



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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✠ **October 13, 2013** ✠

The Holy Fathers of the 7th Ecumenical Council

Hieromartyr Carpus of Thyateira (251)

St. Nicetas the Confessor (838)

Great Martyr Zlata (Chryse) of Meglin, Bulgaria (1795)

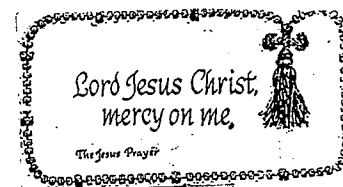
If you want to be spiritually tranquil, never part from someone while feeling agitated, but try in every way to forgive everyone in your soul and to make peace as much as possible. In so doing, you will part from others with a calm spirit, and you will enjoy serenity of the soul.

~ St. Moses of Optina

⇒ St. Symeon's 36th Anniversary celebration today!

⇒ Inquirer's Class – Tuesday, October 15, 6:30pm – *Final*

The Orthodox Church in America and Its Future



by Saint Nikolai Velimirovich {+1956}

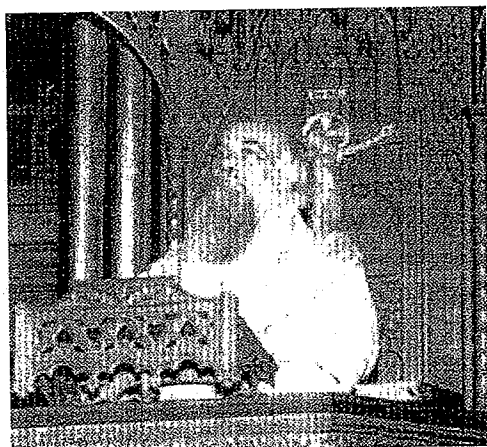
I feel greatly honored in being called to speak to on this day, the Sunday of Orthodoxy. For this day is indeed our pan-Orthodox Thanksgiving Day, because on this day for the last thousand years we have been giving thanks to Almighty God for the spiritual victories He granted to the holy Fathers of our Church and, through them, to us.

When I mention the Fathers of the Church, I am thinking first of all of the Fathers of the Seven Ecumenical Councils, the first of which was held in A.D. 325 and the last in 787. These Seven Councils represent the seven greatest spiritual battles in the

history of Christendom. Like seven pillars of light (the light being Christ), they have illumined the path of our Church through the ages. They remind us of the Biblical words, "Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn out her seven pillars" (Prov. 9:1). They fought against all the apostasies, heresies, pagan teachings and practices, against nebulous oriental occultism and pretentious philosophic theories contrary to Christ's revelations.

The Seventh of these Councils, which we specially celebrate today, confirmed the canons and regulations of the preceding six and added new ones. Therefore, Orthodox churches the world over are today offering thanks to God for having granted to Christendom those spiritual giants in the first thousand years, when all Christendom was united in one Church.

Besides those Fathers of the Ecumenical Councils, we remember today all the other luminaries of early Church history, which no storm of succeeding events could extinguish. Some of them were great theologians, teachers, and preachers; others were extraordinary ascetics; still others were wonder-working intercessors, or wise leaders and organizers of Christian communities, or successful missionaries, or glorious martyrs for Christ, both male and female. By their words and deeds, by their wisdom and life examples, they continue to edify and assist us in following Christ. All that they taught and wrote is part of what we call the Sacred Tradition of the Church. They represent a precious treasure in our Church, which is God's family. And therefore we are lifting our hearts with thanks to



God for this precious treasure. Yes, this is our pan-Orthodox Thanksgiving Day.

The examples and experiences of these holy men and women are like precious stones left to posterity as their loving legacy. What are these precious stones? They are as many as the number of Christian virtues, but I will discuss here just three of the most essential for our modern times. They are: spiritual vision, moral discipline, and competition in doing good.

Spiritual Vision

Our Lord Jesus Christ revealed to mankind an invisible world incomparably greater than the visible. The spiritual horizon which He opened to men was a much greater wonder than the physical horizon of distant galaxies discovered by modern telescopes. He spoke not like other teachers and philosophers—by hypotheses and theories and probabilities, but by authority of an eyewitness who descended from that great heavenly world in order to draw us to it. He called that world the Kingdom of Heaven. It was the most staggering and gladdening annunciation since the creation of the world. It wiped away the tears of mothers for their dead children, and the tears of children for their deceased parents. "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad," He said to the mournful world. "Open your spiritual eyes and behold a glorious Kingdom beyond, in which the King is your real Father. And if you cannot easily open your inner sight, look through Me; I am your telescope. Believe me and follow me. Rejoice, and again I say, Rejoice!"

An English lady happened to be present at a Serbian funeral service and heard Orthodox priests chanting repeatedly: "Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia." She was shaken and asked, "Is it proper to sing a song of joy over a dead person?" "For us, death is not evil," I answered, "sin alone is evil."

Many times I asked holy monks on Mount Athos—Greeks, Serbs, Russians, Romanians: "What is the best means to keep a person from sinning?" Their usual answer was: "The constant vision of the heavenly world." A Greek elder on Karoulia said, "You must exercise in spiritual vision every day until the other world is clearly opened to you."

It is no wonder that many Protestants call our Orthodox Church transcendent. Through all centuries and generations we have been taught to strive toward the realization and visualization of the other world.

In many of our Church hymns, Saints and Martyrs are glorified because they "gave up the cheap for the precious," or "the mortal for the immortal," or "the transitory for the eternal." Their motive for such a choice was the spiritual vision of the Kingdom of Heaven as our true fatherland, as the real goal of our travelling and toiling in this physical world of mere symbols and shadows.

Moral Discipline

Now, since we acquire that spiritual vision of the Kingdom of Heaven by hard spiritual training and exercises, the question arises: How can we make ourselves worthy of that Kingdom? For the end of our physical life is very near and we have to decide quickly, lest it be too late. The answer is: by moral discipline.

What is moral discipline? It is the "narrow path" that leads to eternal life and bliss. It is clearly described and prescribed in the Gospel, and more particularly in the apostolic epistles, and it is exemplified in the lives of holy men and women, some of whom are mentioned in our calendar, and myriads upon myriads of whom are written in Heaven's Book of Life.

Moral discipline is the way to perfection. And nothing less than perfection is our ideal, according to Christ's exhortation: "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). To accomplish this tremendous task, our holy ancestors who loved the living Christ courageously climbed up the ladder of perfection, step by step. The steps were: incessant prayer, meditation, obedience, humility, meekness, self-restraint, weeping, watchfulness, forgiveness, repentance, sacrificing everything—even their own body. They trained themselves to abstain not only from every evil deed and word, but from every negative thought. They lived in this world as if they were not of this world. They used things of this world as if they were not using them. They considered themselves to be not citizens of this world but merely visitors.

They vigilantly controlled the inner circle of their souls observing every movement of their mind and heart. Thereby they became the greatest psychologists in the world. If you want to know the human soul, read the records of the great spiritual Fathers such as Saints Macarius of Egypt, John Chrysostom, Isaac of Syria, and other ascetic Fathers. And you will see how impoverished our modern psychology is by comparison. Externally they lived as the most destitute, yet in terms of spiritual wealth, in truth and virtue, they were the richest people. The whole world was not worthy of them. Truly are they called "barefoot aristocrats".

Today we are remembering these spiritual aristocrats, who by superhuman efforts and God's grace reached perfection. And we are offering our thanks to Christ for presenting us with this brilliant gallery of beautiful and perfect souls in order that we and our children might emulate them. Therefore, we call this day our Orthodox Thanksgiving Day.

Competition in Doing Good

I come finally to the third point, the third jewel that adorned those of our ancestors whom we are celebrating today. That is the new competition or the competition in doing good. Whereas spiritual vision and moral discipline have individual bearing, the competition in doing good concerns society. It is the highest social virtue.

Christ proclaims this virtue throughout His Gospel. In essence this teaching is: Give more than you are expected to give, and do more than you are expected to do. The world has been revolutionized by this marvelous doctrine. But the Author of this doctrine was crucified because the world was intoxicated by the old competition in doing evil. When a man was striving by every possible means to get rich, his neighbor tried to get richer. If a Roman patrician had a thousand slaves, another patrician tried to have two thousand. If a pharaoh became famous by some conquest, his successor desired greater fame by greater conquests. While Emperor Caligula was very cruel, Nero tried to be yet more cruel.

The new competition in doing good was as different from the old as traveling in darkness is from traveling in sunshine. Our holy ancestors understood the doctrine of the new competition as the highest social virtue, and they trained themselves in that virtue most strenuously all their life long.

Imagine how marvelously changed this awful world would be if you and I entered this competition of doing good. For instance, if every day we eagerly tried to be more pious than some other pious people, more forbearing, more merciful, more peaceful, more sympathetic, more constructive, more forgiving, more loving than others. And all this not for pride's sake but for Christ's sake. Verily it would solve all the crucial social, political, and economic problems in every Christian country, and it would mightily help Christian missions among non-Christian peoples and nations.

We are glorifying the Lord God because our Orthodox Forefathers pointed out and exercised this social ideal of a new competition in doing good and because they showed us a glorious personal example to follow. ~ Sermon re-published in *Orthodox America*, Vol. XIX (No 5 [169]) ❖ ❖ ❖

St. Nikolai of Serbia - An Appeal to all our American Orthodox Youth

America is your cradle and your earthly motherland. It is a wonderful God's country, and you are expected to be wonderful God's people in this country. Remember that our greatest contribution to America is of a spiritual and moral nature. And that is precisely what America needs today. That is what every Christian country today needs most of all—in boundless measure. For all nations, especially the Christians nowadays traveling as if in a wilderness of confusion created by senseless materialism and its blind daughter atheism. I offer this to what leading American men and women are saying: "The only hope for us and for the world is to return to religion." Again I say: "Our hope is in the Church." You ought to listen to these words, too, and to ponder them. We live in very tragic times, which are made more tragic by easy-going and self-indulgent people who have never read the story of Sodom, of Laish, or of Capernaum.

If I am correct in my observations, the greatest struggle of America these days is the struggle for the priority and superiority of spiritual and moral values over techniques and technological lordship: in other words, for predominance of the spiritual over the material, of goodness over cleverness. The Serbs often say of a clever man: "He is clever as the devil." They never say: "He is good as the devil."

America is constantly sounding the sympathetic watchwords: "dignity of man" and "liberty of men and nations." But the deepest meaning of these watchwords can be found in the sacred teaching of Him without Whom we can do nothing. That meaning is found most explicitly in the threefold program of our Orthodox Church: spiritual vision, moral discipline, and competition in doing good.

For the dignity of man—in other words, the superior value of man—has real and eternal meaning only if you know and acknowledge the Kingdom of Heaven as the true fatherland of all men, from which we originated and to which we are returning as children of one common Father, Who is in Heaven. And freedom is most useful, joyful, and sacred if you exercise moral discipline over yourself and practice competition in doing good.

These are the fundamentals upon which you can build your individual and communal happiness. And you have received these fundamentals as a glorious heritage, never to part with. By practicing this spiritual heritage in your daily life, you will become an adornment to America. And through you all Americans will come to know and appreciate our ancient Church of the East and her spiritual heroes, whom we are praising today.

~ *Orthodox America*, Vol. XIX (No 5 [169])

Fighting the Passions with Alternate Desires - St. John of Damascus

These eight passions should be destroyed as follows:

Gluttony by self-control,

Lust by the desire for God and longing for the blessings held in store,

Greed by compassion for the poor,

Anger by goodwill and love for all men,

Worldly dejection by spiritual joy,

Listlessness by patience, perseverance, and offering thanks to God,

Self-esteem by doing good in secret and by praying with a contrite heart,

Pride, by not judging or despising anyone in the manner of the boastful Pharisee, and by considering oneself the least of all men.

~ When the nous has been freed in this way from the passions we have described and been raised to God, it will henceforth lead the life of blessedness, receiving the pledge of the Holy Spirit. And when it departs this life, dispassionate and full of true knowledge, it will stand before the light of the Holy Trinity and with the divine angels will shine in glory through all eternity.

1. Ambrose, *Elder of Optina*

Why do men sin? Either because they do not know what they should do, or, if they do know, they forget; and if they forget, they are slothful and despondent . . . This is why we pray to the Queen of Heaven: *O all-holy Theotokos, my Mistress . . . drive from me, thy servant despondency, forgetfulness, negligence, and all vile and wicked and evil thoughts.* . . . Why is man bad? Because he forgets that God is above him.

2. Anatoly the Older, *Elder of Optina*

Recite the Jesus Prayer unceasingly, and no one will interfere with you. Even when there are many people around you, you will not notice them.

One should pray to God so that between God and the soul of the one who prays there is nothing and nobody, only God and the soul: and that the one who prays senses neither heaven nor earth, nor anything else beside God.

Stand in church like an angel: do not indulge in talking, do not look around you Church is an earthly heaven. When you leave the Church, recite, *Virgin Theotokos rejoice . . .* and speak to no one: then you shall be *like unto a vessel so full that it overfloweth upon the way.*

3. Anatoly the Younger, *Elder of Optina*

If you say in your heart, "Even though I am only a piece of dirt, still the Lord cares for me. Let the will of God be accomplished in me" you rely upon the Lord with the firm intention to submit without complaint to submit to the will of God, whatever it might be--the clouds will part before you, the sun will emerge and shine upon you and warm you and you will know the true joy of the Lord.

4. Anthony, *Elder of Optina*

Of course, it would be easier to get to paradise with a full stomach, all snuggled up in a soft feather-bed, but what is required is to carry one's cross along the way, for the kingdom of God is not attained by enduring one or two troubles, but many!

5. Barsanuphius, *Elder of Optina*

Sometimes on a day on which you intend to receive Communion, you may experience a feeling of heaviness, but you should not pay any attention to this, nor should you become despondent, since on such a day the devil will particularly attack a man.

The six psalms (Matins) are a spiritual symphony, life for the world, which embraces the whole soul and imparts to it the most sublime light.

6. Hilarion, *Elder of Optina*

Reprimand without feeding thine own self-love, considering whether thou wouldst be able to bear what thou demandest of another . . . It is of greater benefit for the soul to acknowledge itself to be guilty of everything and the last of all, than to resort to self-justification, which has its origin in pride: God opposeth the prideful, but giveth grace unto the humble

For us the church is heaven on earth, where God Himself is invisibly present and watcheth over those who stand before Him there. For this reason, one must stand in church in an orderly manner, with great reverence. Let us love the church, and let us be zealous therein, for it is a delight and consolation for us amid both sorrows and joys.

7. Joseph, Elder of Optina

[Seclusion] is a dangerous path. The passions grow in seclusion. It is better to be among the people. Out away from where people walk, the grass grows high; but where they walk, the path is bare. Sometimes people go in for solitude out of intolerance. But it is good for us when we are jostled. The tree that the wind blows most against has the deepest and strongest roots: but that tree which grows undisturbed is more likely blown over.

How may one acquire complete dispassion? By complete humility.

The example of God's long suffering must curb our impatience, which gives us no rest. Nothing so calms us and reconciles us to the doings of others as silence, prayer and love. To each, this or that manifestation of the behavior of one's neighbor seems to be a great thing that accuses him of something.

8. Leo, Elder of Optina

One of his disciples asked the Elder, "Batiushka! how have you acquired the spiritual gifts we see in you?" The Elder Leo answered, "Live simply, and God will not forsake you and will show you His mercy."

9. Macarius, Elder of Optina

When ye shall have the security of humility in your hearts, remembering your own wickedness, then ye shall find the help of God in your works. According to the measure of our acquisition of humility shall we obtain eternity here on earth, shall we acquire the kingdom of God within ourselves, of which we are informed by the Savior Himself, Who says: "The kingdom of God is within you."

10. Moses, Elder of Optina

If you suffer with one who is suffering you will be reckoned among the martyrs.

If you forgive one who offends you, you will receive not only the forgiveness of your sins, but will become child of your heavenly Father.

If you confess your sins before God, you will receive forgiveness and reward. If you pray for salvation with your heart -if only a little- you will be saved.

11. Nectarius, Elder of Optina

One must not demand of a fly that it do the work of a bee. Every man should give according to his own ~~own~~ measure. Everyone cannot do the same thing.

In times to come the world will be girded about with iron and paper. The days of Noah were a prefiguration of our days. The ark is the Church; only those who are on it will be saved. We must pray. By prayer, by the word of God is every defilement washed away.

God not only permits, but demands of a man that he grow in knowledge. However, it is necessary to live and learn so that not only does knowledge not ruin morality, but that morality ruin not knowledge.

How Can One Maintain a Healthy Spiritual Life in the Modern World?

or

Have You Taken Your Orthodox Pulse lately?

Are you burning up with fever for God? Lukewarm? or Dead cold!?

"Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important." (C.S. Lewis, quoted in *Praxis Magazine*, Spring 2012)

I. What is Christianity?

- Outside the truth kept by the whole Church personal experience would be deprived of all certainty, of all objectivity. (Vladimir Lossky, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, p. 9).
- There is, therefore, no Christian mysticism without theology; but, above all, there is no theology without mysticism. (ibid.).
- Christianity is not a philosophical school for speculating about abstract concepts, but is essentially a communion with the living God. (ibid, p. 42).
- St Gregory of Nyssa says, Christianity is an 'imitation of the nature of God'. (ibid, p. 124; P.G., t. 46).

How will we come to know God?

Reading the Scriptures, reading the Church Fathers, hearing our teachers and elders in the faith.
Personal prayer and devotions and together with our brothers and sisters.

Luke 18:10: (anabainw) went up. Prayer makes us ascend up to God.

Some come and justify themselves, they do not go up because God resists the proud. They descend, they bring down the Church, they come to do business, to converse and to enjoy their "club." Others confess their unworthiness and so ascend and are accepted by God.

Are we like Lazarus who desired to eat the crumbs from the Master's table? How about the Canaanite woman from the district of Tyre and Sidon? She replied to Jesus, even the dogs eat the crumbs from the Master's table.

Maintain a proper balance between home, work or school and our Christian life

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. Matthew 16:24-27

Ps 51:17: The sacrifices of God *are* a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

II. A Spiritual Thermometer:

What is my personal opinion of Christianity, of our Church, of the afterlife?

Do I really believe in God?

Do I truly believe in the Second Coming and the Judgment Day to come?

Is Church only a "tack-on," something I do because I have been born into an Orthodox Family, a Greek, Russian, or Serb family? Or I am or was married to an Orthodox Christian?

How many Orthodox books have I read in the last year?

What is the name of my favorite Orthodox author?

What book on Orthodoxy or spirituality do I really love?

What is my favorite Orthodox service?

Do I regularly attend the Divine Liturgy?

If not, why not? What excuses do I make for skipping or shortening the services?

III. The Importance of the Liturgy

The Divine Liturgy is the Gospel lived!

We enter into the experience of the Cross. We enter into the joy of the Resurrection. We testify of new life to the world!

Therefore: We should desire to be regular in attendance and show our respect by being on time.

Alexander Schmemmann, a Theologian of the Liturgy wrote:

"We are at the paschal table of the Kingdom" (p.41)

"We must go out of this world, we must ascend to heaven in Christ in order to become partakers of the world to come." (p.42)

(Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, SVS Press.)

We have to learn that only God can satisfy our inner longings or hungers. He created us for Himself. Only in God can be found the meaning (value) of everything.

The world is a fallen world because it fell away from the awareness that God is all in all.

Man has loved the world, but as an end in itself. Man was to be the priest of a eucharist, offering the world to God, and in this offering he was to receive the gift of life. He does not know that breathing can be communion with God. He does not realize that to eat can be to receive life from God in more than its physical sense.

The world, its air, its food cannot bring life in themselves. Only in God can be found the meaning of all we have and we do. Eating is communion with a dying world, communion with death. Food is dead and has to be kept in a refrigerator like a corpse. The life man chose was only the appearance of life.

Man lost the eucharistic life, he lost the life of life itself, the power to transform it into **Life**. He ceased to be the priest of the world and became its slave. (*For the Life of the World*, A. Schmemmann)

THE Problem.

"There is a eucharistic crisis in the Church. ... With time, however, this crisis has become chronic. That schizophrenia that poisons the life of the Church and undermines its very foundations has come to be seen as a normal state. ... it is characterized by a mounting rebellion against God and his kingdom. Not God, but **man has become the measure of all things**." (Preface, *The Eucharist*, A. Schmemmann).

Possible Solutions: Retreats, seminars, conferences:

Ancient Faith Radio music programs, podcasts and Orthodox books can be aids to grow in the faith. We must place the proper emphasis on spiritual needs and the world's expectations.

The original sin is not primarily that man has "disobeyed" [the ACT] God; the sin is that he ceased to be hungry for Him and for Him alone; [the REASON FOR THE ACT] he ceased to see his whole life... as a "sacrament of communion with God."

"Love for God begins to manifest itself, and to act in us, when we begin to love our neighbor as ourselves, and not to spare ourselves or anything belonging to us for him, as he is the image of God: "For he who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen."

(St. John of Kronstadt)

Mt 6:33, *But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*