

## **Spiritual Lessons from Fr. Boniface**

(delivered by Abbot Joseph of St Gregory Palamas Monastery, at St Philip's Memorial Retreat, August 12, 2017)

Through the prayers of our Holy Fathers Lord Jesus Christ our God have mercy on us and save us.

We gather today on the one year memorial of the falling asleep of our beloved Fr. Boniface – priest, missionary, founder of Orthodox parishes, spiritual father to many of us, and of course a beloved husband and father of his own progeny.

Writing of the Corinthians (2 Cor. 3:2) St. Paul says: **“You are our letter written in our hearts, known and read by all men – clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is on the heart.”** Fr. Boniface was just such a letter from God.

The lives of the righteous and godly are worthy of reflection and imitation. Whether we realized it or not Fr. Boniface had a profound influence on a great many people and his unassuming, humble, understated way of being had a powerful magnetism and force that made a difference wherever he was. In his own quiet, humble yet powerful way, Fr. Boniface made his presence and life count for something.

Because Fr. Boniface was so influential and formative in my own early adulthood I fear that I might shift the center of gravity away from the one who deserves our attention. Nevertheless, I have known of Fr. Boniface since I was 19 years old, and a summer worker in a day camp program in Baltimore, Maryland. As part of that experience we went to Philadelphia to witness the work that was being done in the inner city and, of course, the then Fr. Black and his community at 9<sup>th</sup> and Lehigh was part of that excursion. It was not until four years later that I had the good fortune of meeting with Fr. Black. I had driven up from Baltimore on a Sunday and went to church in South Philadelphia. My friends and I then decided to see if church services were still being held at 9<sup>th</sup> and Lehigh. The church was locked up, and we got the bright idea to find Fr. Black. It was a busy street with a number of people out and about. We simply asked the first adults who were passing by if they knew where Fr. Black lived and without any hesitation they said, “we will take you to his house.” They didn’t say, “we don’t know him, who is he?” I mention this detail because Fr. Boniface was a presence and personality in that African-American neighborhood of inner-city Philadelphia. We had the temerity to ring the bell and knock on the door and a very kind and very tired clergyman answered the door. He had a warm and wonderful smile and bright piercing blue eyes. We had heard a lot about Fr. Black’s reputation and were surprised by the mild, humble and understated demeanor of this man who was already a legendary figure. We asked if we could see the church and he invited us into to the living room while he put his collar on and changed his shoes. I don’t recall many details about the living room but I do remember the beautiful refinished hardwood floors and a harpsichord. I also remember the reverence and respect that he paid to the church. We were

aware that we were taking up valuable time and energy of a very busy, visibly tired and overworked clergyman and greatly appreciated his words and hospitality. Fr. Boniface never missed an opportunity to give a good word, share the Gospel of Jesus Christ, or simply make a connection with the people he met. It seems that he rarely missed an opportunity to do good.

I am sure that if we were to make a compilation of our experiences of Fr. Boniface as pastor and spiritual father we would be amazed at all of the ways that he extended himself and sacrificed himself for us. I think we would marvel at the way that he was always proactive in doing good. We didn't ask or expect anything from him; his good deeds seemed to appear out of the blue.

When a priest is buried he holds the Holy Gospel and Cross and his face is covered with the "aer" – this is the cloth that covers the Holy Chalice and Discos, which is then tied around the priest's neck and hangs on his back as he carries the Holy Gifts in the Great Entrance. The meaning of this burial custom is that the priest is part of the Eucharist Sacrifice and thus his life has been an offering to God. If ever there were a fragrant offering of sacrifice and service it was the life and works of Fr. Boniface Black.

I mention these initial details because it was no surprise to us when Fr. Black was received into the Orthodox Church that his patron saint became St. Boniface of Crediton, bishop of Maestricht and Mainz. This was a perfect fit. The name "Boniface" means "doer of good" and this particular St. Boniface was an uncompromising missionary to the pagan Germanic tribes.

It is amazing to see how faithful servants of God take on the attributes of their patron saints. And I marvel at the imprint of the saint on Fr. Boniface and his priesthood. Now that I serve at an altar that has a relic of St. Boniface, the Enlightener of Germany, I have been moved to get to know this saint a little better. Like St. Boniface of Crediton, bishop of Maestricht and Mainz, our Fr. Boniface was a constant doer of good. Any of us who have known him know that there were countless occasions when he showed kindness, gave support or simply made a connection with people. These acts seemed to arise from out of nowhere. That constant striving to do "good" was a thread that ran throughout his entire life and continues after his death through the work and connections that he put into motion.

A few words should be said about St. Boniface. This is not the same Martyr Boniface celebrated on December 19. That saint was a slave and concubine of the wealthy patrician, Aglaia. Although he lived a beautiful life of repentance, this is not the same Boniface that was the patron saint of our Fr. Boniface.

According to Butler's **Lives of the Saints**, "*St. Boniface (680 -754) had the title of Apostle of Germany. For although the Rhineland and Bavaria had accepted the Christian faith before his time and isolated missionaries had penetrated into other parts of the country, especially into Thuringia, to him belongs the credit of systematically evangelizing and civilizing the great regions of central Germany, of founding an organized church and of creating a hierarchy under the direct commission of the Bishop of Rome. Second only in importance, though less generally recognized, was the saint's other great achievement – the regeneration of the Frankish church.*

*Boniface, or Winfrid in Holy Baptism, was born in 680, probably at Crediton, in Devonshire, England. At the age of five, after listening to the conversation of some monastic visitors to his home, he determined to be a monk and when he was seven he was sent to school to a monastery near Exeter. Some seven years later he went to the abbey of Nursling. He was known for his learning and skill in teaching. His skill in teaching and his personal popularity attracted many scholars, for whose benefit he wrote the first Latin grammar known to have been compiled in England.*

*In time his gifts and his burning desire to bring the pagan Germanic tribes of northern and Central Europe to the Light of the Gospel were recognized. At first he worked in Friesland. Finally he was commissioned by the Bishop of Rome to be the missionary to those regions and on St. Andrew's day, 722, he was consecrated a regional bishop with a general jurisdiction over Germany; and Gregory II gave him a special letter to the powerful Charles Martel. This letter, which the newly ordained bishop presented in person on his way back to Germany, obtained for him the valuable concession of a sealed pledge of protection. Armed in this way with authority from church and state, Boniface, on his return to Hesse, made a bold attempt to strike at the root of the pagan superstitions which constituted the chief hindrance to the progress of the Gospel as well as to the stability of the recent converts. On a day which had been publicly announced, and in the midst of an awestruck crowd, he attacked with an axe one of the chief objects of popular veneration, Donar's sacred oak, which stood on the summit of Mount Gudenberg at Geismar, near Fritzlar. Almost as the first blows fell upon it, the huge tree crashed, splitting into four parts, and the people who had expected judgement to descend upon the perpetrators of such an outrage acknowledged that their gods were powerless to protect their own sanctuaries. From that time the work of evangelization advanced steadily, but success in one field only spurred St. Boniface to further efforts, and as soon as he felt that he could safely leave his Hessian converts for a time, he passed on into Thuringia."*

This episode in the ministry of St. Boniface stands out for his "no compromise" approach when it came to Christianity's relationship to the pagan culture that surrounded it. We can draw a parallel between St. Boniface's refusal to accommodate paganism demonstrated in the dramatic felling of the tree and the actions and personality of Fr. Boniface, who was not at all interested in the opinions and speculations of bright and learned men; he was only interested in the Faith once delivered to the saints. Fr. Boniface often told the story of the monk who was accused by the demon of being liar, a thief, and a fornicator; the monk agreed that these charges were true. But when the demon accused him of being a heretic, the monk denied it emphatically, replying: "Call me a thief, a liar, a fornicator but DON'T CALL ME A HERETIC." When asked by those present why he agreed to all the other accusations but not to the accusation of heresy the monk said, "whereas those other sins kill the body, heresy kills the body and soul and throws both into hell." Fr. Boniface was a very good communicator, and there was little doubt about what he meant when he spoke.

In the Gospel of St. Mathew we read: **“Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform your oaths to the Lord.’ But I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is the throne of God; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you swear by your head, because you cannot make one hair white or black. BUT LET YOUR ‘YES’ BE ‘YES’ AND YOUR ‘NO,’ ‘NO.’ For whatever is more than these is from the evil one.”**

Those of us who were his spiritual sons and became priests have our fair share of stories to tell of Fr. Boniface’s corrections, given personally and otherwise. If Fr. David Bleam or Fr. Joseph Butts were here we would be reminiscing. His corrections were clear, hardly ever harsh -- they can perhaps be likened to a velvet sledge hammer; but we always understood them to be born out of his love for God, His Church, and for us, his spiritual children. I remember the first time that I liturgized by myself on a Sunday. This happened at St. Philips, (it was in fact the Sunday after Transfiguration). My hands were shaking, my voice trembling, my heart was pounding at this awesome event. After the Liturgy, as I was unvesting, Fr. Boniface came over and said, “not bad, but not good – my heart was in my mouth a number of times.” He went on to explain and demonstrate where I went wrong.

Fr. Boniface knew exactly who he was – a man who was the priest of the Most High God. This is a fact in no uncertain terms. He planted and watered this parish community with much love, joy, tears and great labors. He guarded and protected it from any spiritually foreign elements.

Fr. David Bleam told me about an inquirer’s class. In attendance there was a protestant clergyman, and every time someone would ask a question this clergyman would answer it. This was tolerated once or twice. But finally a question was asked and when the visiting non-Orthodox clergyman began to answer, Fr. Boniface pounded the table and said: “Who is the teacher here? Who is the teacher here?” Needless to say, that put an end to that.

He was a good teacher who got his message across. He communicated well not only on a one-to-one basis, but also within the communities that he planted and tended. Although he challenged us to live an unadulterated Orthodox life, he did not correct everything. This was not because of cowardice or laziness; rather, it was born out of compassion and wisdom. It seems that he was lenient because he did not want to put burdens on his spiritual children that were too heavy for them to bear.

## **Respect for Holy Things, the Temple, and the Divine Services**

I mentioned earlier that in the initial meeting that I had with Fr. Boniface, I took note of the reverence and respect that he had for the non-Orthodox place of worship that he served in Philadelphia. I recall him saying that “we must have respect for holy things, we must respect the house of God, the place where the glory of honor of God lives.” About 15 or 20 years ago, Mother Gabriella, the Abbess of the Orthodox Monastery in Rives Junction, Michigan, spoke here at St. Philips and before she gave her talk, she asked him if there was something that she

should emphasize. Fr. Boniface said “yes, impress on them the importance of respect and piety in God’s House. Our piety is not what it should be. There is too much noise, too much talk, not enough attention.” After hearing this, she was really taken aback when she arrived before the service and noted that people were very quiet and prayerful, venerating icons and lighting candles, some were standing and reading from prayer books; even children were quiet. She said that she truly wished that her community and visitors at the monastery behaved as did the faithful at St. Philip’s.

Fr. Boniface loved God’s house, he loved the liturgical prayer of the church and he loved the faithful. He wanted the services to be as clear, focused and beautiful as they could be. He understood very well that one of the primary places that an Orthodox soul is formed is in the worship of the Church. He understood that the great, deep mysteries of our faith are not mere objects of intellectual reflection and speculation, but are revealed and experienced in the liturgical life of the Church; and these mysteries are then lived out and amplified in our daily prayer life and in the daily liturgy that is our life in the world.

His priestly ministry certainly included an attention to the Divine Services. In our monastery, we are currently reading at meals from the **Evergetinos**, a collection of monastic texts from the Holy Fathers which are the “bread and butter” of communal monasticism. The book is organized into chapters, each one with a “hypothesis” stating the theme of the chapter. A few days ago, we read the following, which Fr. Boniface would love:

“HYPOTHESIS XII: WE SHOULD REPROVE THOSE WHO TALK IDLY OR CONVERSE WITH EACH OTHER IN THE DIVINE SERVICES; AND IF THEY DO NOT CORRECT THEMSELVES WE SHOULD STERNLY EJECT THEM FROM THE CHURCH.

- A. From the Life of St. John the Merciful: St. John the Great made sure to correct as much as he could those who talked heedlessly in Church. If he saw that someone remained uncorrected after the first and second counsel, he immediately threw him out of the Church and repeated to him the words of the Master Christ: ‘The house of God must be a house of prayer.’ Conversely those who showed interest in the services, and followed them with reverence and compunction, he received with joy, as lovers of God, and praised them even honoring with various ecclesiastical appointments.
- B. From St. Ephraim: My brother, if you stand in the house of the Lord (the Church) for spiritual worship, you should be eager to take part in the chanting; but if you are silent, I too shall be silent, and our neighbor will be silent; and then, of necessity, the chanting will stop. But this should not happen. For if those who are acclaiming a ruler or king, when they are standing in the theater, push away and then chase off anyone in their midst who is not cheering with them in a loud voice, because they consider him unworthy to stand there, ought we not all the more, when we stand before the Master of Heaven and earth, chant with eagerness and with appropriate vigor the hymnody that befits Him?

Again: Brother if you do not want to build, at least do not overturn what has been built; if you do not want to plant, do not uproot what has been planted; that is, when you are standing in the services and do not want to chant to the Lord, do not bother the chanters. When a rich man speaks, all are silent, so that his speech might be heard as far as the clouds. And when God speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures, should we not desire to be silent and listen? Yet, one man talks, another feels drowsy, and another lets his mind wander away in thoughts. But what does Holy Scripture say about this? 'He who turneth away his ear so as not to hear the laws of the Most High, will be abominable before God, as will his prayer'."

### **Reliance on the Prayers of the Saints**

It seems that Fr. Boniface had a very lively appreciation for the presence and work of the saints in the Church, both inside the temple and outside. He relied on their intercession and help. It impressed me very much that Fr. Boniface prayed to St. Nicholas, asking for his intercession in the building of the church on the land that St. Philip's had found. St. Nicholas is a helper of the poor and needy. Before or shortly after St. Philip's made an offer for this land, Fr. Boniface prayed at the site. He had a little metal medallion with an icon of St. Nicholas stamped on it and he threw it into the grass -- a silent, hidden token of Fr. Boniface's prayers and reliance on the help of St. Nicholas.

I also remember that when Fr. Boniface was still a protestant clergyman, he went to St. George, Upper Darby, for the feast of St. Elias/St. Elijah, incognito. He was very excited about what he experienced there and that the great Prophet Elijah was honored in the Orthodox Church. The Holy Prophet's contest with the prophets of Baal, the slaughter of the prophets, and his ascent into heaven in a fiery chariot seem to have captured his mind and heart. I did not know this but Fr. Noah told me last year that Fr. Boniface read the biblical account of the life of the Prophet almost every week.

Fr. Boniface lived conscious of the presence of the Most Pure Mother of God and His saints. In an Orthodox manner, Father Boniface did not trust in his own prayer but rather relied on the saints to help lift his prayers to heaven.

### **"Let all things be done decently and in good order" or "I have got to get organized – you have got to get organized"**

Another theme, another WORD that runs throughout the life of Fr. Boniface is what St. Paul says, writing in the first epistle to the Corinthians (14: 40): **"Let all things be done decently and in good order."** St. Paul was speaking of the disorder and chaos that was apparent in the worship of the Church in Corinth. There were self-proclaimed prophets and teachers, babbling,

noise, inappropriate dress and conduct in the assemblies, and all of this seeped into the daily lives of the faithful in Corinth. Chaotic worship results in a disorganized and chaotic life.

Many times I heard Fr. Boniface say to people, “you have got to have a plan, you have got to get organized.” A number of times I would discuss a project or a plan that I might have for the parish that I served. With a twinkle in his eye imitating the jargon of socialist ideologies and governments who always had a “five year plan,” he said: “Make a five year plan – get the idea out there – don’t rush it – and usually in a few years there will be people who think that it was their idea all along. Don’t just rush into anything because you might see that your idea wasn’t as good as you thought it was.”

Fr. Boniface was a master at parish organization, of getting things done with a consensus and giving all of the thanks and credit to others. He had a very clear idea about how to plant a mission and allow a parish to grow. He knew that one size does not fit all but had established a paradigm that worked for him. We also see that while he appreciated beauty and quality in church architecture it was measured and had a limit. While he was concerned to build beautiful structures, he was more concerned to build radiant communities and radiant and beautiful lives that hungered and thirsted for the one thing needful. Organization and order in worship and parish life was our inspiration for living an orderly life that was organized not on principles and abstractions but rather on lives that would be centered and organized around the worship of the “ONE, TRUE GOD.”

I remember once when Fr. Boniface was cleaning up after the Liturgy, he took out a yard stick and very carefully measured the center of the Holy Table and rearranged the Holy things on the Holy Table in a very exact order. He looked up at me, smiled, and said, “I guess there are some things that remain from growing up in a Germanic community.”

### **A Deep Respect and Love for the Patriarchate of Antioch and the Faithful that Brought the Orthodox to these Shores.**

In the week after I was Chrismated, Fr. Boniface scheduled a meeting at the old St. Philip’s. He said a number of things, for instance: “You are now in the Church and this is indelibly stamped on you, there is no going back.” Among the important spiritual lessons he gave, this stands out in my mind: “You are Orthodox but don’t think that you know anything until after about 10 years. Think in 10 year increments – Orthodoxy – he said – is a bottomless well of experience and knowledge.”

Another thing he said was: “yes you have read a great many books but there is much more to Orthodoxy than what you might read in the books printed by our Seminaries. Get to know and love the Orthodox people who have come to our land. Get to know the people who have come to our land and those who have been raised in the faith.”

Then he also said, “we converts might be interesting to one another, we read a lot of things, it might be that we have similar backgrounds and experiences but that can be its own ghetto.” I jokingly caricatured this good word with my own translation: “stay away from converts.” But this of course was not what he said or even meant. He was counseling balance and underscoring the reality that the tradition of the Church is born in the hearts and lives of Orthodox people in addition to the books. He had a great respect for his hierarchs: Metropolitan Philip, Bishop Antoun, and Bishop Thomas. His gratitude and admiration for all that had been accomplished in the Antiochian Archdiocese was a source of comfort and hope.

Fr. Boniface did not believe that he was God’s gift to the Church. He did not believe that he was saving the Church. He saw the Church as a great gift and the place where God saves us. He sang with joy: **“We have seen the true light we have received the heavenly Spirit, we have found the true faith worshiping the undivided Trinity for He has saved us.”**

He did not think that he was doing anything special or noteworthy. He believed that he was only doing what he was supposed to do. It seems he was among the righteous who heard the words from the Lord: **“I was hungry and you feed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and in prison and you visited me”** [and they in surprise said:] **“When did we see you hungry, or naked, sick or in prison?” And the Lord answered, “for as much as you did it to the least of these you did it to me.”**

Such was the love and humility in which he went about his work. Such was his love and humility with which he imparted to us what he had received.

Such was the love to which he was united in the One True Faith.

Such is the love by which we say, Fr. Boniface if you have received favor with God – **pray for us sinners!**

**May his memory be eternal – May he rest in the saints.**