

# **"Do We Have Rights?" and Other Homilies**

**From the "Major Works"  
series**

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# Preface

A lay homilist in Orthodoxy may be rare, but through the kind leniency of priests, a layman may be able to preach a homily. Here are five homilies offered by the author; there is much else he has written in theology (Orthodoxy has a rich tradition of lay theologians), but here the author's complexity can give way to a deep simplicity.

The first homily preached was *Do We Have Rights?* and the parish burst into applause when it ended followed, appropriately enough, by the priest reminding the parish that a homily is not a performance. Perhaps it would be better for homilies to lead people to forget the homilist and only be mindful of God, but even without having all reached that level, these homilies have something to offer each reader.





# A Pet Owner's Rules

God is a pet owner who has two rules, and only two rules. They are:

1. I am your owner. Enjoy freely the food and water which I have provided for your good!
2. **Don't drink out of the toilet.**

That's really it. Those are the only two rules we are expected to follow. And we still break them.

Drunkenness is drinking out of the toilet. If you ask most recovering alcoholics if the time they were drunk all the time were their most joyful, merry, halcyon days, I don't know exactly how they'd answer, if they could even keep a straight face. Far from being joyful, being drunk all the time is misery that most recovering alcoholics wouldn't wish on their worst enemies. If you are drunk all the time, you lose the ability to enjoy much of anything. Strange as it may sound, it takes sobriety to enjoy even drunkenness. Drunkenness is drinking out of the toilet.

Lust is also drinking out of the toilet. Lust is the disenchantment of the entire universe. It is a magic spell where suddenly nothing else is interesting, and after lust destroys the ability to enjoy anything else, lust destroys the ability to enjoy even lust. Proverbs says, "The adulterous woman"—today one might add, "and internet porn" to that

—"in the beginning is as sweet as honey and in the end as bitter as gall and as sharp as a double-edged sword." Now this is talking about a lot more than pleasure, but it is talking about pleasure. Lust, a sin of pleasure, ends by destroying pleasure. It takes chastity to enjoy even lust.

Having said that lust is drinking out of the toilet, I'd like to clarify something. There are eight particularly dangerous sins the Church warns us about. That's one, and it isn't the most serious. Sins of lust are among the most easily forgiven; the Church's most scathing condemnations go to sins like pride and running the poverty industry. The harshest condemnations go to sins that are deliberate, cold-blooded sins, not so much disreputable, hot-blooded sins like lust. Lust is drinking out of the toilet, but there are much worse problems.

I'd like you to think about the last time you traveled from one place to another and you enjoyed the scenery. That's good, and it's something that greed destroys. Greed destroys the ability to enjoy things without needing to own them, and there are a lot of things in life (like scenery) that we can enjoy if we are able to enjoy things without always having to make them mine, mine, mine. Greed isn't about enjoying things; it's about grasping and letting the ability to enjoy things slip through your fingers. When people aren't greedy, they know contentment; they can enjoy their own things without wishing they were snazzier or newer or more antique or what have you. (And if you do get that hot possession you've been coveting, greed destroys the ability to simply enjoy it: it becomes as dull and despicable as all your possessions look when you look at them through greed's darkened eyes. It takes contentment to enjoy even greed: greed is *also* drinking out of the toilet.

Jesus had some rather harsh words after being unforgiving after God has forgiven us so much. Even though forgiveness is work, refusing to forgive one other person is drinking out of the toilet. Someone said it's like drinking poison and hoping it will hurt the other person.

The last sin I'll mention is pride, even though *all* sin is drinking out of the toilet. Pride is not about joy; pride destroys joy. Humility is less about pushing yourself down than an attitude that lets you respect and enjoy others. Pride makes people sneer at others who they can only see as despicable, and when you can't enjoy anyone else, you are too poisoned to enjoy yourself. If you catch yourself enjoying pride, repent of it, but if you can enjoy pride at all, you haven't hit rock bottom. As G.K. Chesterton said, it takes humility to enjoy even pride. Pride is drinking out of the toilet. *All* sin is drinking out of the toilet.

I've talked about drinking out of the toilet, but Rule Number Two is not the focus. Rule Number One is, "I am your owner. Enjoy freely of the food and water I have given you." Rule Number Two, "Don't drink out of the toilet," is only important when we break it, which is unfortunately quite a lot. The second rule is really a footnote meant to help us focus on Rule Number One, the real rule.

What is Rule Number One about? One window that lets us glimpse the beauty of Rule Number One is, "If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you can say to a mountain, 'Be uprooted and thrown into the sea,' and it will be done for you." Is this exaggeration? Yes. More specifically, it's the kind of exaggeration the Bible uses to emphasize important points. Being human sometimes means that there are mountains that are causing us real trouble. If someone remains in drunkenness and becomes an alcoholic, that alcoholism becomes a mountain that no human strength is strong enough to move. I've known several Christians who were recovering alcoholics. And had been sober for years. *That* is a mountain moved by faith. Without exception, they have become some of the most Christlike, loving people I have known. That is what can happen when we receive freely of the food and drink our Lord provides us. And it's not the only example. There has been an Orthodox resurrection in Albania. Not long ago, it was a church in ruins as part of a country that was ruins. Now the Albanian

Orthodox Church is alive and strong, and a powerhouse of transformation for the whole nation. God is on the move in Albania. He's moved mountains.

To eat of the food and drink the Lord has provided—and, leaving the image of dog food behind, this means not only the Eucharist but the whole life God provides—makes us share in the divine nature and live the divine life. We can bring Heaven down to earth, not only beginning ourselves to live the heavenly life, but beginning to establish Heaven around us through our good works. It means that we share in good things we don't always know to ask.

Let's choose the food and drink we were given.

## The Eighth Sacrament

"Holy" is an important word in the Bible, and there are many holy actions described in the Bible: Communion, prayers, and worship, to pick some of the larger ones. But there is only one act in the Bible that is called holy, and it is one we might not think of. What is it? "Greet one another with a holy kiss," which is repeated four or five times. "Holy" is *not* just another way of saying "appropriate," or rather it means "appropriate" but also something much stranger, much wilder. "Holy" means set apart to God, an element of Heaven here on earth.

The New Testament's main word for a profound display of respect in fact means "kiss", even if our translations hide it. Bowing and kissing have some interesting similarities throughout the Bible, and they mean something similar. Kissing has one meaning in American culture, but it has a very different set of colors in the Bible, and we are missing something of the holy kiss until we can see it as a display of profound reverence for one who is living in the life of Christ and becoming a little Christ. Is giving a kiss to an Orthodox Christian really different from kissing an icon?

The holy kiss is an opportunity to meet others in love. Do you know how someone gives you a greeting, a gift, or *something* and you know it isn't fake, you know another person has put his heart into it? That's what the holy kiss

should be, and for many people here, *is*. Why? There was one tenth degree black belt in karate who was asked what he thought our society could learn from his martial art. He didn't give any of the answers we find so obvious: exercise, self-defense, discipline, and the like. What he said, very emphatically, was "to bow," at which point he stood up and gave a great, courteous, and majestic bow. Bowing was bigger to him than any of the things that draw us, and that is what the holy kiss should be. What's the connection? Bowing and giving a kiss are never very far in the Bible, and once you understand them, you understand that they are a place where quite a lot come together. Furthermore, some of the warmest kisses I've received have been from bishops and other devout Orthodox Christians, and then the kisses have been worthy of that bow. How you give the holy kiss is related to your spiritual state.

The holy kiss is tied to holy communion. It is part of the eucharistic liturgy, and the Fathers draw interesting connections. St. Ambrose of Milan said, "We kiss Christ with the kiss of Communion:" we embrace Christ when we embrace each other, and yet there's something that the holy kiss adds. The kiss is itself an image for the Eucharist: even our prayers before communion say more than that. Yet the holy kiss is not just something indirectly connected to Holy Communion. The holy kiss is an act of communion between persons, and if we pray before Communion, "Neither like Judas will I give thee a kiss," this means not only that love must be in our reception of Holy Communion, but that we must not like Judas kiss our brethren without the love of Communion. There is difference between an embrace to someone who is Orthodox and someone who is not, because as with Holy Communion the kiss does not stand by itself: full communion makes a difference.

There are many other things one could say; the holy kiss takes different forms in different cultures and in my home parish is usually a hug. But the holy kiss is, in its way, the eighth sacrament, and is a window that opens out onto the

whole of Orthodoxy. It is well worth living.

## Two Decisive Moments

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

There is a classic Monty Python "game show": the moderator asks one of the contestants the second question: "In what year did Coventry City last win the English Cup?" The contestant looks at him with a blank stare, and then he opens the question up to the other contestants: "Anyone? In what year did Coventry City last win the English Cup?" And there is dead silence, until the moderator says, "Now, I'm not surprised that none of you got that. It is in fact a trick question. Coventry City has *never* won the English Cup."

I'd like to dig into another trick question: "When was the world created: 13.7 billion years ago, or about six thousand years ago?" The answer in fact is "Neither," but it takes some explaining to get to the point of realizing that the world was created 3:00 PM, March 25, 28 AD.

Adam fell and dragged down the whole realm of nature. God had and has every authority to repudiate Adam, to destroy him, but in fact God did something different. He called Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Elijah, and in the fullness of time he didn't just call a prophet; he sent his Son to become a prophet and more.

It's possible to say something that means more than you realize. Caiaphas, the high priest, did this when he said, "It



is better that one man be killed than that the whole nation perish." (John 11:50) This also happened when Pilate sent Christ out, flogged, clothed in a purple robe, and said, "*Behold the man!*"

What does this mean? It means more than Pilate could have possibly dreamed of, and "Adam" means "man": *Behold the man! Behold Adam, but not the Adam who sinned against God and dragged down the Creation in his rebellion, but the second Adam, the new Adam, the last Adam, who obeyed God and exalted the whole Creation in his rising. Behold the man, Adam as he was meant to be. Behold the New Adam who is even now transforming the Old Adam's failure into glory!*

*Behold the man! Behold the first-born of the dead. Behold, as in the icon of the Resurrection, the man who descends to reach Adam and Eve and raise them up in his ascent. Behold the man who will enter the realm of the dead and forever crush death's power to keep people down.*

*Behold the man and behold the firstborn of many brothers!* You may know the great chapter on faith, chapter 11 of the book of Hebrews, and it is with good reason one of the most-loved chapters in the Bible, but it is not the only thing in Hebrews. The book of Hebrews looks at things people were caught up in, from the glory of angels to sacrifices and the Mosaic Law, and underscores how much more the Son excels above them. A little before the passage we read above, we see, "To which of the angels did he ever say, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you?'" (Hebrews 1:5) And yet in John's prologue we read, "To those who received him and believed in his name, he gave the authority to become the children of God." (John 1:9) We also read today, "To which of the angels did he ever say, 'Sit at my right hand until I have made your enemies a footstool under your feet?'" (Hebrews 1:13) And yet Paul encourages us: "The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet," (Romans 16:20) and elsewhere asks bickering

Christians, "Do you not know that we will judge angels?" (I Corinthians 6:3) *Behold the man! Behold the firstborn of many brothers, the Son of God who became a man so that men might become the Sons of God. Behold the One who became what we are that we might by grace become what he is. Behold the supreme exemplar of what it means to be Christian.*

*Behold the man and behold the first-born of all Creation, through whom and by whom all things were made! Behold the Uncreated Son of God who has entered the Creation and forever transformed what it means to be a creature! Behold the Saviour of the whole Creation, the Victor who will return to Heaven bearing as trophies not merely his transfigured saints but the whole Creation! Behold the One by whom and through whom all things were created! Behold the man!*

Pontius Pilate spoke words that were deeper than he could have **possibly** imagined. And Christ continued walking the fateful journey before him, continued walking to the place of the Skull, Golgotha, and finally struggled to breathe, his arms stretched out as far as love would go, and barely gasped out, "It is finished."

Then and there, the entire work of Creation, which we read about from Genesis onwards, was *complete*. There and no other place the world was created, at 3:00 PM, March 25, 28 AD. *Then* the world was created.

That is a decisive moment, but decisive moments are not some kind of special exception to Christian life. Christian history and the Christian spiritual walk alike take their pace from decisive moments. I would like to look at the decisive moment in the Gospel reading.

In that reading, the people who have gathered to listen to Jesus went beyond a "standing room only" crowd to being so packed you couldn't get near the door. Some very faithful friends of a paralytic did the only thing they could have done. They climbed on the roof and started digging through it. I suspect that the homeowner didn't like the

idea. But they dug in, and lowered him, hoping this teacher will heal him.

Jesus saw *their* faith and said, "Your sins are forgiven." And people were shocked—there was a very good reason for this! If I have two friends, and one owes the other money, I can't tell the first one, "Your debt is forgiven. It's wiped clean." *That's not my place.* Sin is not a debt, or a crime, or even a disease. *It's worse.* And Christ told a man who owed an infinite debt to God that his slate was wiped clean and his sins were forgiven. And the reason people were saying, "This man blasphemes! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" was that they understood exactly how significant it was for Jesus to say, "Your sins are forgiven." Maybe they failed to recognize Christ as God (it is very rare that anyone but the demons identified him as the Son of God), but they were absolutely right when they said that Jesus was saying something that only God had the authority to say.

They were murmuring, and Christ knew why. So he asked them, "Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Arise. Take up your mat and walk.'" Everybody knew the answer, that forgiving sins was an infinitely weightier matter, but Jesus was about to give a lesser demonstration of the exact same authority by which he said, "Your sins are forgiven." He said to the paralytic, "Arise. Take up your mat and walk." And the paralytic did exactly that.

*That* is authority. That is the authority that commands the blind to gaze on the light of the Transfiguration, the deaf to listen to the song of angels, the mute to sing with God's angels, the lame to dance for joy, and what is greater than all of these, command you and me, sinners, to be freed from our sins.

Great and rare as the restoration of one paralytic may be, everybody knew that that was less important than the forgiveness of his sins. The story of that healing is a decisive moment.

But it's not the only decisive moment, and there is

another decisive moment that may be much less rare, much less something we want to write home about, but is profoundly important, especially in Lent. I am talking about repentance.

When the Holy Spirit convicts me of my sin, there are two responses I give, both of which I ought to be ashamed of. The first response is to tell God that he doesn't know what he's talking about. Now of course I am not blunt enough to tell God, "You don't know what you're doing." (Perhaps it would be better if I did.) What I say instead is something like, "I can see where you're coming from, and I can see that you have a point. But I've given it a little thought and I'd like you to consider a suggestion that is much better for everyone involved. Would you consider this consolation prize?" Now again, perhaps it would be better if I were honest enough to simply tell God, "You don't know what you're doing." Not only is it not good that I do that, but it is spurning the grace of God.

When a mother takes a knife or a sharp pair of scissors from a little boy, this is not because the mother wants a pair of scissors and is too lazy or inconsiderate to go get her own pair: her motivation is entirely for the child's welfare. God doesn't need our repentance or our sin. When he commands us through his Spirit to let go of our sin, is this for our sake or for his need? It is entirely for our own benefit, and not something God was lacking, that we are commanded to repent from sin. And this has a deeper implication. If God convicts us from our sin and asks our surrender to him in the unconditional surrender for repentance, then that is how we will be healed from our sin: it is the best medicine chosen by the Great Physician, *and it is out of his mercy that the Great Physician refuses all of our consolation prizes that will cut us off from his healing love.* Repentance is terrifying at times; it is letting go of the one thing we least want to give over to God, and it is only once we have let go that our eyes are opened and we realize, "I was holding on to a piece of Hell!" The more we understand repentance the

more we understand that it is a decisive moment when God is at work.

The second response I give to the Holy Spirit is even more an affront to the decisive *now* in which the Lord meets me. I say, "Well, I think you're right, and I need to repent of it, only now isn't the best time for me. I'd like to deal with it at another time." Here, also, things might be better if I were at least honest enough to acknowledge I was telling God, "Your timing is far from perfect." God lives outside of time, and yet he has all the time there is. There is never reason for him to say with a sheepish grin, "I know this really isn't the best time for you, but I only have two minutes right now, and I'm going to ask for you to deal with this now even though this isn't the best time." When he comes and tells us to repent, now, the reason for that is not that some point later on we may feel more like repenting and that is a better time; the reason is that by the time I am struggling against God's Spirit I have already entered the decisive moment when I can choose either to be cleansed and freed of my sin, or keep on fumbling for the snooze button while God tells me, "Enough sleep! It is time for you to arise!"

Let us repent, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

# What the Present Debate Won't Tell You About Headship

Today I'm going to talk about head and body (headship). And I say "headship" with hesitation, because in today's world asserting "headship" means, "defending traditional gender roles against feminism." And that maybe important, but I want to talk about something larger, something that will be missed if "headship" means nothing more than "one position in the feminist controversy."

One speaker didn't like people entering Church and saying, "It's so good to enter the Lord's presence." He said, "Where were you all week? How did you escape the Lord's presence?" And whatever Church is, it is absolutely not entering the one place where God is present. At least, it's not stepping out of some imaginary place where God simply can't be found.

But if we are always in the Lord's presence, that doesn't mean that Church isn't special. It is special, and it is the head of living in God's presence for all of our lives. Our time in Church is an example of headship. Worshipping God in Church is the head of a life of worship, and it is the head of a body.

There is something special about our time in Church.

But the way we live our lives, our "body" of time spent, manifests that glory in a different way. Christ didn't say that people will know we are his disciples by our "official" worship, however much God's blessing may rest on it. Christ said instead that all people will know we are his disciples by this, that we love one another. That isn't primarily in Church. That's in our day to day lives. If our time in Church crystallizes a life of worship, our love for one another is to manifest it. And that is the place of the body.

The relationship between head and body is the relationship between corporate worship and our lives as a whole. The body manifests the glory of the head. In my head I can decide to walk to a friend's house. But the head needs the body and the body needs the head, and I can only go to a friend's house if my head's decision to visit a friend's house is lived out in my body. "The head cannot say to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'"

The Father is the head of the Son. "No man can see God and live." God the Father is utterly beyond us; he transcends anything we could know; he is pure glory. If we were to have direct contact with him, we would be destroyed. And yet the Son is equal to the Father; the Son is just as far beyond this Creation, but there is a difference. The Son is the bridge between God and man, and God and his Creation. God the Father created the world through the Son, and the Son is just as glorious as the Father, but the Son can touch us without destroying us. The Father displays himself through the Son. The Father's love came to earth through the Son. The Father's wish that we may be made divine is possible precisely because the Son became man. And finally we can know the Father through the Son. If you have seen the Son, you have seen the Father.

We read in the New Testament that Christ is the head of man, that Christ is the head of all authority, that Christ is the head of the Church, and that Christ is the head of the whole Creation. If we think, with people today, that to have any authority over us, any head, is degrading, then we have

to resent a lot more than a husband's headship to his wife. But that's not the only option. When Christ is the head of the cosmos, there is more than authority going on, even if we have a negative view of authority. Our Orthodox understanding that the Son of God became a man that men might become the sons of God, that the divine became human that the human might become divine, expresses what the headship of Christ means. Christ is the head, and that means that the Church is drawn up in his divinity. If we are the body of Christ the head, that doesn't mean we're just under his authority. It means that we are a part of him and share in his divinity. The teaching that we share in his divinity is very tightly connected to the teaching of "recapitulation", or "re-heading," where Christ being the head of the Church, and our sharing in Christ's divinity, are two sides of the same coin. Christ is the head, and we, the body, make Christ manifest to the world. Some people may not know Christ except what they see in us. We cannot have Christ as our head without being a manifestation of his glory, and if Christ is the head of the Creation and Christ is the head of the Church, that means that when we worship, inside this building and in our daily lives, we are leading the whole visible Creation in turning to God in glory, and living the life of Heaven here on earth.

Christ is the head of the whole Creation, not just the Church. Christ isn't just concerned with his people, but the whole created world. By him and through him all things were created. Icons, which reflect the full implications Christ's headship over his Creation, exist precisely because Christ is the head of the whole Creation. We use a censer, a building, icons, water, flowers, and other aspects of our matter-embracing religion as representatives of the whole material Creation over which Christ is head. Christ doesn't tell us to be spiritual as spirits who are unfortunately trapped in matter; far from it, we are the crowning jewel of the material Creation, and Christ's headship glorifies the whole Creation and makes it foundational to how we are



saved. The universe is a symbol that manifests the glory of its head, Christ.

One example of headship that is immediate to me, although I don't know how immediate it is to the rest of you, is artistic creation. I create, write, and program, and in a very real sense I am at my fullest when I create. When I create, at first there is a hazy idea that I don't understand very well. Then I listen to it, and begin struggling with it, trying to understand my creation, and even if I am wrestling with it, I am wrestling less to dominate it than to get myself out of its way so I can help bring it into being. If in one sense I wrestle with it, in another sense I am wrestling with myself to let my creation be what it should be. If I were to simply dominate my creation, I would crush it, breaking its spirit. My best creations are those which I serve, where I use my headship to give my creations freedom and cooperate with them so that they are greater than if I did not give my creations room to breathe. My best work comes, not when I decide, "I am going to create," but when I cooperate with a creation, love it, serve it, and help it to become real, the creation becomes a share of my spirit.

A great many writers could say that, and I don't think this is something that is only found in writing, but how something far more general plays out. All of us are called to exercise headship over our work. In a family, the father is the head of the household and the mother is the heart of the household. The mother's headship over work in the home provides ten thousand touches that make a house a home. A mother's headship over the home is as much human headship over one's work as my headship over my creations and writing. What I do when I create is love my creation, serve it, develop it, work with God and with my creation to help it be real. If I'm not mistaken, when a woman makes a house into a real home, she loves it, serves it, develops it, and works with God and what she has to make it real. When a woman makes a house into a warm and inviting home, *that's headship.*

What is the relationship between women and the home? In societies where people have best been able to honor what the Bible says about men's and women's roles, there is a strong association between women and the home. The home, in those societies, was the main focus of business, charity work, and education, besides the much narrower role played by a home today. To say that women were mainly in the home is to say that they held an important place in one of society's important institutions, an institution that was the chief home of business, education, hospitality, and what would today be insurance, and held many responsibilities that are denied to housewives today. The isolation felt by many housewives today was much less an issue because women worked together with other women; like men, they worked in adult company. I believe there should be an association between women and the home, and I believe the home should be respected and influential. And, for that matter, I believe that both men and women are sold short with the options they have today. But instead of going too deep into that sort of question, important as it may be, I would like to look at what headship means.

The sanctuary is the head of the nave. Part of what that means is that there is something richer than either if there were just an sanctuary or just a nave. But we'll miss something fundamental if we only say that the sanctuary is more glorious to the nave. They are connected and part of the same body. They are part of the same organism, and the sanctuary manifests the glory of the sanctuary. There is also a head-body relation between the saint and the icon. Or between the reality a symbol represents, and a symbol. Or between Heaven and earth. Bringing Heaven down to earth is a right ordering of this world. Heaven isn't just something that happens after death after we serve God by suffering in this world. "Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has any heart imagined what God has prepared for those who love him," but God wants to work Heaven in our lives, beginning

here and now. If we are bringing Heaven down to earth, we are realizing God's design that Heaven be the head of earth, in the fullness of what headship means.

What about husbands and wives? There's something that we'll miss today if we just expect wives to submit to their husbands, even if we recognized that that's tied to an even more difficult assignment for husbands, loving their wives on the model of Christ giving up his own life for the Church. And we need to be countercultural, but there's something we'll miss if we just react to the currents in society that make this unattractive. Quite a few heresies got their start in reactions against older heresies; it is spiritually dangerous to simply react against errors, and if feminism might have problems, simply reacting to feminism is likely to have problems. Wives should submit to their husbands, and husbands should love their wives with a costly love, but there's more.

It bothers me when conservatives say, "I want to turn the clock back... all the way back... *to 1954!*" If we're just reacting against some feminists when they say women should be strong and independent, and have no further reference point, we're likely to defend a femininity that says that women are weak and passive. What's wrong with that? For starters, it's not Biblical.

If you want to know God's version of femininity, read the conclusion of Proverbs. The opening of this conclusion is often translated, "Who can find a good wife?" That's too weak. It is better translated as, "Who can find a wife of **valor**," with "valor" being a word that could be used of a mighty soldier. She is strong—*physically* strong. The text explicitly mentions her powerful arms. She is active in commerce and charity. There are important differences between this and the feminist picture, but if we are defending an un-Biblical ideal for womanhood, some delicate thing that can't do anything and is always in a swoon, then our reaction against feminism isn't going to put us in a much better spot.

And men should be men, but that doesn't mean that men should be rugged individuals who say, "I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul!" That is as wrong as saying that Biblical femininity is weak and passive. Perhaps men should be rugged, but to be a man is to be under authority. Trying to be the captain of your soul is spiritually toxic, and perhaps blasphemous. There is one person who can say, "I am the captain of my soul," and it isn't Christ. Not even Christ can say that, but only God the Father. Christ's glory was to be the Son of God, so that the Father was the captain of his soul, and he did the Father's work. Even Christ was under the headship of the Father, and if you read what John says about the Father and the Son, the fact that Christ was under headship, under authority, is part of his dignity and his own authority. To be a man is, if things are going well, to be a contributing member of a community, and in submission to its authority. Individualism is a severe distortion of masculinity; it may not be feminine, but it is hardly characteristic of healthy masculinity. There are a lot of false and destructive pictures of what a man should be, as well as what a woman should be.

If simply reacting against feminism is a way to miss what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman, it is also a way to miss something more, to miss a broader glory. This something more is foundational to the structure of reality; it is a resonance not only with God's Creation, but within the nature of God and how the Father's glory is shown through the Son. This something more is in continuity with God's headship to Christ, Christ's headship to the Church, Christ's headship to the cosmos, Heaven's headship to earth, the sanctuary's headship to the nave, the spiritual world's headship to the physical world, the soul's headship to the body, contemplation's headship to action, and other manifestations of a headship relation. On the Sunday of Orthodoxy, we proclaim:

...Thus we declare, thus we assert, thus we preach Christ our true God, and honor as Saints in words, in writings, in thoughts, in sacrifices, in churches, in Holy Icons; on the one hand worshipping and reverencing Christ as God and Lord, and on the other hand honoring as true servants of the same Lord of all and accordingly offering them veneration... This is the Faith of the Apostles, this is the Faith of the Fathers, this is the Faith of the Orthodox, this is the Faith which has established the Universe.

What does this have to do with heads and bodies? The word "icon" itself means a body, and its role is to manifest the glory of the saints, as the saints are to manifest the glory of God.

We don't have a choice about whether we will live in a universe with headship, but we do have a choice whether to work with the grain or against it, work with it to our profit or fight it to our detriment. Let's make headship part of how we rejoice in God and his Creation.

## Do We Have Rights?

As we [Paul and Silas] were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by soothsaying. She followed Paul and us, crying, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." And this she did for many days. But Paul was annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I charge you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market place before the rulers; and when they had brought them to the magistrates they said, "These men are Jews and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs which it is not lawful for us Romans to accept or practice."

The crowd joined in attacking them; and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, charging the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this charge, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying

and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and every one's fetters were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."

And he called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out and said, "Men, what must I do to be saved?"

And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their wounds, and he was baptized at once, with all his family. Then he brought them up into his house, and set food before them; and he rejoiced with all his household that he had believed in God.

Acts 16:16-34, RSV

As he [Jesus] passed by, he saw a man blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him. We must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

As he said this, he spat on the ground and made

clay of the spittle and anointed the man's eyes with the clay, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Silo'am" (which means Sent). So he went and washed and came back seeing.

The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar, said, "Is not this the man who used to sit and beg?" Some said, "It is he"; others said, "No, but he is like him." He said, "I am the man."

They said to him, "Then how were your eyes opened?"

He answered, "The man called Jesus made clay and anointed my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Silo'am and wash'; so I went and washed and received my sight."

They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the clay and opened his eyes. The Pharisees again asked him how he had received his sight. And he said to them, "He put clay on my eyes, and I washed, and I see."

Some of the Pharisees said, "This man is not from God, for he does not keep the sabbath." But others said, "How can a man who is a sinner do such signs?" There was a division among them.

So they again said to the blind man, "What do you say about him, since he has opened your eyes?" He said, "He is a prophet."

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight, until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight, and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?"

His parents answered, "We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but how he now sees we do not know, nor do we know who opened his eyes."



Ask him; he is of age, he will speak for himself." His parents said this because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had already agreed that if any one should confess him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, "He is of age, ask him."

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and said to him, "Give God the praise; we know that this man is a sinner."

He answered, "Whether he is a sinner, I do not know; one thing I know, that though I was blind, now I see."

They said to him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?"

He answered them, "I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you too want to become his disciples?"

And they reviled him, saying, "You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from."

The man answered, "Why, this is a marvel! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if any one is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him. Never since the world began has it been heard that any one opened the eyes of a man born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing."

They answered him, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out.

Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, "Do you believe in the Son of man?"

He answered, "And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?"

Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and it is he

who speaks to you."

He said, "Lord, I believe"; and he worshiped him.

John 9:1-38, RSV

The Gospel today deals with physical blindness, but it is about much more than physical blindness. In this passage, the man who was blind from birth received his physical sight. That is an impressive gift, but there's more. The passage deals with the Pharisees' spiritual blindness, but the Church has chosen to end today's reading with the blind man saying, "Lord, I believe," and worshipping Christ. When he did this, the blind man demonstrated that he had gained something far more valuable than physical sight. He had gained spiritual sight. The Bible actually gives a few more chilling words about the Pharisee's spiritual blindness, but the Church, following the Spirit, is attentive to spiritual sight and ends its reading with the man demonstrating his spiritual sight by adoring Christ in worship.

What is spiritual sight? We see a glimmer of it in the passage from Acts, where we read something astonishing. We read that Paul and Silas were stripped, savagely beaten, and thrown into what was probably a dungeon. And how do they respond to their "reward" for a mighty good deed? Do they say, "Why me?" Do they rail at God and tell him he's doing a lousy job at being God? Do they sink into despair?

In fact none of these happen; they pray and sing to God. Like the man born blind, they turn to God in worship. As should we.

That is advanced spiritual sight. I'm not there yet and you're probably not there either. But let me suggest some basic spiritual sight: Next time someone cuts you off on the road and you almost have an accident, instead of fuming and maybe thinking of evil things to do the other driver, why don't you thank God?

What do you have to be thankful for? Well, for starters,

your eyes work and so do your driver's reflexes, you have a car, and your brakes work, and probably your horn. And God just saved you from a nasty scrape that would have caused you trouble. Can't you be thankful for some of that?

In the West, we think in terms of rights. Almost all of the ancient world worked without our concept of rights. People then, and some people now, believed in things we should or should not do—we should love others and we shouldn't steal, cheat, or murder—but then there was a queer shift to people thinking "I have an entitlement to this." "This is something the universe owes me." Now we tend to have a long list of things that we're entitled to (or we think God, or the universe, or someone "owes me"), and if someone violates our rights, boy do we get mad.

But in fact God owes none of the things we take for granted. Not even our lives. One woman with breast cancer responded to what the women's breast cancer support group was named ("Why me?"), and suggested there should be a Christian support group for women with breast cancer called "Why not me?"

That isn't just a woman with a strong spirit speaking. That is the voice of spiritual sight. Spiritual sight recognizes that we have no right to things we take for granted. We have no right to exist, and God could have created us as rocks or fish, and that would have been generous. We have no right to be free of disease. If most of us see, that is God's generosity at work. He doesn't owe it to us. Those of us who live in the first world, with the first world's luxuries, do not have those luxuries as any sort of right.

I am thinking of one friend out of many who have been a blessing. I stop by his house, and he receives me hospitably. Usually he gives me a good conversation and I can hold his bunny Smudge on my lap and tell Smudge that my shirt is not edible. This is God's generosity and my friend's. Not one of these blessings is anything God owes me, or for that matter my friend owes me. Each visit is a gift.

It isn't just first world luxuries that none of us are entitled to. We have no right to live in a world where a sapphire sky is hung with a million constellations of diamonds. If there is a breathtaking night sky, God chose to create it in his goodness and generosity. Not only do I have no right to be a man instead of a butterfly or a bird (or to exist in the first place), I have no right to be in community with other people with friendships and family. God could have chosen to make me the only human in a lonely world. Instead, in his sovereignty, he chose to place me in a world of other people where his love would often come through them. I have no right to that. I'm not entitled to it. If I have friends and family, that is because God has given me something better than I have any right to. God isn't concerned with giving me the paltry things I have a right to. He is generous, and gives all of us things that are better than our rights. We have no right to join the seraphim, cherubim, thrones, dominions, powers, authorities, principalities, archangels, and angels—rank upon rank of angels adoring God. Nor do we have any right to live in a world that is both spiritual and material, where God who gives us a house of worship to worship him in, also truly meets us as we work, garden, play, visit with our friends, and go about the business of being human.

Isn't it terrible if we don't have rights? It's not terrible at all. It means that instead of having a long list of things we take for granted as "Here's what God, or the universe, or somebody owes me," we are free not to take it for granted and to rejoice at God's generosity and recognize that everything we could take for granted, from our living bodies to the possessions God has given us to God placing us at a particular point in place in time and choosing a here and now for us, with our own cultures, friendships, languages, homelands, sights and sounds, so that we live as much in a particular here and now as Christ, to a world carpeted with life that includes three hundred and fifty thousand species of beetles, to the possibility of rights. Every single one of

these is an opportunity to turn back in praise and worship God. It is an opportunity for joy, as we were created for worship and we find our fullest joy in worshipping God and thanking him. Would you rather live in a world where you only have some of the things that can be taken for granted, or in a world where God has created for you so many more blessings than he or anyone else owes you?

There is, actually, one thing that we have a right to, and it's a strange thing to have a right to. Hell. We have a right to go to Hell; we've earned a ticket to Hell with our sins, and we've earned it so completely that it cost God the death of his Son to let us choose anyone else. But Hell is not only a place that God casts people into; it is also where he leaves people, with infinite reluctance, after he has spent a lifetime telling people, "Let go of Hell. Let go of what you think you have a right to, and let me give you something better." Hell is the place God reluctantly leaves people when they tell him, "You can't take my rights away from me," and the gates of Hell are barred and bolted from the inside by people who will not open their hands to the Lord's grace. The Lord is gracious, and if we allow him, he will give us something infinitely better than our rights. He will give us Heaven itself, and God himself, and he will give us the real beginnings of Heaven in this life. The good news of God is not that he gives us what we think we have a right to, but that he will pour out blessings that we will know we have no right to, and one of these blessings is spiritual sight that recognizes this cornucopia as an opportunity for joyful thanksgiving and worship.

When I was preparing this homily, there's one word in the Greek text that stood out to me because I didn't recognize it. When the blind man says that Christ must be from God and have healed him as a "worshiper of God," the word translated "worshiper of God" is *theosebes*, and it's a very rare word in the Orthodox Church's Greek Bible. Another form of the word appears in Acts but this is the only time this word appears in either the Gospels or the

books John wrote. It is also rare in the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint. It occurs only four times: once in IV Maccabees 15:28 where the mother of seven martyred sons sees past even her maternal love "because of faith in God" (15:24) and is called "the daughter of God-fearing [*theosebēs*] Abraham," and three times in Job where the blameless Job is called a *theosebēs*, or "worshiper of God." In Job, this word occurs once in the book's opening verse, then Job is twice called a "worshiper of God" by God himself. The Maccabees' mother is not even called *theosebēs* herself, but "the daughter of *theosebēs* Abraham."

What does this mean? I'm not sure what it all means, but John didn't use very many unusual words. Unlike several New Testament authors, he used simple language. In the Greek Old Testament, this word is reserved for special occasions, it seems to be a powerful word, and it always occurs in relation to innocent suffering. Job is the very image of innocent suffering and the Maccabees mother shows monumental resolve in the face of innocent suffering—the text is very clear about what it means for a mother to watch her sons be tortured to death. The Gospel passage is about innocent suffering as well as spiritual sight. When the blind man calls Christ a "worshiper of God," he is speaking about a man who would suffer torture for a miracle, before Paul and Silas, and this little story helps move the Gospel towards the passion. But Christ says that the blind man suffered innocently, and I'm not sure that we recognize all of what that meant.

People believed then, as many people believe now, that sickness is a punishment for sin. The question, "Who sinned? Who caused this man's blindness?" was an obvious question to ask. And Jesus says explicitly that neither this man nor his parents sinned to bring on his blindness. Jesus, in other words, says that this man's suffering was innocent, and he was saying something shocking.

What does this have to do with spiritual sight?

Spiritual sight is not blind to evil. The Son of God came

to destroy the Devil's work, and that includes sin, disease, and death. Sin, disease, and death are the work of the Devil. The woman who survived breast cancer who suggested there should be a Christian support group called "Why not me?" never suggested that cancer is a good thing, and would probably never tell a friend, "I wish you could have the sufferings of cancer." When Paul and Silas were beaten with rods, being spiritual didn't mean that they didn't feel pain. I believe the beatings hurt terribly. Sin is not good. Disease is not good. Death is not good. Spiritual sight neither ignores these things, nor pretends that they are blessings from God. Instead, God transforms them and makes them part of something larger. He transformed the suffering of Paul and Silas into a sharing of the sufferings of Christ, a sharing of the sufferings of Christ that is not only in the Bible but is written in Heaven. I've had sufferings that gave terrifying reality to what had always seemed a trite exaggeration that "Hell is a place you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy." My sufferings are something I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy, and it is terrifying to realize that Hell is worse. So why then is spiritual sight joyful?

C.S. Lewis in *The Great Divorce* describes a journey. This journey begins in an odd place, and one that is not terribly cheerful. Anyone can have anything physical he wants just by wishing, only it's not very good. The ever-expanding borders of this place are pushed out further and further as people flee from each other and try to get what they want.

A bus Driver takes anyone who wants into his bus, which ascends and ascends into a country that is painfully beautiful to look at, where not only are the colors bright and full but heavy, rich, and deep. It is painful to walk on the ground because the people who got off the bus are barely more than ghosts, devoid of weight and substance, and their feet are not real enough to bend the grass. This is in fact a trip from Hell to Heaven, where Hell is mediocre and insubstantial, and Heaven is real and hefty beyond

measure, not only beautiful and good but colorful and rich and deep—and infinitely more real than Hell. One part that really struck me was that when Lewis's Heavenly guide (George MacDonald) explains why a woman in Heaven, whom MacDonald said had gone down as far as she could, did not go so far as descending to Hell:

"Look," he [MacDonald] said, and with the word he went down on his hands and knees. I did the same (how it hurt my knees!) and presently saw that he had plucked a blade of grass. Using its thin end as a pointer, he made me see, after I had looked very closely, a crack in the soil so small that I could not have identified it without his aid.

"I cannot be certain," he said, "that this is the crack ye came up through. But through a crack no bigger than that ye certainly came."

"But—but" I gasped with a feeling of bewilderment not unlike terror. "I saw an infinite abyss. And cliffs towering up and up. And then this country on top of the cliffs."

"Aye. But the voyage was not mere locomotion. That buss, and all you inside it, were increasing in size."

"Do you mean then that Hell—all that infinite empty town—is down some little crack like this?"

"Yes. All Hell is smaller than one pebble of your earthly world: but it is smaller than one atom of this world, the Real World. Look at yon butterfly. If it swallowed all Hell, Hell would not be big enough to do it any harm or have any taste."

"It seems big enough when you're in it, Sir."

"And yet all loneliness, angers, hatreds, envies and itchings that it contains, if rolled into one single experience and put into the scale against the least moment of the joy that is felt by the least in Heaven, would have no weight that could be registered at all.



Bad cannot succeed even in being bad as truly as good is good."

Bad cannot succeed even in being bad as truly as good as good is good, and spiritual sight knows this. To have spiritual sight is not to close your eyes so tight they don't even see evil, but to let God open your eyes wider. Our eyes can never open wide enough to see God as he truly is, but God can open our eyes wide enough to see a lot. Why were Paul and Silas able to turn from being viciously beaten and imprisoned to singing and praying to God? For the same reason a butterfly from Heaven could swallow all of Hell without it even registering. In that image of Heaven, not just the saints but the very birds and butterflies could swallow up Hell. This is just an image; the Real Place, real Heaven, is far more glorious.

Death is swallowed up in victory. Let us let spiritual blindness be swallowed up by spiritual sight that begins to see just how much God's generosity, grace, mercy, kindness, love, and 1001 other gifts we have to be thankful for. Let us worship God.