

W E E K L Y M E D I T A T I O N

JULY 10: Konevits Icon of the Mother of God

This icon is associated with the Konevits monastery on an island off the southwest shore of Lake Ladoga, in Karelia. Ascetic life was established on the island by St. Arseny in 1393 and the icon he brought with him is said to have come from Mount Athos. What is unique about this icon is that the infant Christ is holding in his hands a white dove on a string.

Now this dove might bring to mind the Holy Spirit - who appeared in the form of a dove - or perhaps the dove in the story of Noah's ark - bearing in its beak the good news of new life - or perhaps the dove as a symbol of peace, gentleness or love. All of these associations can make sense in 'reading' this icon.

However, this dove also puts me in mind of a story I once read in an old collection of fables for children. In *The Dove With A String At Its Foot*, a little boy is given a dove on a string to play with. The dove is unhappy with this and, at the first opportunity, it flies away into the woods. Unfortunately, in the woods the string gets tangled up in a branch and the poor dove is trapped and starves to death. The author concludes the tale: "When he came to die, he reflected on the folly of exposing his life in the woods, rather than live in easy servitude among men." Because this was a Victorian children's book and the fable is meant to be an improving or cautionary moral tale, a reflection is added: "Men that are impatient under imaginary afflictions, change commonly for the worse, as the Dove did here... that threw himself into a starving situation, rather than submit to the tolerable inconvenience of an easy restraint."

I do not think that this story has any connection with the meaning of the Konevits icon, but by a sort of free association, I am reminded of the paradox that true spiritual freedom lies in submission to Christ and not in some romantic notion of self-assertion. As we learn in the parable of the Prodigal Son, authentic life and freedom are found in relation with the Lord and our neighbor and not in freedom from them. That 'tolerable inconvenience of an easy restraint' of the fable reminds me of the Lord's words: "*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*" (Matthew 11: 29 - 30)

Fr. Andrew