

# OCA

## ORTHODOX CHURCH IN AMERICA

Work of the Church / Reflections in Christ / January 2013

### Listening to Lessons from the Unborn

By Fr. Lawrence Farley

Good theology can pop up in unexpected places. One such place is the writing of Dr. Seuss, author of children's books. My favourite theological work of his is *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, a story of conversion and redemption. I also like his pro-life treatise, though it is doubtful that he considered it to be such when he wrote it. It is called *Horton Hears a Who*, and contains the theological assertion, "A person's a person, no matter how small." That would include tiny little persons living inside their mothers. Or, in the more elegant words of our own Holy Synod, "the unborn in the womb are already adorned with God's image and likeness".

The unborn and the newly-born, by the very fact of their being, can teach us a thing or two. In the liturgical after-glow of Sanctity of Life Sunday, I would like to pass along two of these lessons.

First of all, the unborn teach us that we enter into this world already loved, wanted, and valued. As my own dad says, "Babies bring their love with them." I remember seeing a young baby wearing a little shirt bearing the words "Another little tax deduction". That is true, of course (thank you, Caesar), but it is not why the child is loved or valued. No one loves the child because of its utility. Babies cannot help cook the meals, or clean the house, or even clean themselves. Strictly speaking, apart from such tax deductions, they have no immediate utilitarian value whatsoever. We love them not because they are useful, but simply because they are. They enter the world pre-loved, even though they may not be self-consciously aware of it (or of much else). In cases of

abortion, of course, there is, shall we say, a deficit of such parental love. But even here they are still loved and valued, if not by their parents or by those in the abortion industry, then by God Himself. It is as the Psalmist sings: “Though my father and mother abandon me, the Lord will take me up” (Ps. 27:10). A Planned Parenthood slogan proclaims, “Every child a wanted child!” As a matter of fact, every child is a wanted child, for God wants and loves every child conceived.

By this the unborn teach us that God loves every one of us regardless of our behavior, loving the worst sinner equally along with the greatest saint. That is because the source and quality of His love is not rooted in us, but in Him. He loves not because of what He sees in us, but simply because He is love. If we refuse to respond to this already given love and choose to spurn Him, doing what He hates and hurting our fellow man, we will receive no benefit from that love. If we choose to love Him in return and strive to live in a way that pleases Him, then we will benefit from this love, and will save our souls. But the love remains nonetheless. As St. John famously said, “We love because He first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:19). We enter this world already loved; our task is simply to respond to it and love God in return.

The second thing that the unborn teach us is that we are completely dependent on others, starting with God. People in the abortion debate sometimes talk about “the viability of the fetus”, debating when a child is capable of living life on its own outside the womb. Is the fetus viable at 39 weeks? At 35 weeks? Earlier? But this debate, reasonable in medical terms, is misleading if translated into a theological principle. For, strictly speaking, the baby is not viable even after a full term birth. If the baby is not cared for, and fed, and kept warm, even outside the womb, then it will die—as will you and I. If I am not cared for, and fed, and kept warm, I will die too. We are none of us viable in that sense, for we are all mortal, and only survive because we are part of a vast network of mutual support.

Our culture values independence. We admire the person who loudly proclaims, “I don’t depend on no one for nuthin!” and who boasts of needing no one. We can feed and clothe ourselves, we say; we are self-sustaining. But these assertions hide the truth that in fact no one feeds himself. The food that I eat every day is grown by someone else (called a farmer), and then processed by someone else (called a manufacturer), and then shipped to my store by yet someone else again (called a trucker), and then sold to me and put into my hands

by yet another (called a retail worker). Even the farmer who can grow and eat most of his own food is still dependent upon God for the sun and the rain. We are all united, whether we acknowledge it or not, in a vast world-wide web of mutual inter-dependence. I am viable and survive only because of others.

This is not simply true in the world, but in the Kingdom also. God could have arranged the economy of salvation so that it was simply “me and Jesus”. But He chose otherwise: it is “me-in-the-Church and Jesus”. Thus, to become born again and begin new life with God, I need to be baptized by others. Then I need to receive Holy Communion from others. I experience the saving and transforming Presence of Christ when I gather together with others, even if that gathering be as small as two or three people (Mt. 18:20). I cannot be saved apart from the prayers of the Mother of God, and the apostles, and the saints, and the angels. I cannot be saved apart from the prayers of the others in my local congregation. We are all saved together, as we continue to worship together and pray together, both for the world and for each other. That is why all the images of salvation in the Scriptures are so relentlessly corporate: we are saved not as individuals, but as part of a people Israel; not as single sheep, but as a united flock; not on our own, but as citizens of a city—for when the Bride of the Lamb descends in beauty from heaven, it comes down as a city (Rev. 21:2). And a city, of course, is a place where people live together in community, depending on one another for their daily needs. We are dependent upon one another, both in creation and redemption.

Theology can indeed be found in unexpected places. Our Lord, citing the Psalter, said that out of the mouths of babes, God has brought perfect praise (Mt. 21:16, Ps. 8:12). He also has brought from there good theology as well.