

In the Spiritual Arena

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People often ask me about books. The one I've been recommending most in the last few years is *The Arena: An Offering to Contemporary Monasticism*, by St Ignatius Brianchaninov, a Russian Orthodox bishop of the last century who was canonized in 1988. Although written by a rigorous monk for fellow monastics, all Christians possessing the courage and discipline to engage this book with attention and obedience may study it with great profit.

St Ignatius introduces his book by saying that his writing is the "legacy" and "offering" of an old man who has endured much from "spiritual directors suffering from blindness and self-delusion." He claims that because of his "hardships" he is able to assist those "who have already set out without knowing the way or with only a superficial knowledge of the way [drawn] from antiquated descriptions." He hopes to show his readers how to "use the writings of the ancients and adapt them to modern conditions, so as to avoid the sad plight of those who do not realize or notice the need for adaptation."

God's Word in the Gospel

In his first chapters, St. Ignatius makes an impassioned plea to monks (and all Christians) to be convinced that the Gospels, and the New Testament writings generally, are their basic rule.

He insists that the writings of the Church fathers and saints, as well as the canons and rules for worship, should be read with greatest care, in proper order, only by those who are first thoroughly rooted in the biblical and evangelical Word of God. He commands monks (and all Christians) to keep God's commandments and to practice the basic teachings of Christ and the apostles, as recorded in the scriptures, before going on to other spiritual readings. He presents terrifying stories of ascetics destroyed by demonic delusion for failing to follow this basic order of spiritual discipline and behavior.

St Ignatius writes that "worldly people and even monks without spiritual discernment are nearly always attracted by humbugs, imposters, hypocrites and those who are in demonic delusion, and they take them for saints and genuine servants of God." He says that "in Russia bodily discipline holds the field, while the very idea of spiritual discipline has been lost." He also claims that "obedience to elders in the form in which it was practiced in ancient monasticism ... is not given to our time." He says the same thing about living the solitary life. And he emphasizes that the "voluntary giving of advice (in spiritual matters) ... is a clear sign of pride and self-deception."

Let us beware (he warns) of giving a beginner some rash teaching not based on the Word of God and a spiritual understanding of the Word of God.

Bodily Disciplines and Delusions

St Ignatius insists that ascetical efforts and bodily disciplines are essential as means to the fulfillment of Christ's evangelical teachings. He says that those who neglect these means leave themselves victims of the crudest forms of carnal passions: gluttony, greed, lust and anger. But the holy father reserves more violent warnings for those who make ascetical discipline the very essence of their spiritual life.

Those who practice immoderate bodily discipline, use it indiscreetly, or put all their trust in it, seeing in it their merit and worth in God's sight, fall into vainglory, self-opinion, presumption, pride, hardness and obduracy, contempt of their neighbors, detraction and condemnation of others, rancor, resentment, hate, blasphemy, schism, heresy, self-deception and diabolic delusion.

The saint is especially hard on monastics who allow the devil to destroy them through the acquisition of costly things, or through decorating their cells, or through being excessively concerned with buildings, gardens and furniture. He speaks of abuses of fasting which lead to the attribution of "special significance to dry bread, mushrooms, cabbage, peas or

beans," abuses that "corrupt the ascetic" and reduce "sensible, holy and spiritual exercises" into "senseless, carnal and sinful farces," producing "conceit and contempt for his neighbors, which snuffs out the very conditions for progress in holiness."

The saint also criticizes those who allow the devil to dupe them into "attaching an exaggerated importance to the material side of church services, while obscuring the spiritual side of the rites; thus hiding the essence of Christianity from those unfortunate people and leaving them only a distorted material wrapper or covering...." He is especially strict in his warning against "carnal and animal (perhaps better translated psychic) zeal," which, he says, is not "divine and spiritual zeal," but rather "zeal without understanding, which leads to conceit and pride."

Love, Humility, Discipline

Quoting directly from the Bible and Church fathers on every subject, St Ignatius instructs monks (and all Christians) to "direct all your attention to the acquisition of love for your neighbor as the basis of your life and your monastic (and Christian) task." And like all the saints, he sees holy humility as the ground and goal of our entire spiritual striving. He gives instruction in prayer, reading, vigilance, confession of sins, guarding of the mind and the senses, and the enduring of trials and afflictions as the most perfect ways to spiritual perfection fulfilled in love for God and neighbor, first of all one's enemy. He concludes with instructions about bodily posture and external behavior in church and out, which, though intended for monastics, is supremely relevant to all Christians.

The Arena is truly an "offering" to all Christians, not only Russians, and not only monastics. It is a precious "legacy" from a man who knows what he is talking about from experience. If you are looking for solid spiritual guidance, read this book slowly and carefully, over and again, with an open mind and heart. You will not regret it.