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The Galatia of St. Theodore:

Tension and Mediation Between Urban and Rural Christianity

The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon provides a view into a strongly regionalistic culture, and specifically displays evidence of a high degree of consciousness in this culture of the divisions between rural and urban society. As a local saint, Theodore exemplified this regionalism by his distinct and specifically rural ascetic religious practices, which differed in form and focus from those that were most frequently encountered in the urban clergy. These ascetic practices and also the peasant-focused miracles that he performed made him less acceptable to the urban clergy, but at the same time these officials realized the importance of supporting and including this type of Christianity within the institutional church as a way to appeal to the rural population, who were often distrustful of the urban elite. St. Theodore's early ordination and subsequent appointment to the office of bishop therefore represented a natural move by the church to assimilate an example of a wild religious talent, who might have caused problems and conflict through his independent leadership if he wasn't quickly brought into the fold. However, the resulting tension between the urban and the rural worlds led to the eventual resignation of St. Theodore from his office as bishop and his return to a focus on both personal ascetic practices and local, rural miracles. His continued importance to the church was clear in the 'annoyance' of the Metropolitan at his request,¹ and also by the final decision of the Patriarch to allow him to retain his rank and ceremonial garments despite his resignation.² In this way, the institutional church was

¹ The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, chapter 79.

² The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, chapter 79.

able to preserve the benefit of his influence over the local population, and St. Theodore was able to return to his village and to his chosen brand of Christian practices. This resolution of this particular urban/rural tension seems to have had successful results both for St. Theodore and for the institutional church.

Evidence of intense regional pride can be found throughout The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon. Rural Galatians are consistently represented in this Galatian-authored document as being morally superior to the urban population, who are in most cases very negatively represented. Urban officials were clearly viewed by these rural peasants with a mixture of mistrust and disdain. A “leading citizen” from Ancyra was clearly implicated in encouraging Theodore’s mother to abandon her child and demonstrate disregard for her proper maternal and religious roles.³ This immoral and irreligious behavior was considered representative of the behavior and attitudes of the urban elite. Nor was it only the urban population who were subject to mistrust and disparagement in this hagiography – the moral character of everything associated with the city, even simple artifacts, was considered to be contaminated. In a later episode, silver vessels were purchased in Constantinople for use in Communion services at the monastery in Sykeon because it was acknowledged that the capitol city was where they could best obtain “a pure and well-finished vessel, so far as concerned the quality of the silver and the workmanship...”⁴ However, through St. Theodore’s discernment it was soon discovered that the materials used for the vessels “came from the chamber-pot of a prostitute...,”⁵ and therefore were obviously unsuitable for sacred use. While this makes it clear that the cities may have been recognized by residents of rural areas as the natural source for fine and beautiful objects, or as a place where a

³ The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, chapter 25.

⁴ The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, chapter 42.

⁵ The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, chapter 42.

lifestyle of luxury impossible in the rural districts could be attained, this story depicted the rural population's clear indictment of the moral character of these products and their source. In this reaction we can see both the desire and the doubt on the part of the author when faced with the rich products and population of cities such as Constantinople.

St. Theodore, as a Galatian, was also depicted as having frequently exerted significant powers over both near and distant urban centers. He was reported to have miraculously cured plagues during his travels in Ancyra,⁶ Jerusalem,⁷ and even Constantinople.⁸ In the context of this document, these demonstrations not only recount the power of the Christian God and of his saint, but from the perspective of the Galatian author they highlight the power and strength of the local, rural population with which Theodore was closely identified.

This tight link between the saint and his local community operated equally powerfully in both directions. During Theodore's residence in Anastasiopolis as Bishop, the town was described as deriving its virtue directly from the Saint himself. The author of the hagiography made it explicit that "[Anastasiopolis] rose to fame not from its fortifications and the embellishment of imperial gifts: not from the size of its population or from the exceeding wealth and power of its prosperous inhabitants, but rather because it was enriched by such deeds of the inspired man as we have described..."⁹ This passage not only emphasizes the importance of the influence the saint exerted over the local population, it also denigrates the influence of 'imperial gifts' and the wealth of urban citizens as being of no account. Theodore's devout practices reflected

⁶ The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, chapter 45.

⁷ The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, chapters 50-51.

⁸ The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, chapter 135.

⁹ The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, chapter 58.

positively on the entire rural community, serving to increase their already strong regional pride, and they were eager to support him in his endeavors and maintain the strong connection.

All of this regional feeling was also very much directed by the rural population towards their own St. Theodore. Local artisans acted directly to support his practices, as when in response to Theodore's demands "the men of the village impelled by faith one and all brought their agricultural tools in order that his bidding might be executed, and in this way the cage was fittingly finished for his holiness."¹⁰ As the author tells us, he was beloved by the entire local population who fervently sought his assistance with all of their problems. St. Theodore offered miraculous cures for a wide variety of maladies, from cases of demonic possession to leprosy. When he was forcibly removed from his oratory in order to be appointed bishop, he communicated to the protesting inhabitants of the monastery "believe me I shall certainly never forsake you; for nothing on earth shall separate me from my life with you."¹¹

St. Theodore's actions in return for the devotion of the local population were distinctly rural and regional, and tended to support and emphasize the area's regionalism. His ascetic behavior in general was not common among urban religious figures, and while it was becoming recognized by the urban clergy as a valid form of Christian expression, it may still have seemed somewhat distasteful. The actions of the Bishop Theodosius on hearing of the saint's removal from his cave provide a direct example: it was important for him to establish a connection with this clearly devout and locally popular religious figure, but he "shuddered," limited the amount of time that he spent with the saint, and preferred to defend him from a distance back in his own city.¹² In effect, the ascetic practices of St. Theodore can be seen as part of the general pattern of

¹⁰ The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, chapter 27.

¹¹ The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, chapter 58.

¹² The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, chapter 21.

regionalism – they embodied the clearly perceptible greater religious power and devotion that the rural people believed that they possessed compared to the urban clergy who tended not to show their faith in this demonstrative way.

Most of the miracles Theodore performed were focused on helping the local peasants in their daily lives: protecting the crops, preventing community disruption due to either personal strife or other causes, preventing or relieving famines, and even blessing couples for fertility. He also worked miracles and cures which were designed to preserve the status quo in his village: several times he dispelled ‘demons’ that were released through digging in mounds and in the ground. In this long-populated landscape, digging was frequently associated with the search for treasure, and in these cases it was specifically said that the men “had dug in order to get money out of the hill...”¹³ Any find of valuable items would have brought with it substantial disruption or change for the patterns of life in Sykeon, a small and relatively poor village. Again, Theodore’s intervention served to augment his power and importance, and also increased his significance as a go-between figure who demonstrably could extend authority for the urban clergy through their support of him. It is also important that Theodore travelled several times to other relatively distant urban places – Jerusalem, Ancyra, and Constantinople. On each occasion, he chose to return to the region and the village from which he had come, and this choice further endeared him to the local population and heightened their regional pride.

Theodore’s position made him extremely important to the institutional urban church: they saw him as an invaluable local ally in a region where strong regional pride dictated a local representative. At first he was ordained as a priest, despite some protest that he was too young.¹⁴ On

¹³ The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, chapter 114.

¹⁴ The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, chapter 21.

the death of their bishop, the people of Anastasiopolis wasted no time in suggesting St. Theodore as a highly visible local religious figure who they, as a nearby and somewhat larger town, would be only too happy to appropriate. They “asked [the Archbishop] to appoint the great servant of God, Theodore, the archimandrite of the monastery of Sykeon, as bishop of their most Holy Church. Paul was greatly pleased at their excellent choice and gave them permission to fetch the Saint.”¹⁵ This permission led to the forcible removal of Theodore from his oratory, and his rapid ordination as bishop.

The Archbishop of Ancyra who had supported the appointment of the ascetic saint to the bishopric “gave him much encouragement, telling him how someone in Anastasioupolis at that time had seen in a vision a very large and radiant star coming from heaven and standing above their church, shining and casting its light over the town and all the surrounding countryside.”¹⁶ In his attempts to mollify and cajole the reluctant saint into acceptance of this office there is more than just the classical hagiographic-modest-reluctance present in this interaction. St. Theodore’s tenure as a serving bishop was relatively short, though the style of the hagiography makes it difficult to estimate exactly how long it lasted. From his actions, he clearly demonstrated that he truly preferred the life of an ascetic, rural monk to that of an administrative figure in the institutional church. He felt that “since he had been absorbed in the cares and administration of his bishopric, he had fallen away from the monastic standard.”¹⁷ This choice of focus reveals religious priorities that were rurally distinct, and also in making that choice St. Theodore the Galatian revealed his own regionalistic distaste for urban affairs and concerns.

¹⁵ The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, chapter 58.

¹⁶ The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, chapter 58.

¹⁷ The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, chapter 62.

While The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon represented the eventual entry of Theodore into the institutional church as a bishop as pre-ordained,¹⁸ it seems clear that at the time, this outcome was much less sure. Other ascetic saints were frequently unaffiliated with the institutional church, and some caused problems for the established hierarchy because of their appeal to certain groups within the population.¹⁹ The ever-present problem of heresy was clearly a related issue for the power of the institutional church, who were leery of any different and extreme religious practices because of their possible interpretation or misinterpretation by laymen.

The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon demonstrates the difficulty that the urban clergy encountered in attempting to maintain control and influence in rural areas with intensely regionalistic attitudes and substantial distrust of the urban population. However, it chronicles a relatively successful outcome for both groups: St. Theodore was able to pursue his particular variety of Christianity in the location of his choice with the full support of the urban clergy (and other authority figures such as the Emperor), except for the slight interruption of his short time serving as bishop; and the urban clergy received the benefit of his substantial influence being exerted over the local population and beyond on their behalf. Despite the general antagonism of the local population for outsiders of any type, and especially for urban outsiders, it is also clear that the acceptance of Theodore by the urban elite as a member of the established church was nevertheless beneficial for his local power and credibility. All in all, it was a partnership that ultimately worked out well for both parties.

¹⁸ The Life of St. Theodore of Sykeon, chapter 3.

¹⁹ Especially in rural populations.