

Is Anything Not a Gift?

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



On February 9th the Church remembers the Hieromartyr Peter Damascene, a man who saw God in everything. He took every event as God's gracious gift, including the terrible things that happened to him.

Peter Damascene (meaning "of Damascus") lived in the 12th century, under Islamic rule. He was known as a great reader who loved to gain wisdom and knowledge. Yet he lived in such utter simplicity, with so little interest in worldly possessions, that he never actually owned or wanted to own a book. He borrowed books he wanted to read from friends, and then cheerfully returned them, having no desire to build an impressive library.

His reading made him a wise person with much knowledge. Yet he knew that reading, in and of itself, is of limited value. He wrote: "We need knowledge based on experience...if we wish to attain knowledge of God mere reading or listening is not enough."

He expanded on this idea of the need for experience in these words: "Man is free to receive the sun's rays or not. God sends the light of knowledge like rays to all, but He also gives us faith like an eye. The one who wants to receive knowledge through

faith, keeps it by his works, and so God gives him more willingness, knowledge and power." All these gifts--faith, willingness, knowledge, power—he wanted human beings to thank God for.

His conviction that "works" and "experience" are of the utmost important led Saint Peter to brave, dangerous acts. He spoke out and defended the Christian faith powerfully. His words carried the certainty that his extensive reading, done with faith, had given him. His hearers were convinced that he spoke the truth and followed the true God.

Saint Peter became a highly respected leader among fellow Christians. But he suffered exile and physical punishment at the hands of the Islamic government, which dealt harshly with those who dared to say that Islam is inferior to Christianity and not the true faith. He paid a great price for his witness to Christ.

Saint Peter Damascene's writings are among the treasures of the Orthodox Church. It is in these writings that he most clearly lays out his belief that everything is a divine gift. Wealth is given so that a person can be merciful to others; poverty is given to engender patience; clumsiness is given for humility; health is given to so that a person can help the infirm. Everything, even great difficulty, is a gift, given by God for our salvation.

On Saturday of this week we read Luke 21:4, the story of the poor widow who is observed by Christ as she makes her offering to the Temple treasury. He says that with her small gift she has offered more than all the rich people who gave a lot, because she has put in all she had.

Saint Peter Damascene would understand an offering like the widow's, one which cost her so much. He would know that she was giving back to God in gratitude for all He had given her. He would recognize her as another person who, like himself, knew that there is not anything that is not a gift.