the very situations in which Orthodox Christianity has always flourished. The reason is simple: when the Church is surrounded by diverse cultures and languages, it is forced to look outward, to share the Gospel with those around it. This is the same condition that motivated Saints Cyril and Methodius to create a new written alphabet to share the Gospel with pagan Slavs (in their own day, it was as impossible to imagine Christian Slavs as it would be to imagine Orthodox Saudis or Iranians today - or Orthodox Canadians, for that matter). It was the same cultural diversity, including a complex patchwork of languages, and ethnic intermarriage, which allowed Saint Innocent and the other Alaskan missionaries relative ease in spreading the Orthodox Faith among native Alaskans. Where cultural diversity and contact was greatest, so often was mission work.

Where do we find the greatest degree of such cultural diversity today? We do not need to look very far: it's in Canada. And linguistic diversity? Again, the answer is in Canada. In particular, the city of Toronto allows an individual to encounter virtually every culture and language in the world living within a one mile area. Montreal, Vancouver, and to a lesser extent other Canadian cities,

present a similar picture. This is the same picture that confronted the missionary saints of past centuries.

What does this mean for Orthodox Christians in Canada? Regrettably, many Orthodox mourn the loss of their ancestral tongue, and try to drown their sorrows in the pursuit of better heritage language and dance programs for their children and grandchildren. Neither of these has anything to do with the work of the Church. If we view our Canadian situation with the eyes of saints like Cyril, Methodius, Innocent, Gregory the Great, and others, our best investment in eternity would be time spent in the heritage language classes of other cultures, such as the Chinese and Arabs, whose numbers swell in Canadian cities, and whose children fill our public schools. Our funds would flow toward the translation of liturgical texts, lives of the saints, and writings of holy elders into Urdu, Mandarin, and Vietnamese (and for our American neighbours, Spanish, which accounts for over forty percent of the first language of all American citizens). French missions deserve special attention. Canada is blessed with freedom of movement throughout the largest national landmass in the world, and the Lord's providence has preserved us free from war on our soil since a small group of American troops were driven back to Niagara Falls generations ago.

Canada presents the greatest missionary opportunity in the history of the world.

Canada presents the greatest missionary opportunity in the history of the world, a doorway into every culture and nation on earth, and the legal protections to offer some safety from fear of reprisals to those from every background who would embrace Christ. Even Holy Russia and Byzantium could not guarantee such security in certain of their regions - but we can, and do.

Of course, most Orthodox Christians in Canada will not pay attention to any of this, preferring to die a demographic death within their own nationalist ghetto. Yet a few will follow in the path of saints like Cyril, Methodius, Innocent, and Gregory the Great, and will grab the opportunity the Lord has presented to us. Regardless of the language or culture of a mission parish, it is in this - and only in this - that we find the true inheritance of Byzantium and Holy Russia: that outward-looking Christian love that recognizes its only real citizenship is a Heavenly one. 