

The Outer Signs are Only to Remind Us of the Inner Things

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>.



"The outer signs are only to remind us of the inner things" are words written by the Nun Martyr and Grand Duchess Elizabeth, who was martyred with her companion, the Nun Barbara.

Because Saint Elizabeth was born into Western European royalty and raised as a Protestant, she struggled to explain her conversion to Orthodoxy to her relatives, among them Queen Victoria. Some of them believed that her Russian husband, the Grand Duke Sergei, had compelled her to convert. Others, apparently, thought that she had been dazzled by the splendor of Orthodox worship. It was to them that she wrote, according to Ludmila Koehler's book "Saint Elisabeth the New Martyr", these words: "You tell me that the outer brilliance of the church charmed me...in that you are mistaken—nothing in the outer signs attracted me. The outer signs are only to remind us of the inner things."

Many people do not understand why churches, vestments and sacred vessels should be beautiful. They consider these things to be unnecessary "trappings." Yet God Himself gave instructions for the building of a richly-furnished tabernacle, and vestments for the "glorious adornment" of the priests, in Exodus 25.

Jesus reproved the disciples when they questioned the "waste" of costly oil used by a woman to anoint Him. They complained that it could have been sold for a good deal of money which would help the poor. But He said, in Matthew 26:11, "For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have Me." The Church understands from this that when we have the privilege of being with the Lord in church, everything from the choir's singing to the well-polished candlestands should be as beautiful as we can make it. Near the end of every Liturgy we ask God to "sanctify those who love the beauty of Your house."

But beautiful things are not ends in themselves. They are there to "remind us of the inner things" as Saint Elizabeth wrote. We are not meant to get caught up in beautiful externals, but we are meant always to remember the glory of the Kingdom of God, toward which the beauty of those externals points us.

Saint Elizabeth understood that, and she also understood what Jesus meant by saying, "For you always have the poor with you." Creating beauty in the church doesn't exempt us from taking care of those in need; we are supposed to do both. The women's monastery founded by Saint Elizabeth served some of the most destitute people in Moscow while at the same time holding services in a beautifully-appointed chapel.

Troparion - Tone 4

Emulating the Lord's self-abasement on the earth,
You gave up royal mansions to serve the poor and disdained,
Overflowing with compassion for the suffering,
And taking up a martyr's cross,
In your meekness
You perfected the Saviour's image within yourself,
Therefore, with Barbara, entreat Him to save us all, O wise Elizabeth.

We should always be able to answer critics of the "fancy trappings" of Orthodox worship by truthfully saying that we do serve and care for our needy sisters and brothers, but that we also make the church a beautiful place so as to "remind" worshippers of the "inner things." Saint Elizabeth shows us how to do both.