

Irony and Belief (Fr. Stephen Freeman)

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ask of youth. If I can remember myself in my college
was sarcasm. Irony required more insight.

There is a deep need for the appreciation of irony to

sustain a Christian life. Our world is filled with contradiction. Hypocrisy is ever present even within our own heart. The failures of Church and those who are most closely associated with it can easily crush the hearts of the young and break the hearts of those who are older.

I can think of at least two times in my life that the failures of Church, or its hierarchy, drove me from the ranks of the Church, or what passed for Church at the time. As years have gone by I haven't seen less that would disappoint or break the

heart – indeed the things that troubled me as a young man barely compare with revelations we all have seen in recent years.

No hands are clean. Evangelical, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, the failures and cover-ups are in no way the special province of any. The question of truth remains – but in a contest of the pure, everyone loses. Irony remains. Our failures would not be so poignant if the Kingdom were not so pure. Judas' betrayal is darkened all the more by the fact that his victim is God Himself.

All of which brings us back to the irony that remains. The greatest irony of all is the God who forgives and remains ever faithful to us despite the contradictions.

When speaking with seekers – those who are asking questions about the Orthodox faith – it's important early on to be sure that they are not in search of the perfect Church. The One, True Church means something quite distinct from *perfect*. A good read through Orthodox history (which for a thousand years is just "Church history") refuses to give up an ideal century – the mark and measure for reform. Any student of the New Testament has to admit that there are no Letters to the Perfect. I find it ironic (in another sense) that there are those who search for the "New Testament Church" as though it were an ideal.

This applies equally to those who seek the flawless argument, the reasonable and logical God. That search will also end in contradiction, to be resolved only by irony, for those who can bear it. It is thought by many of the fathers that the very creation is an ironic act – the gift of existence that will require the gift of forgiveness – such is the irony of freedom and the mercy of Divine Love.

From the moment of the resurrection, Christ continues to gather scattered sheep. Betrayal, denial and cowardice were the hallmark of the Church on Good Friday. But from Christ we hear no blame – if only because He never thought us to be other than we are.

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did; but Jesus did not trust himself to them, because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man (John 2:23-25).

And if we are honest with ourselves and know what is in man, then we can only give thanks for the wondrous irony that, knowing all that, Christ gave Himself for us anyway. It is the very character of love.

I have been asked a few times over the years the meaning of St. Paul's statement

that “love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:7). There is either almost nothing to say about it or far too much to say about it. But it is the irony of the Cross: Love enduring all things. If you know the Cross and the Love that is crucified there, then the verse likely needs no explanation. Christ is His own exegesis.

And when I turn myself to the Church (or myself), I can only reach for Christ and the assurance that the contradictions we offer Him will be forgiven. And this is a thought to cling to even in the best of times. For any who would be His disciples, the Cross and its irony is the only path that is ever offered. Glory to His grace!