

Wonder

Volume: 1 Number: 4 Theme: **Can We Coexist?**

Title: **Faith and the City** Author: **Clio Pavlontis**

This year, Holy Week came at the same time for East and West. New York City was quiet. More people were off from work, and scattered groups of children were out. In the congruence of Eastern and Western celebrations, I became part of a visible majority: the Christian Faithful. While I may have seen myself as profoundly different from my Catholic and Protestant Brethren, the world at large had a different opinion.

After morning Liturgy on Holy Thursday, I went to have coffee with a group of men that I've known for four years. I am the only woman in the group, and one of two Christians. The other Christian is a lapsed Catholic. Often, the Canon from St. John the Divine joins us, and brings the Christian count up to three. The other members of the group are Jews, mostly Jewish by background and culture, although among the half dozen men, there may be those who are more observant. We gather to discuss various issues, often political and economic, but theological from time to time. They know that I am an Orthodox Christian, and they know that I am at Seminary. Up until Holy Thursday morning, I had not heard the coming of Pascha discussed. That did not surprise me.

It was a shock, then, for an acquaintance to sit down beside me and begin to talk about how he had to prepare for being called a "Christ Killer." This man is a history professor at a university in "the City." He has a wonderful sense of humor and at first, I didn't know if he had had the misfortune to tell what he thought was a joke, but there was an edge to his voice that indicated he was serious. I sat in disbelief while he spoke of how he always lectured to his students on the historical events around the Passion, "setting the record straight" and "beating them to the punch." That was when the term "Christ Killer" came up. I saw that the man was completely serious and even a bit aggressive in his tone and message. I have vague recollections of giving my own version of the historical events of the Passion and touching on the difference between the Jewish expectations and the Christians' perceptions of Messiah. (Many thanks to Seminary!) I left the coffee shop in a state of shock, in the company of another member of the group.

As we walked together, he asked me if I was all right, and I asked him if I had been too forward in my response. He said he was surprised at how non-aggressive my reply had been. I must add here that I have spent a lot of time in this man's company, and he has introduced me to many of his friends. He has come to Church with me many times and we talk a lot about Orthodoxy. He is a secular Jew; I am a cradle Orthodox. As we walked up the street, we ran into one of his co-workers, and my friend introduced me. She said, "Have you converted him yet?" I was appalled and embarrassed. I had the sense of being caught between two sides of a war that I did not want to fight.

In New York, inter-Christian and inter-Religious Ecumenism is an everyday affair. This Holy Thursday, it had become a battle ground, a chaotic sea shifting under my feet. In this storm my regard for fellow human beings seemed a fragile anchor and yet it was all I had. Silence was my only response. In the Ecumenical landscape that is America, it seems profoundly important to

walk circumspectly and to speak gently, quietly affirming truth as the Orthodox understand it. The only way to address the fear and triumphalism that various religious beliefs appear to engender is to listen to the person put in front of you. At those moments when prejudice breaks out, it is important to step back and let God answer. In such moments, human beings have no wisdom. The history professor is a deeply wounded man, and in the face of such brokenness, it would seem that few words could address his pain. Will he ever understand that the Christians who have clearly hurt him have also hurt themselves by removing themselves from Christ's love? Would he care? Will the woman who clearly saw me as putting pressure on my friend ever take Christianity seriously enough to understand that conversion is Christ's work alone?

In the end, we have to look within ourselves, and ask what role each of us plays in the diverse society that is America. Are we "missionaries"? Are we "Defenders of the Faith"? Do we speak, or do we remain silent? I would answer that it is not what we do or say, as much as who we are. Perhaps the real questions to ask are about our own spiritual development. How well do we live our faith? How do we receive the people and events God puts into our lives? Do we accept the lessons he sends us? Do we accept the world around us, the people created by God? There are many examples of those who have lived their faith or belief in the wider world beyond their ethnic community: Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Mother Gavrilia all come to mind. They are a testament to the sacrifice such living entails. As Orthodox Christian Americans we are called to our own path of sacrifice among our neighbors. Who is our neighbor? The one who has need. Sometimes we address the need best when we only listen.

Ms. Clio Pavlantos is a resident of New York City and is currently working towards her Masters of Divinity degree at St. Vladimir's Seminary in Yonkers, NY. She is looking to complete her clinical pastoral education certification, which would allow her to actively minister in hospitals.

Discussion Questions:

Is the author right? Is the best way for us to relate to other faiths to "walk circumspectly and to speak gently, quietly affirming truth as the Orthodox understand it"?

What is our role in our society as Christians?

Is her model of evangelism by how we personally live our lives a viable one? Can you think of examples of it beyond who she listed? How were you drawn to the faith?