

Wonder

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Title: **The Community of Joy** Author: **Kh. Krista West**

A few weeks ago, I stood at my worktable and watched the rain deluging my backyard. The light outside was that unique shade of Portland leaden gray, a tone that has an oppressive quality, flattening the sky and giving off a somber light. Many people find it depressing, but it is after these storms that the grass glows with a sublime and intensified light, and it was that intoxicating light that I was hoping to see. It was a solitary moment, just myself alone with my work, and I treasured the quietude and the beauty.

As I brought my eyes back to the work before me, I beheld an even greater beauty. The yards of beautiful burgundy and gold brocade spread across my table caused my heart to soar. This glorious fabric was steeped in traditions that were centuries old, yet looked incredibly fresh and sparkling. In my sixteen years as an ecclesiastical tailor, I've had thousands of yards of fabric pass over my worktable and yet their glory never seems to grow stale. The familiar designs are like old friends well met, the new designs are awaiting their turn to be another link in the ancient chain of the beautification and adornment of Christ's Church.

A few years after I began working as a church tailor, I met an old friend from high school. He asked where I was working and I explained. "You make the same thing over and over again?!" he asked incredulously, "Don't you get bored?." It hadn't occurred to me to question this, but as I began to reflect upon it, I realized that my repertoire of garments is incredibly limited—only 12 basic designs—so I was making the same garments almost daily and yet I wasn't bored. Why was that?

I knew it had something to do with the feeling I got when I was working. It didn't happen all of the time, but every once in awhile I would experience the most delicious contentment, a deep sense of gratitude to be part of this line of craftsmen throughout the centuries who had worked at this labor. It wasn't particularly glamorous or thrilling work; in fact, any novelty it had had quickly wore off after slogging through tasks like cutting 45 feet of canvas interfacing into 4 inch strips or marking out row after row of bias binding. But it seemed that the longer I labored, the more joy I had.

As time went on, I began to realize that the very thing that would cause boredom—the sheer repetition of my work—was in actuality, the very freedom that gave such joy. By working at the same tasks, obtaining mastery bit by bit, year by year, I was going deeper and deeper into the work. And, yet it wasn't a self-serving mastery since it seemed that the more I delved into my work, the less I knew. I had read an account years before of a famous artist who, decades into his career, was convinced that his work was worthless and he abandoned painting altogether; at the time, I thought he was foolish, but I began to understand his motivation—the better you get at something, the more aware you are of your own ineptitude. In the case of working as an ecclesiastical tailor, familiarity bred humility. Sure I could make a beautiful set of vestments, but in the back of my mind I knew that at some time and place in the Church's history, someone else had done it better.

It is this very humility, this knowledge that I am laboring in a long, unbroken chain of tradition to which I am held accountable, and for which I will face judgment, that grounds my creativity. I work within a limited, fixed tradition, acutely aware that I must not add or subtract anything from the essence of the garments which I have been handed down. And the wonder is that, rather than make my work tedious and lifeless, it's these very limitations that stimulate and feed my creativity. As Photios Kontoglou, famous mid-20th century iconographer states "The artist of every period remains within the bounds of this form [the traditions of the Church]. And not only does this fact not trouble him, but by reason of it his work gains in intensity, for, unfettered by any necessity to invent a new type, he can devote himself completely to the task of execution." He speaks of the devout iconographers who "...transmitted their art, as a precious acquisition, to the subsequent artists, meekly and joyfully, not as an excellence of their own, but as a treasury of joy and a spiritual feast to which all are invited." Unlike many secular artists or craftsmen who find themselves enslaved to the modern, I found myself liberated by the ancient.

Every time I pick up my scissors and lay out another brocade, I am laboring within a great community. Like the unknown artisans who laid the stones of Hagia Sophia or made the glorious mosaics at Ravenna, my faith guides my purpose, which is not a man-centered expression of myself, but rather a God-centered expression of the Kingdom of Heaven. I am called to lay aside myself and approach the "spiritual feast" that is the adornment of the Church.

Because for the Orthodox Christian artisan, there are no solitary moments. Each and every moment I spend by myself, working on an epitachelion or cutting out altar cloths, is in actuality a moment spent in the company of all of the artisans who have gone before me in this long and glorious tradition. We don't stand alone, but together, and our joy is not taken from a single thing we might create out of our own limited and corrupt minds, but rather from the knowledge that we are laboring to make the material world give praise and glory to the Creator of All.

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Discussion Questions:

Kh. West, an ecclesial garment maker, discusses feeling "liberated by the ancient" and finds no boredom, but rather a lasting contentment in the repetition of her work. What are some real sources of boredom or contentment in our lives? Is repetitive work boring for some and not for others, or is there deeper purpose (is us or in the task) that leads to contentment or boredom?

The author discusses feeling a connection with her spiritual community while working alone. How can we appropriate this same connection in concentric circles outside of Church life, and into our "secular" lives?

There is a great temptation to “master” a task and then move on, which the author explicitly rejects. What are the dangers in thinking we’ve mastered any tasks in life? What are the warning signs that we’re adopting such attitudes? And what can we do to correct such an approach?