

VITALITIES OF THE VIBRANT ORTHODOX PARISH (Part 6):
MUTUAL ENCOURAGEMENT

by Father Frank Marangos

“Put to death therefore what is earthly . . . anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”

Colossians 3:4-11

According to Saint John Chrysostom, “slander is worse than cannibalism.” In other words, the utterance of false charges or misrepresentations which defame and damage another’s reputation, is viler than devouring physical flesh! Gossip and slander are, perhaps, the most effective tools in Satan’s arsenal. It is by this method that Satan is able to poison unity, mutual support, and love.

A long time ago in Jerusalem there lived two brothers who were both farmers. They tended their crops on opposite sides of a hilltop bequeathed to them by their father. As a result of a bitter argument, the brothers did not speak to one another for years. One older brother was married and had a large family. The other lived alone.

One night, the younger brother was visited by an angel in a dream. He awoke and decided to secretly carry some of his grain to his married brother’s barn. “My brother has many children to feed,” he thought. “Surely he and his wife need more of the crop than I.” At the very same time, the older brother with the large family woke after a similar visitation. “My brother is alone,” he thought, “and has no one to take care of him. Surely he needs more grain than I.”

At midnight, each brother gathered bundles of wheat to give to his brother. As they walked to the hilltop in the starlight, they met at the boundary line of their property. Realizing what the other was doing, they dropped the wheat they held in their arms and embraced. Weeping together, they realized the true meaning of unity and mutual love.

The hilltop on which they embraced was Mount Moriah. It became the very spot where the Holy Temple was built by King Solomon in the heart of Jerusalem.

Mutual love is one of the most important foundational pillars of the vibrant Orthodox parish. In addition to the pillars of (1) hospitality, (2) love of Holy Scripture, (3) catechesis, (4) liturgical participation, and (5) vision, healthy communities strive to maintain unity. Rather than resenting, criticizing, and/or being jealous of others, such parishes are characterized by a culture of mutual support, encouragement, and love. Like the two Jewish brothers, parishioners who belong to these parishes make every effort to authentically celebrate the accomplishments and achievements of others.

According to the Old Testament Psalmist, only those who refrain from slander may come before the Lord. “Who may enter your Temple?” asks King David. “Only a person who obeys God in everything and always does what is right, whose words are true and sincere, and who does not slander others can worship on your sacred hill. But, he does no wrong to his friends nor spreads rumors about his neighbors” (Psalm 15:1-3).

As the Greek Orthodox parish of the Annunciation anticipates yet another year of faithful ministry in North Miami, let us all take time to examine the condition of our respective relationships. Let us seek to forgive and be forgiven for past grievances, malice, slander, and foul talk. Let 2018 be the year of mutual encouragement, support, and unity. Only on such a foundation can a vibrant parish be firmly established!