

Holy Fools
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They called him Gritz. He was small and slight, clean-shaven, with long hair and deep-set eyes. He wore a tattered coat on his naked body, walked barefoot, even in winter snow. He spoke roughly to people—often in riddles. Sometimes he acted in ways that shocked others, for example, while usually fasting very strictly, he'd eat bacon fat on a fast day; or he would use tobacco which was quite unacceptable to the image of piety that people then had.

Gritz lived in an unheated hayloft and the corner that served him as his room was always filled with a weird collection—stones, scrap iron, rags, a large cross. Born in 1821, he had been strange from his childhood. His mother had lost her sight when he was a baby and his father died when he was six years old. Gritz grew up a beggar boy, leading round his blind mother.

People thought Gritz was mad, but they were fond of him. They tried to clean him up, gave him shoes and warm winter clothing, but he would immediately pass on all he received to other beggars. Gritz was illiterate, could barely sign his name, but his strange rough words had often a hidden meaning and turned out to be prophetic. Every day he spent many hours in prayer—in church or at the church entrance—sometimes through bitter snow storms. He used the money that was given him to buy candles and place them before icons. His greatest friends were children and the old priest of the little Ukrainian town said that Gritz's stories taught children more about God than all his lessons. Gritz died in 1855 at the age of 34.

At the end of the 18th century in the city of St. Petersburg, a young childless woman, called Xenia, lost her husband. The next day she distributed all her possessions to the poor, dressed up in her husband's clothes and began living as a tramp, calling herself by her husband's name "Andrei Fedorovich." People thought that grief had made her lose her mind. Xenia spent all her days among the beggars, the bums and tramps of the capital, on "skid-row" as we'd say now. Nights she stayed alone in vacant lots and fields adjoining the city, in constant prayer. When a church was being built near her favorite vacant lot, she spent many hours every night carrying bricks to help along with the work.

Gradually her husband's clothes wore out, but she continued to dress in rags and turned down all attempts of her relatives to make her comfortable.

People noticed a special kind of grace about the strange crazy beggar woman. Owners of shops tried to give her food, for they noticed that their sales went up if she accepted their gifts. Mothers were glad when she fondled their children. Cab-drivers begged her to let them give her a ride to bring them good luck.

Nobody knew exactly when or how Xenia died, but even after her death people prayed for her intercession and many stories are told of help received.

Church history has preserved the memory of many “holy fools” from earlier centuries—both in Greece, where they were called “sali” and Russia “iurodivye.” The pattern is always the same: seeming madness, flaunting their disregard of acceptable social behavior, fearlessness in denouncing those in power, a prophetic spirit, and an intense life of prayer. Many of these “holy fools” were canonized as saints. The difference between them and other kinds of saints was not in the degree of hardships they bore voluntarily—many ascetics led lives of even greater privations. Nor were the “holy fools” the only ones to spend their life among lowly people, compassionately participating in their poverty; other saints did this, too.

What distinguished “holy fools” was their complete rejection of the criteria by which our society lived—respectability; common sense, desire for success, security. They made themselves free of the world. Their way of life proclaimed insistently: “Your values are false; they are worthless, we shall not be subject to them.”

“Holy fools” felt that the root of all evil is pride, self-satisfaction, conceit. A radical means of overcoming this was to make oneself ridiculous, silly, “mad,” disreputable in the eyes of the people. Yet, under the guise of this “madness” they still loved and served people—through their strangely worded advice, through a kind of “second-sight” they seemed to possess, and through a sorrowful sharing in all the pains and tragedies of life.

Some of the “holy fools” only pretended to be “mad.” Others may have been truly deranged, “abnormal” in the modern clinical sense of the word. But their insanity feigned or real was a vehicle of expressing their intense relationship to God. Their love of God, their consciousness of an “other-worldly” life, with quite different values than the ones we accept here, could be fulfilled only when they stripped themselves of all possessions, including that of respectability. They proclaimed by their very life that Christianity is not a religion of reasonableness, rationalism and respectability.

The idea of holiness in the Orthodox Church is amazingly varied. There is no one, prescribed, way of holiness. Among saints, we find intellectuals and illiterates, monks and family people, men and women, soldiers and physicians, princes and beggars. In each case the saint’s way of life was not an accident but a vocation, through which a person carried out, fulfilled, that which was most important to him—his relationship to God.

Being a “holy fool” was a vocation. Renouncing the world, even its respectability and its intelligence, was the way for these particular men and women to come into a close relationship with God. Holy fools can be called the “hippies” of the Church. They have in common with hippies the rejection of all values of respectability and social approval. The basic difference, and an utterly important one, is in what they were trying to attain through their “madness.” “Holy fools” emptied their life of all temporary ties and values in order to fill it with the grace of God’s participation in their life, the grace of their

relationship with God. They opened themselves to God through humble prayer, while modern “hippies” open themselves to the power of emotional states induced by use of drugs. There is a relevant, though rather frightening passage in the Gospel according to St. Matthew:

“When an unclean spirit (in this case attachment to false values of respectability) has gone out of a man he passes through waterless places seeking rest, but he finds none. Then he says, “I will return to my house from which I came.” And when he comes he finds it empty, swept out, put in order. Then he goes and brings with him seven other spirits more evil than he and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first”. (Matthew 12:43-45).