



## *Fire & Light*

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

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✠ **August 23, 2015** ✠

### **The Leavetaking of the Dormition**

St. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (202)

Martyr Lupus, Slave of St. Demetrios of Thessalonica (306)

The uncontainable Wisdom of God has wondrously built a house for Himself by taking His abode in thee, O Theotokos, through the power of the Holy Spirit! Now He has taken thee to dwell in His courts, O all-praised one!

*Most-Holy  
Theotokos,  
save us!*

✠ **Wed. Aug. 26 6:30pm Paraklysis Service**

✠ The glory of God is a human being who is fully alive, and the life of such a person consists in beholding God... God created man in order to have someone on whom to shower His love...

- St. Irenaeus of Lyons (202 AD, remembered today)

"St. John the Forerunner and Baptist did not merely, in the words of the Scripture, choose the good before knowing evil (cf. Isa. 7:16 LXX), but while still unborn, before knowing the world, he surpassed it. Then once he was born he delighted and amazed everyone by reason of the miraculous events surrounding him, because it says, 'The hand of the Lord was with him' (Lk. 1:66), working wonders again as it had in earlier time? Once this divine child, this living instrument of grace from his mother's womb, had been conceived, he was moved by grace to rejoice in the Holy Spirit. In the same way, after being born, he grew and waxed strong in the Spirit." **St. Gregory Palamas**

### **When Life Begins...**

Does the Incarnation give us any help in understanding whether each of our lives began with a single cell? Yes! Even if we knew nothing about embryology or fetology, we know that God the Son assumed nothing less than a human nature in the miraculous conception of the Man Jesus. The God-Man was never the *God-Almost Human!* "Well," someone might say, "perhaps the newly conceived thing in the womb is human (an appendix or a heart, it could be argued, is human in its nature), but it's not yet another one of us, a human being." From the very moment of conception - which we celebrate at the Annunciation, singing, "Today is the beginning of our salvation: the Son of God becomes son of the Virgin" - the humanity that the Son of God takes on and is never devoid of personhood, but is the human nature of the divine Person Incarnate. Scripture makes this plainer: the unborn John the Baptist leapt in St. Elizabeth's womb when he met the unborn Son of God in Mary's womb (Luke 1:39-44).

The Incarnation, it is true, is a mystery completely beyond our understanding, a Divine "act of power" par excellence. There are many things, too, that we don't know about the conception and development of the human being in the womb. But we do know that, with every conception, we have another one of us in the womb. This is not above anybody's "pay grade," and certainly not above any Christian's understanding. God entered the world in the womb of a virgin, and hallowed it.

(over)

This question of when human life begins is not really academic, of course: some people would say that, because the very small human being is not one of us, not our neighbor, he or she can be destroyed. There have been attempts, too, to set a point after conception that would be the real beginning for human life. (The Greek philosopher Aristotle, for example, thought that "ensoulment" took place at 40 days after conception for males, and 80 days for females, because

these were the earliest points at which male and female genitalia could be discerned, respectively, in miscarried embryos.) A lot rides on the determination of when this entity in the womb is another one of us: it may be life or death! Thus it has to be a sure determination, and

not an arbitrary one. Apart from a Christian view of things, if you don't know when life begins, or if you're not certain – don't kill! Hunters can't just fire into the woods when they think that their target is probably not another hunter – they have to know that it's not.

The Church from the earliest times was not very interested in any abstract or philosophical question of when human life begins. The heart of man is desperately corrupt, the Prophet writes, and Christians know how easy it is to come to conclusions that justify things the heart knows to be wrong. Many "pro-choice" people admit this unconsciously. They never say that an appendectomy is "a difficult moral issue." A tonsillectomy is never "a deeply personal matter." Why do they say these things about an abortion? If they mean what they say, it is because they know that abortion has to do with something more than an organ, and they are troubled; their consciences bear witness against what they want to accept, or at least permit. They are like the man who argued with Jesus, wanting to justify himself, when he asked, "Who is my neighbor?"

~ <http://www.antiochian.org/node/22500>

*One of Dostoevsky's sources for Father Zosima was the 7th century St. Isaac the Syrian, also known as Issac of Nineveh:*

✱ "What is a charitable heart? It is a heart burning with charity for the whole of creation, for humans, for the birds, for the beasts, for the demons – for all creatures. He who has such a heart cannot see or call to mind a creature without his eyes becoming filled with tears by reason of the immense compassion that seizes his heart, a heart that is softened and can no longer bear to see or learn from others of any suffering, even the smallest pain, being inflicted upon a creature. That is why such a man never ceases to pray for the animals, for the enemies of Truth, and for those who do him evil, that they may be preserved and purified. He will pray even for the reptiles, moved by the infinite pity that reigns in the hearts of those who are becoming united to God."

***Are we all sinners because of the sin of Adam?*** Does the stain of sin pass from one generation to another? Does every man, woman, and child on this earth stand condemned by God unless they hear and believe in Jesus Christ? To most people this sounds utterly unreasonable and unjust; and indeed it is. To anyone who believes that God loves his creation, and especially loves humanity, it is inconceivable that he should condemn people through no fault of their own. The very idea that an innocent child deserves eternal punishment is monstrous. Yet it is utterly reasonable that we are made good through the goodness of Christ. Although the sin of one person cannot condemn humanity, the radiant love of one Man can transform humanity - and is doing so. God waits for our hearts to open to his grace; he waits for an opportunity to reveal to each of us his truth. Then, when we are ready, he ensures that we hear about Christ and about his Gospel; and we find ourselves faced with a choice, which will affect the entire course of life and death-whether to embrace the words of Jesus Christ or to reject them. If we deliberately reject the Gospel, even when we fully understand it, then we condemn ourselves; if we embrace it, we shall ourselves be embraced by God in Heaven.

– **St. John Chrysostom**, from the book, *Living Simply*

## The Holy Fathers on .... THE TONGUE

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*If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.*  
(James 3:2)

For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile (I Peter 3:10)

He who has become aware of his sins has controlled his tongue, but a talkative person has not yet come to know himself as he should.  
**St. John Climacus**

If Moses, who was a god to Pharaoh, was shut out from the Land of Promise because of one word, how much more will not the evil speech of our tongue, by which we offend and hurt both God and man, shut us out from heaven?  
**St. Ephraim the Syrian**

Many abstain from meat, milk and other food which God has not forbidden and which was even given as a blessing of people who have learned the truth and know how to partake of these things with thanksgiving (I Tim. 4:34). But the same abstemious, devout-living people, give scandal by their action, and spread scandal with their tongue like an incendiary fire.  
**St. Tikhon of Zadonsk**

In general, loquacity opens the doors of the soul, and the devout warmth of the heart at once escapes. Empty talk does the same, but even more so... Empty talk is the door to criticism and slander, the spreader of false rumors and opinions, the sower of discord and strife. It stifles the taste for mental work and almost always serves as a cover for the absence of sound knowledge...  
**St. Theophan the Recluse**

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### **Taming an Unruly Member ~ St. Theophan the Recluse**

**The mouth of a fool is his destruction (Prov. 18:7)**

#### **The Poison**

Evil speech is worse than all poisons. All other wounds may be healed, but the wound of the tongue has no cure. The tongue of the dragon is less evil than that of the whisperer, which in turn comes from a most evil demon: for it provokes quarrelling and bitter strife between brethren, sows evil and discord among the peaceful, scatters many communities. If you permit the whisperer to approach you, he will strip you of every merit you possess. Whosoever becomes involved with him has already become a confederate in his bloodshed, in his murders, and in his slayings! for a whisperer and a murderer spawn the same whelp: if they do not slay you with the sword, they will bring the same disaster on you with the tongue. (...)

Because of these things I charge you severely, that you separate yourself from a whisperer as speedily as you can. Let him be a monk, let him be an anchorite, let him be a champion of virtue or but a novice, whoever he is, as long as he is a whisperer, fly from him. Though he should be your own father, or your brother, if he is a whisperer keep far away from him. For it is better to dwell with a lion or with a lioness than with one who is a whisperer. And do not be ashamed to fly from him; so that he shall not infect you with the poison of his sin.

So then, my sons, have no part in murmuring: do your work earnestly and in silence; for he who is devoted to silence is close to God and His angels and dwells in heaven. For the Lord tells us that: He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his soul. (Prov. 13:3)

And then in the day of our visitation He shall say to us: "Blessed art thou, Israel," because you kept watch on your tongue; "who is like to thee" (Deut,33:29)? May the Lord preserve you in His grace and peace. Amen.

### **The Cure**

Set, O Lord, a watch before my mouth, and a door of enclosure round about my lips. The greatest necessity of all is to control and curb our tongue. The mover of the tongue is the heart: what fills the heart is poured out through the tongue. And conversely, when feeling is poured out of the heart by the tongue, it becomes strengthened and firmly rooted in the heart. Therefore the tongue is one of the chief factors in building up our inner disposition.

Good feelings are silent. The feelings which seek expression in words are mostly egotistical, since they seek to express what flatters our self-love and can show us, as we imagine, in the best light. Loquacity mostly comes from a certain vainglory, which makes us think that we know a great deal and imagine our opinion on the subject of conversation to be the most satisfactory of all. So we experience an irresistible urge to speak out and in a stream of words, with many repetitions, to impress the same opinion in the hearts of others, thus foisting ourselves upon them as unbidden teachers and sometimes even dreaming of making pupils of men, who understand the subject much better than the teacher.

When you have to speak, before expressing what has entered your heart and letting it pass to your tongue, examine it carefully; and you will find many things that are better not let past your lips. Know moreover that many things, which it seems to you good to express, are much better left buried in the tomb of silence. Sometimes you will yourself realize this, immediately the conversation is over.

Silence is a great power in our unseen warfare and a sure hope of gaining victory. Silence is much beloved of him, who does not rely on himself but trusts in God alone. It is the guardian of holy prayer and a miraculous helper in the practice of virtues; it is also a sign of spiritual wisdom. St. Isaac says: "Guarding your tongue not only makes your mind rise to God, but also gives great hidden power to perform visible actions, done by the body. If silence is practiced with knowledge, it also brings enlightenment in hidden doing." In another place he praises it thus: "If you pile up on one side of the scales all the works demanded by ascetic life, and on the other side--silence, you will find that the latter outweighs the former. Many good counsels have been given us, but if a man embraces silence, to follow them will become superfluous." In yet another place he calls silence "the mystery of the life to come; whereas words are the instruments of this world"....It can be said in general that a man who keepeth silence is found wise and of good sense (Eccl. 20:5).

I shall indicate to you the most direct and simple method to acquire the habit of silence: undertake this practice, and the Practice itself will teach you how to do it, and help you. To keep up your zeal in this work, reflect as often as you can on the pernicious results of indiscriminate babbling and on the salutary results of wise silence. When you come to taste the good fruit of silence, you will no longer need lessons about it.

*(St. Theophan the Recluse in Unseen Warfare; SVS Press, 1978)*

### **We Must All Be Humble**

✕ We must all be humble: in thought, word and in behavior. We will never go before God and say, "I have virtues." God does not want our virtues. Always appear before God as a sinner, not with despair, but trusting in the mercy of His compassion. Elder Porphyrios (1991)

# ST. BASSA

*August 21st*

Although St. Bassa was born in Larisa, Greece in the third century, her difficulties mirror those of many Christian mothers of the 21st century. She was recruited into the burgeoning ranks of the Christian faithful who struggled mightily against the ancient darkness of disobedience looming against the backdrop of imperial domination, that menacing abyss of evil that wrecks havoc even to this day, whether in the form of paganism, witchcraft, magic or satanism. For truly, "we wrestle . . . against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." (Ephesians 6:12.) St. Bassa kept aloft the high Gospel standard and took a heroic stance which ultimately cost the life of her sons, as well as her own.

The third century was a time of intense persecution of Christians by the Roman government. St. Bassa had been raised by Christian parents so this persecution affected her most intimately, especially since she was given in marriage to Valerius, a pagan priest of the official state religion. The main reason for the persecution of Christians was that they refused to take part in the authorized Roman worship. Since Christians separated themselves from pagan society, Roman authorities assumed they were involved in something illegal, inciting acts and teaching beliefs contrary to Roman citizenship and worship. Thus, they became "enemies of the state".

A loving mother, St. Bassa was entirely devoted to her three sons. Steeped from the womb in the Christian faith, she also taught them the pitfalls of idolatry and its cunning. She must have lived in an atmosphere of suspicion, always being watched and baited by Valerius. Those who have truly given their hearts to Christ cannot pretend to be anything other than what they are, "children of light and of the day". (I Thessalonians 2:5.) She bore the burden of having been "unequally yoked" and fully understood St. Paul's admonition: "Be ye not unequally yoked together with



unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? . . . what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For ye are the temple of the living God . . ." (II Corinthians 6:14,16.)

As if in fulfillment of St. Paul's warning, Valerius finally reached his limit of toleration. Certain that his wife had brainwashed his sons, he demanded, as head of the household, that his entire family sacrifice to idols. St. Bassa knew that if she were to compromise her faith and give in to her husband even on the seemingly innocuous issue of idol worship, she would lose the battle. His dictates then would only increase until he had completely subjugated the family. She would not do anything that might cause her children to lose their souls. Indeed, she had taught her sons well and they unanimously refused to concede to their father's demand. Insanely furious, Valerius denounced his wife to the governor, knowing very well that this would implicate his three sons. He hoped that if they could be persuaded through fear and torture to sacrifice to idols, the constancy of their mother would wane, and he would gain the domination he sought.

When brought before the governor, the sons were urged to pay homage to the lifeless idols, but they refused. Valerius had not counted on the steadfastness of his sons. Because of their fervent confession of faith, his entire family was imprisoned. St. Bassa never ceased to speak to her sons of eternal life in Christ. When the torturers burst into the cell, the boys were brave and did not fear martyrdom. Their mother was forced to witness the torture and beheading of her three sons. Although to those without faith this seems horrific, St. Bassa considered the martyrdom of her sons a cause for joy in that they had grown to full stature in Christ and would receive eternal life in heaven. She longed to receive the same martyric end.

The governor transported St. Bassa to Macedonia where he again tried to compel her to sacrifice to the idols, but without success. Various forms of torture were implemented, but she was protected from them all. Her torturers tried to drown her, but she escaped unharmed. They cast her into a furnace, but she was preserved. She was stoned, but not injured. After shattering an idol of Zeus, she was thrown to wild animals, but was not harmed. Finally, they flung her into the sea, far from land. God preserved his faithful saint once more and brought her to the island of Alonnisos. The consul of the area discovered her whereabouts, and she was quickly seized and tortured. Again refusing to deny Christ, she was beheaded. She joyfully surrendered her soul to God and entered heaven to abide with Christ and her sons forever.

## A Testimony of St. Gregory Dialogus, Pope of Rome

(Pre-Schism 7<sup>th</sup> Century - from the Evergetinos):

It is also needful to make this known: Often when the souls of the elect leave the body, there are heard hymns in the heavens. This happens because of the providential love of God for man, so that these souls might hear hymns during the last pangs of death and not feel their separation from the body.

The incident which I am about to narrate, directly, I remember having related in my sermons on the Holy Gospel. An unfortunate fellow once lived near the portico of the Church of St. Clement. His name was Servulus. This man, whom I think you know, was paralyzed and would beg for alms along the streets. Now, Servulus, though wholly impoverished with regard to material goods, was nonetheless very rich in virtues. His body had been rendered paralyzed by disease for many years. From all that we know of him, he was paralyzed for his entire life and was never able to stand upright on his legs, or sit for awhile on his bed, or even move his hand or foot a bit.

This unfortunate paralyzed man was looked after by his mother and brother. And when he happened to collect a little money through the alms of other Christians, he would give it again as alms through the hands of his mother and brother. Servulus had no education whatever; despite this, however, he had purchased books of Holy Scripture, and whoever visited to keep him company - various pious people - he would persistently prevail upon to read aloud to him from Scripture. In this manner he succeeded, though wholly unlettered, in learning the Holy Scriptures by heart and using them for the benefit of his soul. And so, with spiritual contentment and gallantry, he endured his pain and suffering, hymning and glorifying God, day and night.

When the time came for Servulus' great forbearance to be rewarded by God, for him to depart the temporal for the eternal, the first thing to happen was that the pain in his limbs ceased. And as soon as he saw that death was already upon him, he asked the people whom he had taken in and sheltered to get up from their seats and to chant with him to God, in anticipation of the departure of his soul. Then suddenly, as the dying man was singing with them, he stopped his friends from chanting and said to them in a voice filled with fear: "Quiet! Do you not hear hymns resounding from Heaven?" Having, in the throes of death, thus turned his attention to these hymns, which the ears of his heart vividly heard with delight, his soul was freed from his body.

After the departure of his soul from the body, the place was filled with such fragrance that all those present smelled it. From this it is obvious that the departing soul was received in the heavens by those who were heard singing. At this moving event was present one of our own monks, who is still alive and who, when asked of it, says with tears: "Until we buried the body of that blessed man, this sweet fragrance never left our noses at all."

## **Most Holy Theotokos, Save Us!**

*O Mary, thou sacred dwelling of the Lord, raise us fallen into a bottomless pit of despair, wrongdoing and affliction; for thou art the salvation and succor and powerful advocate of those that have sinned, and thou dost save thy servants. (Tone 1, Matins, sessional hymn)*

Sometimes something becomes so familiar to us that we no longer hear what is said. This was brought to mind when a non-Orthodox attended a Divine Liturgy in an Orthodox Church recently. His question was, "How can Mary the Mother of Jesus, save us?" He said that the priest intoned the plea at the end of the service.

It is true that at the conclusion of most of our services the priest intones, "Most Holy Theotokos, save us!" The visitor to the Church, along with many other people, did not understand what is meant by this. To ask the Mother of God to save us is an ancient and revered Christian custom. By this expression we do not address the Virgin Mary as our Redeemer. Our only Saviour and Redeemer is Jesus Christ. The Orthodox Church has never had a notion of the Mother of God as a Redemtrix. We ask the Virgin for her prayers for our salvation from perils and sin. We ask her to save us from those things that impede our ascent toward salvation in Christ.

The word "save" as we use it in reference to the Mother of God, is found in a number of places in Sacred Scripture. St. Peter in the Acts of the Apostles (2:40) exclaims, Save yourselves from this on toward generation. In I Cor. 1:21 we read that it pleased God through the foolishness of preaching to save them who believe. We also find in Romans 11:14 that St. Paul, speaking to the Jews, says that he hopes by his example to save some of them.

Now let us discuss these references. Needless to say, St. Peter does not suggest that Christians can save themselves. Certainly we do not replace Christ by "preaching" when we understand that preaching has saved believers. And, of course, when St. Paul expressed his desire to save his fellow Jews, he certainly is not, by this expression, taking the redemptive power of Christ.

As in our prayers to the Mother of God, we are using the word save in a special way. This in no way compromises our belief that Christ alone saves and redeems our souls.

From *The Orthodox Herald*, September 1994

### **Not of the World**

**Not in form or in outward figures lies the distinguishing mark of Christians. Most men think that the difference which distinguishes themselves from the world consists in a form and in figures; and lo! in mentality and understanding they are like the world, undergoing the same shaking and inconstancy of thought, and unbelief, and confusion, and disturbance, and fear as all other men. In outward form and appearance they differ from the world, and in a few points of religious ordinance; but in heart and mind they are bound with earthly bonds, never having acquired rest from God and the peace of the heavenly Spirit in their heart, because they never sought it from God, nor believed that He would vouchsafe these things to them.**

**It is in the renewing of the mind, and the peace of the thoughts, and the love and heavenly attachment for the Lord, that the new creation-the Christian-is distinguished from all the men of the world. This was the purpose of the Lord's coming: to vouchsafe these spiritual blessings to those who truly believe in Him. Christians have a glory and a beauty and a heavenly wealth which is beyond words, and it is won with pains, and sweat, and trials, and many conflicts, and all by the grace of God.**

- Saint Macarius the Great (+390)