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## **The Stance of Fear, the Stance of Faith**

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An Open Letter to Christians Who Struggle to be Orthodox

Earlier this year the monks of St. Anthony's Greek Orthodox Monastery in Arizona published *The Departure of the Soul According to the Teachings of the Orthodox Church*. They flag it as a "patristic anthology" and amass an enormous amount of material to make a simple argument. Chapter seven is titled, "On the Falsifications, Misrepresentations, and Errors of Those Who Oppose the Teaching of the Orthodox Church" and provides a fore-piece from Psalm 25:1, "Judge me, O Lord." Archbishop Lazar Puhalo and Father Michael Azkoul, who have written extensively over many years, are the subject of their "analysis." They devote over a hundred pages to the examination of my friend Vladika Lazar's writing on the subject in a work that numbers one thousand one hundred and eleven pages.

As I read what they had to say and the curious way they went about this enormous effort I was reminded of the long history of apologetics, whether theological, philosophical and political, in which arguments are carefully and cunningly constructed blind to the intent and purpose of those they are writing against. It is a temptation to address the details in their diatribe, but it seems to me a fruitless exercise -- inviting one into the Devil's kitchen. A primary way the Tempter works is to turn us away from the intentions and spiritual purposes at work in those we judge as "our enemies", turn them into a faceless symbol in which we can bury all our unresolved passions, our desire to judge and banish and extend our passion so it frames how we see the world and all of God's creation, each human struggler and their challenges. When we do this we mount the high war-horse of self-declared righteousness and engage battles based on fear.

Vladika Lazar and I became friends over forty years ago. We have nurtured our understanding and the depth of Orthodox thought, our understanding of the gifts of the liturgical life and the spiritual disciplines that help us "work out our salvation", and the needful Word we are called to hear and speak in the life of God's fragile and wounded world. Countless conversations are one of the treasures of my heart.

When I read the Prophet Jeremiah and much though not all of the writings of Saint John Chrysostom I see how deeply concerned they were about the dangers lurking when the "Devil nests in the Church" and synagogue. They, like Vladika Lazar, love their liturgical families, grasp the gift of revelation bequeathed to them over the long span of the developing spiritual tradition and seek to call their community back to the centre of the "faith we have received from our fathers and mothers." They know in their bones the danger of reframing the faith through the prism of fear, just how cunningly the Evil one uses our fear and our desire for purity and appetite for righteousness against the "least of these my little ones." Like Jeremiah and Chrysostom a central pastoral concern has been at work in all that Vladika Lazar has written on this subject. He has sat with many in the midst of their grief at the loss of a loved one captured by the fear that the dearly departed is on a road of horror, a road governed and controlled by demons with "no one watching out for their soul." Vladika has been to them like "a minor angel, the kind of angel who would descend

with disarming apologies, and of who no sinner would ever be afraid.” He has brought them out of the precincts of fear into the fold of faith in the sure knowledge that the Lover of the World and the ministry of Jesus Christ forgives and cradles their loved one in the lap of divine grace.

This year is the five hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther’s Reformation. The tipping point for Luther was the work of Johann Tetzel (d. 1591), a Dominican friar and preacher and grand Inquisitor and Grand Commissioner for indulgences in Germany. Tetzel combed the countryside playing on the fears of those who had lost loved ones and were in the grip of fear. He marketed spiritual terrorism. Fear blind to God’s grace trumped the faith proclaimed in the Gospel. Perhaps it is oddly fitting that the legacy of Tetzel should witness a rebirth in presumed Orthodox clothing at the hands of the monks of Saint Anthony’s monastery in the desert of Arizona for the quincentenary. I only wish they would change the name of their monastery since my old friend Saint Anthony resolved his struggles with demons and came to dwell in the grace of God and the kingdom of compassion which knows no end.