



## *Fire & Light*

### **St. Symeon Orthodox Church**

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✠ **August 2, 2015** ✠

### **The Dormition Fast**

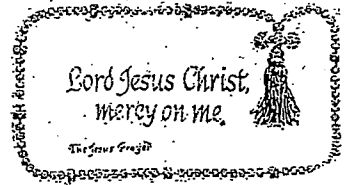
#### **Protomartyr and Archdeacon Stephen**

(Translation of Relics from Jerusalem to Constantinople – 428)

**Righteous Nicodemus and Gamaliel of Jerusalem (1<sup>st</sup> C)**

**Hieromartyr Stephen, Pope of Rome (257)**

Come, let us transform ourselves with a higher transformation!  
Let us prepare ourselves for tomorrow,  
To ascend the holy mountain of God,  
To behold the glory of Christ!  
- Vespers of August 5



✠ **Inquirer's Class Tomorrow - 6:30pm**

✠ **Wed. Aug. 5 6:30pm Great Vespers with Litiya – Feast of the Transfiguration**

✠ **Thurs Aug. 6 10:00am Divine Liturgy – Feast of the Transfiguration**

✠ **Fri. Aug. 7 6:30pm Paraklysis – Supplicatory Canon to the Theotokos**

✠ **Sat. Aug. 8 6:00pm Great Vespers with Litiya for St. Herman of Alaska**

✠ **Next Sunday, August 9, is the Feastday of St. Herman**

### **HOMILY ~ About the Personal Witness of the Apostle**

"This is my beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with Him in the holy mount" (2 Peter 2:17-18).

Let us hear the testimony of the true and faithful one who was crucified on a cross because of his testimony. Let us hear the Apostle Peter who, what he was unable to prove by his words, proved by his bloody death on the cross, crucified upside down by the pagans. He testifies that he was on the holy mountain, i.e., Mount Tabor, when our Lord was transfigured, when Moses with Elijah appeared and when a voice was heard from heaven saying: "This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased" (2 Peter 1:17). In this text, the Apostle does not speak of what he and his companions saw on the holy mountain, which is narrated in the Gospel, but repeats only that which they heard. That which they heard is just as important as that which they saw. Therefore, let the people hear that the Apostle saw the Lord Jesus transfigured in a miraculous heavenly light and let them know that He is the Son of God. Let the people also hear that the Apostles saw Moses and Elijah alive and let them know that life after death exists as well as the judgment of God. Let them also hear, that the Lord Jesus is called the Son of God, not by man, but rather by God the Father Himself. Those who speak these words to the people and relate to them what their eyes saw and what their ears heard are faithful and true witnesses. He, who does not believe the Apostles, believes in Judas, Caiaphas, Herod and Nero, the persecutors of the Apostles and traitors of the truth. He who does not believe in the righteous ones has no other alternative left but to believe in the unrighteous ones. He who does not believe in the pure ones, must believe in the impure ones. He who does not believe in those who suffer for the truth, must believe in the torturers and libertines. Day does not dawn for anything else except that men may take sides with one or the other.

✠ **We believe** that believers, who are purified by Christ's commandments, do not simply have some spiritual illumination and enlightenment, but that the Holy Spirit Himself abides in them; as it is written, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and, The Kingdom of God is within you.

from *An Instruction on the Sunday of Pentecost, The Gospel Commentary (2002)*

## The Dormition Fast

The Theotokos, the Virgin Mary, was "blessed among women," and she was chosen "to bear the Savior of our souls." We, therefore, as Orthodox Christians, consider her to be the Queen of all the Saints and the Angels.

Knowing that she holds such a high place in the Kingdom of Heaven and that she is eternally present at the throne of God interceding for mankind, we, as good Orthodox Christians pray for her love, guidance, and protection. We should never forget to ask for her intercessions in times of sickness and danger, and we should constantly thank her for her care and her prayers in our behalf.

Every year the Orthodox Church sets aside the first fourteen days of August in honor of the Virgin Mary. This fast period is climaxed on August 15th, when the Church gathers to celebrate the Great Feast of the Dormition (Falling-Asleep) of the Theotokos.

So why do we fast before Dormition? In a close-knit family, word that its matriarch is on her deathbed brings normal life to a halt. Otherwise important things (parties, TV, luxuries, personal desires) become unimportant; life comes to revolve around the dying matriarch.

It is the same with the Orthodox family; word that our matriarch is on her deathbed, could not (or at least should not) have any different effect than the one just mentioned. The Church, through the Paraklesis Service, gives us the opportunity to come to that deathbed and eulogize and entreat the woman who bore God, the vessel of our salvation and our chief advocate at His divine throne. And as, in the earthly family, daily routines and the indulgence in personal wants should come to a halt. Fasting, in its full sense (abstaining from food and desires) accomplishes this. Less time in leisure or other pursuits leaves more time for prayer and reflection on she who gave us Christ, and became the first and greatest Christian.

In reflecting on her and her incomparable life, we see a model Christian life, embodying Christ's retort to the woman who stated that Mary was blessed because she bore Him: blessed rather are those who hear His word and keep it. Theotokos did this better than anyone! As Fr. Thomas Hopko has stated, she heard the word of God and kept it so well, that she of all women in history was chosen not only to hear His Word but give birth to it (Him). So while we fast in contemplation of her life, we are simultaneously preparing ourselves to live a life in imitation of her. That is the purpose of the Dormition Fast. This period is also a good time to prepare and partake of the Sacrament of Holy Confession.

✠ Let us, then, cry out loudly with Peter's words, "Lord, save us!" And if we are willing to receive Christ into our ship; that is, to have Him dwell in our hearts; we shall immediately find ourselves at the land to which we are hastening. What land is that? Clearly, it is the promised land, heaven, the land of the meek, of them that refrain from evil. With them, then, may we also be vouchsafed to enter that land and be heirs of its good things; in Christ Jesus our Lord, to Whom be glory and dominion, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, unto the ages of ages. Amen.

-St. John Chrysostom

# On the Transfiguration

Fr. Mark Andrews, Weatherly, PA

We can find the whole event of Christ's Transfiguration in Matthew 17:1-9, Luke 9:28-35 and 2 Peter 1:16-21. Jesus leads His disciples to a high mountain and shows them His divine glory. Like Theophany, Transfiguration is a feast of Light. *Today on Tabor we have seen the Father as Light and the Holy Spirit as Light guiding with Light the whole creation, we sing on that day.*

The Transfiguration is a revelation of the Holy Trinity. On Mount Tabor, as at the baptism in Jordan, the Father speaks from heaven, testifying to the divine Sonship of Christ; and the Spirit is also present, on this occasion not in the likeness of a dove, but under the form of dazzling light, surrounding Christ's person and overshadowing the whole mountain. This dazzling light is the light of the Spirit.

In the Orthros for the Feast we sing:

*The pillar of fire plainly showed to Moses Christ transfigured, and the cloud pointed clearly to the grace of the Spirit that overshadowed Mount Tabor.*

The Transfiguration took place 40 days before Christ's passion. He chose this particular moment to reveal to His disciples something of His divine glory in order for them to be ready to bear His suffering on the Cross. But our Church celebrates this great event on 6 August which is also 40 days before the Elevation of the Holy Cross (September 14 ) a feast of crucifixion.

What has happened to human nature in Christ can happen also to the humanity of Christ's followers. The Transfiguration, then, reveals to us the full potentiality of human nature. It shows us the glory which our humanity once possessed and the glory which, by God's grace, it will again recover.

The three disciples, Peter, James and John become witnesses of Christ's glory. They saw the face of Christ shine as the sun. According to St. Gregory of Nazianzus, this light was the divinity manifested to the disciples. The Evangelists compare the divinity with the light of the sun, but this comparison is quite inadequate, because uncreated reality cannot be expressed by a created image.

The Church Fathers tried to formulate the Orthodox definition of grace founded on the dogmatic distinction between the inaccessible essence and the communicable energy of God. So the Light is not God's *essence* but His *energy*. The Light of the Lord's Transfiguration had no beginning and no end; it remained uncircumscribed and imperceptible to the senses, although it was contemplated with bodily eyes.

## ON THE PURPOSE OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

*Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James and John ...up on a high mountain by themselves, and was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light...*

*Matthew 17: 1-2*

Through the Transfiguration the Lord wanted to give His disciples tangible proof of His Divinity, so that, as the Church chants, "Seeing You crucified, they would know Your Passion is by choice and would preach to the world that You are indeed the Father's splendor" (Kontakion of the Feast). The Lord did not want them to be shaken, then, when they saw Christ on the Cross, but would understand that he voluntarily gave Himself to death, since, as God, He could destroy all opposition and throw His enemies prostrate on the ground in the thunderbolt of His Divinity. Should His Disciples fall and not His enemies? And so, He was pleased to be crucified for our salvation.. Lord glory be to Your infinite love and long-suffering! Still through the Transfiguration the Lord wanted to show that human nature will not remain in the lowly state it is today, but will be exalted and made brilliant. No matter how insignificant their earthly lives had been, all believers will see the day when they will shine like the Sun in God's Kingdom, for as Scripture says, " the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Matt. 13:43)....

■ Bishop Augustinos of Florina

Why do we bless wheat, wine, oil, and the five loaves on the eves of certain Holy Days?

-At the Blessing of the Loaves, God's blessing is asked on the fertility of the earth for the nourishment of men. In the early Church, when the All-Night Vigil lasted until the morning, it was customary to distribute the common offerings of bread, wine and oil after the Vespers; to the end that the Faithful who intended to remain throughout the service might be strengthened and refreshed thereby. After the Priest had pronounced the final Benediction upon the people, he and the Deacon descended from the Sanctuary and sitting down with the people, they consumed with them the food which had thus been blessed. During this time selections from the Acts of the Apostles, or from the Epistles, were read aloud. This custom is still observed in certain monasteries, notably those on Mount Athos. The distribution of blessed bread during Grand Matins, to the faithful who have received the benediction by the anointing with the blessed oil, commemorates this in ordinary churches.  
Hapgood, Service Book.

In Psalm 104, 15 we read "and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread to strengthen man's heart." This image of the things necessary to sustain life is found throughout Scripture, so it's only natural that we continue to pray for this blessing of fertility and nourishment for our lives and our Churches.

## On Temptations ~ St. Dorotheos of Gaza

✠ "We have lost the virtues, and have put the passions inside us instead; so we must struggle, not only to be rid of the passions but to also regain the virtues and re-establish them in their rightful place. The virtues have been given to us naturally by God. When God created man, he implanted the virtues within him. ... However, it is not natural that we also have the passions.

"It is similar for the soul. A person must first cut out every old attachment to passions, and every bad habit that he possesses; because nothing is worse than bad habits. St. Basil himself says: 'This struggle to overcome the habits within us is not minor. Habits which are retained for a long time, inevitably take on the strength of nature.' If one wants to struggle, as I have said, he must do so not only against bad habits and against passions, but also against their cause --- the roots. If the roots are not removed, the thorns inevitably grow up again. There are some passions that are powerless if we cut away their causes. Envy, for example, is nothing in and of itself, but it has certain causes. One of them is ambition: wanting to be glorified, [such an individual] detests the person who is glorified or given preference. In like manner, wrath has many causes; but - in particular - the desire for pleasure. Evagrius mentions this when telling of a certain saint, who said: 'I strip away the desire for pleasure, because I want to cut off the pretext for anger. All the Fathers say that each passion arises from one of these three causes: ambition, avarice or the desire for pleasure...'"

"One must, therefore, not only cut off the passions, but also their causes; and thus perfect his entire way of life through repentance and tears. He must then start to sow the good seed, which are the good works. We have said regarding the field: if, after clearing it and making it good, one does not sow good seed, the weeds grow up again; as they find the soil soft and good from cultivation, and they become rooted more deeply. It is the same with man: if, after he has well prepared his entire way of life and repented from his previous actions, he neglects

to perform good deeds and obtain virtues, then it happens to him as it says in the Gospel, 'When an unclean spirit goes out of a person, it goes through dry places --- seeking rest. And finding none, it says: "I will return to my house from which I came." And when it comes, it finds it swept and put in order. Then, he goes and takes to him seven other spirits more wicked than himself; and they enter and dwell, and the last state of that person is worst than the first' [Luke 11-24-27].

"We need a little labor. Let us labor, therefore, so that we shall receive mercy. If someone has a field and does not till it, it will be neglected. Is it not true that - as much as he neglects it - [the field] will become full of thorns and thistles, so that - when he comes to clear it - the more weeds, the more his hands will have to bleed when he wants to remove them ...? It is impossible for someone not to reap what he sowed. If a person wants to clear his field, first he must effectively root out all the weeds; because if he only cuts them down, without rooting them out, they will grow once again. ... [A]fter he has cleared the field of the weeds, the thorns and the like, he must cut up the soil, till it, plough it and then sow the good seed. If, however, - after this perfect preparation - he stops showing proper care for the field, then the weeds, finding the soil soft and good, grow up again. Furthermore, they push their roots more deeply [into the ground] and grow stronger and more numerous."

"It is impossible for the soul to remain in the same condition: it will become progressively better or worse. That is why the person who wants to be saved needs not only to do no evil, but also to do good; as it says in the Psalms: 'Turn away from evil and do good' [36:27]. ... That is to say, if someone used to be unjust, he must not only cease from injustice, but practice justice. If he was recklessly wasteful, he must both cease from that and practice temperance. If he was irascible, he must both give up his anger and obtain gentleness. If he was emboldened, let him humble himself. ... Each passion has its opposing virtue: pride has humility; avarice has charity; wastefulness has temperance; restlessness has patience; wrath has gentleness; hate has love ..." ✠ ✠ ✠

## Wisdom from new Saint Paisios the Athonite (from the book *Epistles*)

We owe greater gratitude to those who humble us, wrong us, and douse us with venom, than to those who nurse us with honor and sweet words, or feed us with tasty food and confections, for bile is the best medicine for our soul. Let us not examine whether we were justly or unjustly embittered, out of love or viciousness, or whether we are at fault slightly or not at all. We should accept with joy the spiritual benefit that every trial leaves behind, glorify God for everything and be grateful to the people who wrong us.

Whoever thinks that he can come to know the mysteries of God through external scientific theory resembles the fool who wants to see Paradise with a telescope. Those who struggle patristically (in the way of the Fathers) become empirical theologians through the visitation of the Grace of the Holy Spirit.

All evil begins from the mind, when it revolves solely around science and is completely alienated from God. That is why these people do not find their inner peace and balance. If, however, their mind were revolving around God, they would use science for the cultivation of their inner universe and the world's benefit, for then the mind would be sanctified.

External (worldly) education, unfortunately, invariably disfigures men and the beautiful nature (creation) of God as well, making the life of man unnatural with the stress and anguish that it constantly adds. It leads hundreds of people (even little children troubled with stress) to psychoanalysis and psychiatrists daily and continually builds psychiatric hospitals and trains psychiatrists - even though most of them neither believe in God nor accept the existence of the soul. How is it then possible for these people to help souls while they themselves are full of stress? How is it possible for a man to be truly comforted and consoled if he does not believe in God and in the true life after death, eternal life? When man conceives the deeper meaning of true life then all his stress and anguish departs, divine consolation appears, and he is cured.

As cleanliness has the quality of driving away flies and germs and of granting health to man, purity of soul has the virtue of driving away the demons - when we do not give them rights over us. Of course, out in the world we are not able to hinder the demons, but neither can they harm our soul.

Usually the greatest temptations are momentary. If, in that moment, we escape, the column of demons also moves away and we are saved from the hands of the enemy.

The value of all the knowledge of the world does not exceed the worth of one insight into our self.

## *This and That*

Oh yes, the mob came first for the Evangelicals and the Catholics and the Latter-Day Saints; but do not be deceived: it will not stop with them. It's true that many in the mob have a particular animus against Christians, but the point of destroying the reputations and livelihoods of the initial victims is *pour encourager les autres*. If you believe you belong to a group that will be given a special exemption or dispensation from the enforcement of the new orthodoxy—by any means necessary—you will soon learn that you are tragically mistaken. No one who dissents will be given a pass.

We have seen how swiftly the demands have moved from tolerance to compulsory approbation of behavior historically rejected as contrary to morality and faith by virtually all the great religious traditions of the world. And now it is not only approbation that is demanded, but active participation. And do you honestly think that we have now reached the endpoint of what will be demanded?

Of course, some will say—indeed some are saying—that the battle is over, the cause is lost. All we can do is seek the best terms of surrender we can get, knowing that at this stage they will not be very good.

What should we say to that? Well, it is certainly true that the political, economic, and cultural power now arrayed against people of faith and their rights and liberties is formidable. No question about it: This is David against Goliath. But then, we know how that contest ended, don't we?

**If we refuse to surrender, we will certainly be demonized; but everything will depend on whether we refuse to be demoralized. Courage displayed in the cause of truth—and of right—is powerful.** And it will depend on whether ordinary people...inspired by their faith to stand firm, will also be willing to stand shoulder to shoulder, and arm-in-arm, with their brothers and sisters of other traditions of faith to defy the mob. ~ Robert P. George, *First Things*

**"Our children witness perversions of all kinds, and no one cares, because we have become pornographic people. . . .** That is because we accept the principle undergirding the pornography, which is that the pursuit of sexual gratification is a good thing, maybe the greatest good of all, and trumps all other considerations, such as the health of marriages, generally, the welfare and innocence of children, the promotion of virtue, and the common good..."

"We are all interested in marriage, that is, we all have a stake in it, because through marriage, or through actions that should have been performed within the haven of marriage, we have all come into being. It isn't simply a reflex of the emotions of the man and woman. It is the act of renewal. It brings together this family of blood relations with that family of blood relations, the kinfolk that lay just claims upon us because we and they share some of the same history, the same cousins, even the same eyes and ears and noses. A marriage marries families, and it is the family, and not the abstracted autonomous individual, that is the foundation for the community."

Anthony Esolen, from his book, *Defending Marriage*

Gay marriage has never been about marriage. Gay marriage has been about the moral sanctioning of homosexual couplings. It was and remains the wedge issue for the legal codification of homosexual behavior and the overthrow of cultural norms by using the coercive power of the courts. At bottom it is a revolt against Christ and Christian civilization...Dark days are ahead. There will be no compromise with the forces that will be mobilized against Christians and Christianity as a result of this ruling. Liberty has lost, and next comes the attempt to extinguish the Light the illumined it.

— Fr. Johannes Jacobse

*Most Holy Theotokos, save us!*

# Sons of Nones

On a recent train ride, I sat next to a young German woman living in the United States. She was raised by atheists, but had a deep religious longing. She was baptized and tried Christianity. Her experience of Christianity in Germany left her wanting something deeper, and through a friend, became a full convert to Islam.

This encounter was particularly intriguing coming so soon after Pew's study on religion in the public forum. Some media commentators hail the decline of religious participation as a sign of the new order and the death of traditional religion in the U.S.

Reba Riley writing for Time sees a vindication of her catchy new book title, Post-Traumatic Church Syndrome. The flight of "nones" (no religion) from traditional organized religion is a response to the inflexible dogmatism of said churches, and PTCS manifests itself physically as well as spiritually and emotionally. Recovery is a long process.

For Peter Manseau in the New York Times, this rise of the nones is a normal, healthy process; it's an expression of the individual. Being members of a culture which demands independence and choice, a growing number of Americans are throwing off old-world dogmas in favor of a more personalized creed, and this is empowering.

Some commentators were more nuanced in their reception of the survey. David Briggs of the Association of Religious Data Archives wrote that the data for the nones is "inflated." Many Americans are still Christian, but aren't familiar with the specifics of their denomination, and the necessary follow-up questions were not asked.

Michael Gerson's piece yesterday in the Washington Post is particularly insightful. Gerson does not rail against organized religion, nor does he hail empty churches as a sign of a new and improved zeitgeist. Rather, the rise of the nones is rooted in the exodus of "casual Christians." These Christians were willing to participate in public ecclesial life insofar as it conformed to the public life of the day, but they were not interiorly convicted of the truths of the faith they professed.

It is indeed important to have a culture which supports a public religious life, and it's a shame that this aspect of society is in decline. But it doesn't seem like we should fill out the death certificate for Christianity, nor is there any coherence in Manseau's do-it-yourself religion. The exit of casual, cultural Christians is unfortunate, but it provides an opportunity for renewal and the re-presentation of an all-encompassing faith in Jesus Christ.

In the past century or so, Christian denominations have often supported a belief system that appeals to the lowest common denominator, fears offending most of all, and ultimately fails to answer any of life's deepest questions.

The young lady I talked with on the train sought something deeper than the emptiness of her parent's atheism and the mores of a secular culture that focuses exclusively on self-satisfaction.

The Pew study challenges Christians. As the children of nones reject the non-faith of their parents, either Christians must offer them a real, coherent system, or expect to lose them to other, more radical systems of belief.

*Dominic Bouck, O.P., is a Dominican brother of the Province of St. Joseph and a summer intern at First Things.*