# HAVE SALT AMONG YOURSELVES. Lecture at Dallas Seminary, February 12, 2011

***Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk***

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The subject of traditional values and their connection with Christian faith has acquired paramount importance in current discourse on social ethics. It is remarkable that this precise matter is being widely examined both by ecclesial and secular bodies. Now for some time, societies living according to the laws of liberal democracy and the forces of the market economy have felt themselves trapped in an ethical vacuum principally because commonly accepted norms are continually undergoing questionable scrutiny.

It is not difficult to divine what is behind this. The notion of 'personal freedom', which now dominates modern society, has enjoyed an observable, sustained tendency to expand, winning over more and more space at the expense of the narrowing sphere known as 'public ethics.' What remains is a pluralistic society run by a state stripped of any institution that pronounces and fixes norms of moral behaviour. Furthermore, in that liberal democracy has enthusiastically ostracized churches and religious organizations from the realm of private life, ensuing standards of neutrality on ethical issues are the inevitable and only possible platform for public debate. This debate, however, leads nowhere since neutrality in this sense inescapably yields an emptiness, and the affirmation that ethics, like religion, is 'the private affair of each person'.

Our society, from time to time described as 'post-Christian,' is nonetheless founded on the rudiments of Christian ethics. Its current bearers are the families and individuals who resist the growing aggressive milieu which seeks maximal, though falsely understood, freedom. The norms of ethics, which continue to be the concern of the state, cannot be trusted as permanent since they can so easily be changed and

‘liberalized’ by the democratic introduction of appropriate amendments to unsatisfactory legislation.

From the Christian point of view, moral commandments are eternal and unchangeable. Man, created in the image and likeness of God, has from generation to generation preserved a moral intuition that has been forged in him by God. Pluralistic secular society, however, ignoring the Legislator Who stands over it, seeks to appropriate the power that defines and interprets the norms of moral social behaviour. In so doing, ‘normality’ is swayed by the fluctuations of ‘public opinion,’ fluctuations that owe their existence to the technological manipulation of public consciousness, artificially created by interested circles, volatile, and fully dependent on ideals approved by an omnipotent mass media.

It is, therefore, secular society itself that establishes the criteria of moral behaviour, criteria which have no underlying foundation because they are not rooted in the eternally just law of God. As such, standards can *a priori* be changed.

Let us recall a recent public debate in the United States on the abortion issue. It turned out that pro-choice adherents were supported by wealthy companies – producers and sellers of contraceptives and ecbolics – that desired to expand their ‘business’ under the rhetoric of “defending babies’ right to be wanted”. In spite of the blatant aberration and bloody, nightmarish act of killing unborn babies, a great number of states, allegedly responding to their citizens’ wishes, legalized abortion during the first twelve weeks of pregnancy.

Another vivid example of this line of thinking is the widespread contention in Western Europe and America about the right of same-sex couples to adopt children. Even such fundamental notions as ‘mother’ and ‘father’ are now being challenged in order to please secular ethics. Instead of ‘mother’ and ‘father’ we hear the impersonal ‘parent number one’ and ‘parent number two’. First we witnessed the efforts being made to attest that same-sex unions are as ethically justifiable as the natural union of a man and a woman; then this appendage surfaces tagged with laws, terms, and a novel nomenclature.

Last year, the erosion of yet another moral standard, one that had hitherto been considered irreversible, surfaced in the US Army. Before 2010, American officers and privates had been prohibited from openly demonstrating any unconventional sexual orientation. Those who did so were discharged. The resulting discourse in American society once again demonstrated the defining role of the mass media in shaping public opinion through targeted propaganda. Existing legislation can easily be changed, and moral standards can be redefined and reinterpreted. Pluralistic society has for a long time appropriated the right to decide what is moral and what is amoral by using as benchmark the purely legal imperative: ‘what is not forbidden is permitted.’ It is altogether astonishing that a principle of criminal law has suddenly become a defining paradigm in the moral field of social living!

The entire issue of morality, especially social morality, is not that it has lost its enormous importance, but that in our times it is valued essentially from a different standpoint. Moreover, in recent decades, the very notion of 'values' has fallen under suspicion. While until recently it was seen as something indisputable, an objective given, today we are told that the concept of values is artificial, having been created at a certain time for specific purposes. The perception of values is equated to ideology, the product of a social contract which, accordingly, has a purely temporary and conditional nature.

In liberal Protestant theology of the last quarter of the 20th century, there was a stable tendency to reject a whole number of fundamental values, including those of moral order. Protestant critics spoke of the material rather than the spiritual nature of ethical values categorizing the latter as 'materialized ethics,' deprived of any connection with religion.

The implication here is that not only the very idea of moral values but also their possible existence is challenged. Moral values can indeed be used for ideological purposes; this was evident, for example, in totalitarian states –Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. To be sure a particular set of values was used in raising an Arian – a citizen of the Third Reich, or a builder of communism.

Though not all values can be called Christian, some have been borrowed from Christian ethics. In the case of Christian-based principles, the reliance of a state on values had as its central aim to show its concern for what was traditionally known as the 'common good'. Regrettably, the view of what is 'common good' in a pluralistic society has collapsed, since what is good for some is not necessarily good for others. And we once again find ourselves in a vicious circle: nothing is objective: there are only your subjective feelings or mine.

But objectivity and impartiality require of a responsible enquirer that he reject the media approach to the problem and instead study it in its entire retro- and prospective totality. If, when investigating the meaning of moral value, we focus solely on the 'value' component (thereby severing morality from the holistic context of its historical evolution), we destroy the sense of continuity of its natural evolution over the millennia by isolating it at particular developmental stages and then classifying it as universally fundamental. Actually, our task is much more difficult. In stripping away the dogmas of pluralistic ideology, we should embrace mentally all of the stages within a single contextual process and then appreciate its organic and integral nature.

In making our detailed investigation, we must first revoke the very notion of 'moral value' as identified by modern ethics. What is it that lies on the other side of that which is defined by axiology as 'moral value'? Is it the family as a 'type' of the common life of a man and a woman? Or the sanctioned product of a social contract? Or the fulfilment of the reproductive instinct? Or does something bigger stand behind it, such as the actualization of the enormous creative potential of love? Turning now to our search of what

constitutes goodness: is it or is it not motivated psychologically? Does it stem from the sphere of human affects, or is it a natural, inborn requirement of a human being?

Clearly, a positive answer can be given to each of these questions. But our interest here centres more on the phenomenon of 'unconscious intentional acts', as Husserl called them. By way of clarification, let us consider our actions at the pre-reflective stage, before they became objects of speculative analysis. For example, what motivating force engenders the impartial act of giving aid to the needy? What compels a person to do good; what power or ability? How did the general distinction between evil and good develop in our cultures? It is precisely this intention to do good, that personal inspired impulse, which is the creative point of departure not only for an individual but also for a family, a community and ultimately for the life of society in its totality.

Moving on to the level of inter-personal relations, this intention for good acts can now be defined as 'values', the meaning of which lies in its macroscopic application for society. And from this perspective, the very notion of values, even if originally borrowed by ethics from economics, is altogether positive, void of selfish abuse. Moral values create the person, family, community, and society as a whole. They are instrumental in establishing a healthy and harmonious atmosphere, allowing us the opportunity to live long and to communicate with one another in peace and love.

Clearly, no human intention is purposeless. Earlier, we defined moral values as human desire for harmony – a classical notion which originated in Greek philosophy with the idea of καλοκαγαθία, according to which a human being should be καλὸς καὶ ἀγαθός – beauty in body and kindness in the soul. The essence of harmony was viewed at that time as conformity with the Cosmos – a universal ordering. This in turn gave rise to the conception of man as a microcosm who, writ small, embodies the whole Universe.

The Enlightenment continued to uphold the concept of human calling but it soon mingled this with a critical element which, over time, diverted the course of European history and culture. Now it was no longer the Cosmos with its order and laws that constituted the focus of attention and the source of edification, but man himself: isolated, an abstract unit. For its part, the Renaissance actualized the aphorism of the sophist, Protagoras: 'Man is the measure of all things'. It is noteworthy that the sophists' sensualism was criticized by Socrates and Plato, whose philosophical contributions were decisive for our culture. The path towards deifying man led our culture to an impasse, a void from which, to this day, we are unable to free ourselves. Indeed, no two minds think alike and as such, how can a just society, a state, be formed where all of the citizens feel free and happy?

Socrates and Plato progressed in their visions of harmony and happiness. They tried to explain how man should live, what he should live for and what should be his life's goal. But our modern culture in its

attempts to deify man ignores these questions. Why? What do we have instead? Contemporary opinion is that man's happiness is defined by his being a consumer and a seeker of specific pleasures!

Accordingly, our civilization finds itself in yet another vacuum, this one characterized by the absence of positive notions, goals and desires. In the words of Protopresbyter Alexander Schmemann, an American theologian of Russian origin, modern culture is distinguished by its negativity. One only has to switch on the TV and listen to news reports: mostly about disasters, murders and crimes! Media technologists have admitted that negative news stories sell for a higher price and are purchased more willingly than stories with positive content. And look at modern movies? Most address human passion and rarely develop anything good or worthy for people's lives.

Curiosity, pleasure and entertainment have become the artificial substitutes of goodness and happiness. They have captured the riveted attention of the average man. When heated in the flames of mass media and pop culture the result is an impersonal ethos that exploits commercially human passion and vice. Most lamentably there is simply not a single modern pluralistic society that cares for the spiritual well being of its inhabitants.

Standing in contradistinction to this situation are the unambiguously positive and creative moral values that at one time had been espoused by a traditional Christian culture. These include goodness, joy, forgiveness, patience, love, mercy, and self-sacrifice. They were the bases upon which the harmonious life both of individuals and of all society were built. They directed a person not to momentary pleasures but to true happiness which can be found in this life when one devotes time and effort to others. These virtues are not the product of a social contract; they grew organically from Christian teaching and were practiced by people who created their culture and determined their history. In other words, moral values were primarily the categories required for the education and self-education of a healthy personality, just the opposite of the instruction in social behaviour taught to schoolchildren. Our civilization's loss of positive guidelines is most luridly evidenced in the erosion of the concept of the common good and in the rejection of traditional values both of which had been instilled by Christianity.

Moral values, which are grounded in Holy Scripture, are of a personal nature and are realized in the life of each one of us. They stem first of all from the biblical teaching of the creation of man in the image and after the likeness of God (Gen. 1:26). If man is in the image of God it follows that he is called to resemble his Prototype. The Lord Jesus Christ, the New Adam, the Perfect Man, restored the likeness of man to God after its loss at the Fall. He opened to everyone the way to inner renewal: In his letter to the Colossians, St. Paul asserts: *Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator* (Col. 3:8-10). Again in his letter to the Philippians this same idea is expressed: *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus* (Phil. 2:5).

It is precisely this ‘same mindset as Christ Jesus’ that gave birth to the notion of moral values. With the passing of the centuries this notion entered the thesaurus of traditional guiding principles. With the rise of secularism and individualism, together with new elaborate theories of liberation, the Church lost contact with the broad masses. People’s attention was deflected to concerns that were remote from such positive ideals as happiness, love and harmony. Instead, the prevailing aspirations were agitated by perfectionism, rationality and logic. Ethical conduct was transmuted into a science, an aspect of philosophy and law. Eventually it shifted from an aggregate of personal qualities to a set of prescriptions observable by one’s behaviour in society.

Development of this kind did not at all belittle the importance of moral values in their own right. Indeed, moral values are of absolute necessity in today’s explosion of human personality crises. First of all they act as guidelines for one’s harmonious growth and self-fulfilment. While contemporary mass culture and its offspring, modern civilization, impose on us a veneration of endless pleasure (known as ‘lust’ in biblical language [cf. 1 Pet. 4:3]), moral values serve as guidelines not only for one’s pathway way to God but also to union with Him, in His likeness. This likeness does not mean blind imitation but a conscious choice made by the free personality. It implies mastering ‘the same mindset as Christ Jesus’. In Orthodox theology, this pathway is called deification.

Christian communities today should denounce the imposition of ‘civil society institutions.’ These are a form of ghetto into which secular civilization has driven them and into which they themselves have agreed to enter. Bearing witness to traditional Christian moral values will promote strong opposition to those who conspire to remove them permanently from social life. Following Christ may incur conflict with social forces whose aim is to corrupt and degrade. But if Christians are simply content to exist as honest tax-payers, indifferent to the growth of corruption in society and reliant on the separation of church and state, then they betray Christ and cease to be the salt of the earth. *But if the salt loses its savour, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot* (Mt. 5:13).

As never before, today’s society needs to be reminded of traditional, absolute moral values that are based on divine law. It is necessary to educate people, not through complex theological reasoning, but rather with very simple ‘conventional’ truths. Here are some examples: marriage is the union of a man and a woman; every child has the right to have a father and a mother – not parent number one, two or three; human life is precious; it is inadmissible, at any time between conception and natural death, to terminate life artificially. These and other similar moral axioms, constantly being challenged by modern secular society, should be restored in public consciousness.

Our Saviour says, *Have salt among yourselves* (Mt. 9:50), which means, be that which does not exist in

the world. And in our time it is this salt that constitutes the inner moral content of a unique Christian personality raised on experience and communion with God. It is this personality who serves as a moral guideline for those near us; it communicates to them the life in Christ, so that people will come to appreciate the fruit of this experience and its value for themselves. In these ways, moral values move from the category of individualism to that of collective personhood; they contribute to the common good and to the establishment of peace and harmony in society. Briefly put, sound moral qualities in society breed healthy inter-personal relations, stability, benevolence, joy and happiness to all.

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