

The Fear of God is Reverence for and Love of Him (Metropolitan Athanasios of Lemessos)

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The Church is not opposed to the human body. This is why the Fathers were so careful not to damage their body with their ascetic efforts. They tried to submit it to the Holy Spirit and to God's commandments, so as not to seek the pleasures and lapses of the flesh, but they never accepted that their bodies should be damaged. In Patristic literature, there's a saying that 'we don't slay the body, but we do slay the passions'. It's sin and the passions which kill, not the body, which is the temple of God. And if, at times, it appears that the saints seem merciless and harsh in their treatment of the body, it was not to kill it, but, as we've said, to slay sin and their passions. It was because their body was often a prisoner to sin and the passions that they treated it in this way. The Church never permitted people to kill or maim their bodies in the pursuit of some virtue. And besides, in the sphere of the Church,

we have also to learn to overcome the difference between the sexes. In other words, we should learn to regard other people not in sexual or carnal terms, but as images of God, as our brothers and sisters, as people destined for sanctification and glorification. If we see them in this light, we won't regard them in a sinful manner, but in a holy and virtuous way. This is the view of the Church concerning the human body.



In the Old Testament, God says: 'I shall dwell among them and walk with them and in them and I shall be their God'. God is speaking personally, thousands of years before Christ, and saying that He will make a people of His own.

There's no ethnicity in the Church. This is why we all work together, irrespective of racial origin, though, naturally, this is not to disregard our homeland and our nation. But in the Church we transcend this. So, in the Church there's a new people, a new nation. The people which the Holy Spirit said, thousands of years ago, that God would walk among and be their God is, in fact, the nation of Christians. We're a new people and we don't depend on racial origins. This is why the Prophet Isaiah says: 'Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean'. [This is actually Saint Paul, quoting Isaiah at 2 Cor. 6, 17. WJL].

God says He'll accept us, will become our Father and we'll be His sons and daughters. In this way, God urges us to separate ourselves, not from other people, but from sin, from the worldly outlook. When He tells us to leave the world and not love it, He doesn't mean our fellow human beings, but the secular way of looking at things, that is, sin. People who want to follow Christ can't just do what everyone else does. In order to follow Christ, your heart has to tell you to and you have to leave behind the worldly outlook. You have to sever every connection with sin. Then God will become your Father and you'll become His sons and daughters. This is an absolute given, because when God says something, then it's sealed, validated and repeated over the course of the centuries. God never abandons anyone. Why, then, are we cowardly and indolent? We have God's promise, so let's take the first step: to go against the current and the secular way of thinking and then God will become our Father and we His sons and daughters.

Saint Paul goes on to say: 'Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God' [2 Cor. 7, 1]. That is we should cleanse ourselves of every sin which is committed, whether in the body, the mind or the soul, and should live a holy life in the fear of God. The fear of God isn't some psychological fear, but the awareness of His love and the awe we feel in our souls for Him when we gaze upon the majesty of His sanctity and purity. When we see this sanctity and realize who we should be and who we are and are fearful of breaking our relationship with Him, that's the fear of God. Because if you fear God in a psychological way, you don't truly love Him. Saint John says that perfect love expels fear. Saint Anthony says: 'I no longer fear God, but love Him'. So fear of God is this reverence for Him, love of Him. If I love God, I'm careful not to lose that love. And the more I love Him, the more careful I am.

The text is an extract from a recorded talk