

## Protection

Here in Paris, one of the friars recently pointed out that summer was finally coming to an end. I suspect (since I have learned that one should always suspect) that this observation comes as a result of the friars' return to the priory after their lengthy summer vacations; it certainly can't be because of a drop in temperature: weather-wise, we have not really had any summer at all and, if anything, the weather has gotten warmer with the approach of October!

In either case, the coming of October is a reminder of the Feast of the Protection of the Mother of God. Since I, in my advancing old age, am accused of repeating myself, I shall not go into detail about the origins of the feast – which will doubtless be treated in other articles of this issue – nor about its iconic depiction other than the fact that it shows the Mother of God extending her mantle of protection over a Church at prayer. (For contemporary renderings of this icon, I call your attention to the eparchial icon which “visited” every parish of the eparchy a few years back, and to icon screens gracing two parishes which have survived my administrator-ship – namely, Syracuse, NY and Mishawaka, IN.)

While the autumn in Paris definitely lacks the majesty which the northeastern maples bestow upon the hills back home, it does share one trait: leaves fall, making a mess by piling up on the ground while leaving behind ghostly skeletons of trees. Now, if I remember my grade-school science classes correctly, it seems to me that what we describe as inconvenience, as mess, and as dreariness is rather pre-winter protection provided by a providential God through the intermediary of another “Mother” - i.e., “Mother Nature”. (Why am I reminded of the 1970's commercial for Chiffon margarine where a thunder clap reminds that “It's not nice to fool Mother Nature”? cf. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLrTPrp-fW8>)

The falling of the leaves, if I recall, has several benefits for deciduous trees. First of all, the messy accumulation of fallen leaves protects susceptible ground-level plants and earthbound roots from the onslaughts of winter. (Hmmm, a motherly mantle of protection. Where have I heard that before?) Then, of course, there is the protection derived for the tree itself; you can understand this if you have ever seen a leaf-bearing tree break under the weight of an early snow. Moreover, unlike conifers, deciduous trees would lose precious moisture due to icy winds blowing over their flat surfaces, so what looks like dying is really preservation of life. As sap retreats to the roots protected by the earth, the starving leaves lose their green chlorophyll and die, leaving behind the glorious fall colors in which I revel: autumn's beauty has a high price! (Of course, one cannot lose sight of spring's rising sap which will provide luscious maple syrup! Yummy!) Denuded of leaves and deprived of moisture, limbs and branches and twigs apparently go into *rigor mortis* ; creepy though the clicking of ghost-like tree “fingers” may seem, this rigidity too is beneficial, for it better localizes ice-and-snow-breakage than would lively springtime flexibility. (I seem to have taken a decidedly Hallowe'en turn ... and I've never even liked Hallowe'en!) What looks like death is really life preparing for an encore.

Protection, it seems, is not only on the mind of wise old Mother Nature. Madison Avenue hucksters proffer products aimed at preventing the onslaughts of many an evil enemy: from plastic containers guaranteed to free us of the sorrow of freezer-burned ice-cream, to cryogenics

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protecting our lifeless bodies from decay so that these can be thawed and reanimated when a remedy has been found for what killed us, and everything in between. Then there are all the work-saving devices aimed at protecting our bodies from doing what they were designed to do: work; as a result, we (read: I) have grown so flabby that getting up from a chair becomes a problem. As for our atrophied brains, when was the last time you did math without a calculator – if you even remember how?

When it comes to Mother Nature herself, we seem unable to do cajole her into a more favorable direction; nor do we seem able to protect ourselves from her fury: not even the shrine at Lourdes was spared, as a huge flood nearly washed it away. Then there are volcanoes which play havoc with our plans – the one in Iceland disrupting our trans-Atlantic flights, and the one in Hawaii turning to ashes our dreams of a tropical paradise. When we have destroyed the ozone layer and denied our way into irreversible climate change, Mother Nature will have the last laugh. Remember: It's not nice to fool Mother Nature!

Perhaps the greatest need for protection comes from the one who looks back at us from the mirror. We have all reverted to the state of high-school sophomores (literally: “wise fools”), thinking that we know everything and that we have everything under control; the headlines speak volumes of the folly of this vision: we can't bring order into our own lives and families, much less into the world which we seek to control and dominate. This grappling to establish our “new order” leads rather to chaos. As a remedy for “man's inhumanity to man”, many protective strategies have been tried: the twentieth-century Maginot line obviously didn't protect France from invasion by belligerent neighbors, nor have any of the economic sanctions aimed at the Muscovite menace by pusillanimous powers succeeded in protecting Ukraine from the considerably-more-muscular armaments of a determined invader.

What is one to do? A recently published bit of wisdom from +Sviatoslav provides a starter: He urged Ukrainian citizens to reform Ukraine ... starting with themselves! (It might even hold true for those of us who are not Ukrainian citizens!) Remember, rather than seeing it as conquest, Byzantines see conversion as akin to “spiritual contagion”: we can only catch it from those who have it. (In Latin: “*Nemo dat quod non habet*”; yes, I'm showing off.) The hardest protection to apply is against our own pettiness and hatefulness; our egos, of course, sense that they are in the crosshairs, and they fight tooth-and-nail to convince us to buy into the logic of death. In the short run, our deep down conversion is not as effective as their Kalashnikovs and bombs and tanks, but the results are sure to be more constructive and longer-lasting; once again, what looks like death is the only way to life. Psalm 33:17 tells us, “Don't count on your warhorse to give you victory--for all its strength, it cannot save you”; let us rather place our trust in the ways of the God who sends us a maternal mantle of protection instead of thunderbolts. In the immortal words of the old Alka Seltzer commercial: “Try it. You'll like it.”