

More about the 'holy fool'

Rich Heffern | Feb. 10, 2011 | Eco Catholic

Iurodstvo is the Russian word for the idea of 'holy foolishness' for Christ's sake. It's a form of asceticism that has been practiced within the Russian Orthodox church for centuries.

Its practitioners feign madness in order to provide the public with spiritual guidance. The aim too is to avoid praise and acclaim for perceived holiness. It's a radical form of humility as well.

According to Russian Orthodox scholar Svetlana Kobets: 'The holy fool's exploit is that of secret sanctity, which above all promotes the non-ontological understanding that all of God's created world is a sacred place. By his feigned madness the holy fool opts to say that the lowliest of the low can be not the poor wretch he appears to be, but a holy one and God's prophet. He shares his power and authority with all the weak, mocked and despised thus symbolically destroying clear-cut distinctions between the profane and the sacred.'

In the Russian church it is regarded as the most difficult and controversial of all spiritual practices. Thirty-six holy fools have been canonized by the Orthodox church.

'Unlike other sects, the fool in Christ does not renounce the profane world. He feigns madness and instead of going into hermetic or monastic seclusion becomes a part of secular life,' Kobets writes.

This tradition has its origins in the very early history of the Christian church. Indeed, the patron saint of holy fools is St. Simeon Salos of Emress. He retreated to the Syrian desert in the 6th century to devote his life to prayer, living on nothing but lentils. A few decades later, Simeon returned to town a completely different man. He tied a dead dog to his waist and entered town dragging the carcass. Simeon would throw nuts at the priests during worship services and publicly ate sausage on Good Friday. The seemingly nutty monk also helped people in the town, though never when someone else might notice and never taking credit. Simeon's saintly deeds were done in secret. And no one could dispute that Simeon was very holy person, even the priests he pelted with nuts on Sunday.

Simeon just poked fun at every attempt people made to feel themselves 'holier than thou.'

In Russian history the greatest of the 'holy fools' was Basil the Blessed, a man so revered that the famous Cathedral in Moscow's Red Square next to the Kremlin was named in his honor. Basil walked through Moscow wearing nothing more than a long beard. He threw rocks at wealthy people's houses and stole from dishonest traders in Red Square.

Few doubted Basil's holiness. Tsar Ivan the Terrible feared no one but Basil. Basil was also given to eating meat on Good Friday. Once he went to Ivan's palace in the Kremlin and forced the tsar to eat raw meat during the fast saying, 'Why abstain from eating meat when you murder men?' Countless Russians died for much less but Ivan was afraid to let any harm come to the saintly Basil.

In the year 1555 Ivan commissioned two Italian architects to build the famous cathedral that has become the icon of Russia. After its completion, he asked the architects if they could build an edifice more beautiful than

the one they had just completed. When they said yes, he had them blinded.

The idea of holiness in the Orthodox church is varied. There is no prescribed way. The vocation of the "holy fool" meant renouncing the world, even its respectability and intelligence. It was a way some chose to become close to God, echoing St. Paul's famous words (1 Corinthians 1:27-29) about God's choosing the foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise.

Jim Forest, author and secretary of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship, writes: "Holy fools pose the question: Are we keeping heaven at a distance by clinging to the good regard of others, prudence, and what those around us regard as 'sanity'?" The holy fools shout out with their mad words and deeds that to seek God is not necessarily the same thing as to seek sanity. We need to think long and hard about sanity, a word most of us cling to with a steel grip. Does fear of being regarded by others as insane confine me in a cage of "responsible" behavior that limits my freedom and cripples my ability to love? And is it in fact such a wonderful thing to be regarded as sane? Adolph Eichmann, the chief administrator of the Holocaust, was declared "quite sane" by the psychiatrists who examined him before his trial.

"Holy fools challenge an understanding of Christianity that gives the intellectually gifted people a head start not only in economic efforts but spiritual life. But the Gospel and sacramental life aren't just for smart people. At the Last Judgment we will not be asked how clever we were but how merciful."

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