



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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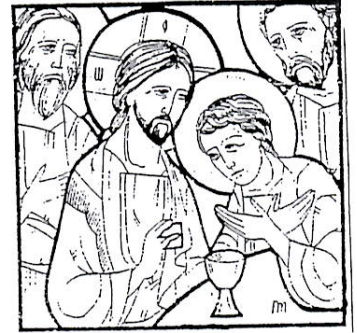
July 30, 2017

Apostles of the 70, Silas and Silvanus

Hieromartyr Valentine, Bishop of Terni, Italy (273)

St. Herman of Solovki (1479)

St. Angelina (Brancovic), Despotina of Serbia (16thC)



✠ **The Dormition Fast Begins Tuesday, August 1** ✠

✠ **Wednesday, August 2, 6:30pm Paraklysis Service**

➤ **Next Sunday is the Feast of the Transfiguration!**

➤ **Annual Parish Assembly – Sunday, September 17**

➤ **October 7/8, 2017 – St. Symeon's 40th Anniversary ~ with Archbishop Alexander**

The Theotokos is very much a type of every Christian soul.

When I see the image of the Theotokos in the eastern apse of the church, either with the Child in her womb, which is what the medallion shape signifies, or holding the Child, I see an image of every Christian soul in whom Christ has been born, in whom Christ has taken His place. As far as I know the first ecclesiastical author to have said this is St. Gregory of Nyssa in *On Virginity* where he says what took place in the Virgin physically or materially must or will take place in every Christian soul spiritually. There is a one-to-one correspondence between the actualization of Christ in the womb of the Virgin and the actualization of Christ in the soul of the believer. There are actually Icons of some Saints, such as St. Menas, standing in the classic orans (prayer) position with a medallion on his chest and the figure of Christ Emmanuel inside. It's rare, but it is seen.

St. Symeon the New Theologian, who knew the writings of St. Gregory, says that indeed there is one Theotokos—one human being with that title in a very unique and unrepeatable way—but all Christians are called to go on to become *theotoki*. The first time I read that I found it very striking. St. Symeon is famous for making very striking remarks and using very vivid imagery and this is one example. It's a very bold thing to say but it's certainly very true and powerful. Fr. Maximos Constas

Read the Gospel More Often

"I advise you to read the Gospel more often and longer, especially the Gospel of John. Read it so that only your ears hear it. Whether you understand it or not, read. The grace-filled words of the Gospel will mightily drive away boredom and despondency and bring comfort. Only read it more often and longer." ~ **St. Ambrose of Optina** (1891)

This and That

"Although the term "traditional" is helpful and may be preferred over "conservative," I think a more apt term for us "conservative, traditional, religionists" would be "sacramentalist." It certainly would prompt more inquiry from the curious: *"Now tell me, why do you call yourself a sacramentalist?"*

... The American attitude to tradition is simple. It is something to be tolerated but not revered. It is something we will put up with as long as it is fun and does not get in the way but there is nothing sacred about it and we will dump it in a heartbeat if we have a reason. There is, for Americans, no worse reason to do something, or not do something, because that is the way things have been in the past. *Novus Ordo Seclorum*. We are the new order in the world and the ways of the old mean nothing to us."

Charles Cosimano, Dreher blog comment

A Peculiar Self-Hatred ~ Pope Benedict XVI, Europe and Its Discontents

...One issue that is fundamental to all cultures: respect for that which another group holds sacred, especially respect for the sacred in the highest sense, for God, which one can reasonably expect to find even among those who are not willing to believe in God. When this respect is violated in a society, something essential is lost. In European society today, thank goodness, anyone who dishonors the faith of Israel, its image of God, or its great figures must pay a fine. The same holds true for anyone who dishonors the Koran and the convictions of Islam. But when it comes to Jesus Christ and that which is sacred to Christians, freedom of speech becomes the supreme good.

This case illustrates a peculiar Western self-hatred that is nothing short of pathological. It is commendable that the West is trying to be more open, to be more understanding of the values of outsiders, but it has lost all capacity for self-love. All that it sees in its own history is the despicable and the destructive; it is no longer able to perceive what is great and pure. What Europe needs is a new self-acceptance, a self-acceptance that is critical and humble, if it truly wishes to survive.

Multiculturalism, which is so passionately promoted, can sometimes amount to an abandonment and denial, a flight from one's own things. Multiculturalism teaches us to approach the sacred things of others with respect, but we can do this only if we ourselves are not estranged from the sacred, from God. With regard to others, it is our duty to cultivate within ourselves respect for the sacred and to show the face of the revealed God—the God who has compassion for the poor and the weak, for widows and orphans, for the foreigner; the God who is so human that he himself became man, a man who suffered, and who by his suffering with us gave dignity and hope to our pain. Unless we embrace our own heritage of the sacred, we will not only deny the identity of Europe. We will also fail in providing a service to others to which they are entitled. To the other cultures of the world, there is something deeply alien about the absolute secularism that is developing in the West. They are convinced that a world without God has no future. Multiculturalism itself thus demands that we return once again to ourselves.

- "The first task of the Church is not to make the world more just but to make the world more the world," theologian Stanley Hauerwas recently said in a UK lecture. "The Church is not a secondary political community. It is first and foremost that community that commands our ultimate loyalty, to know when the demonic has raised its head."

Unchastity: Fr. Lawrence Farley

God's love is unconditional. But love is not the same as approval—God loves me, but He does not approve of all of my choices, and because He loves me He calls me to repent of the sinful ones. God knows that certain choices lead to stability, health, happiness, and life, while other choices lead to instability, sickness, misery, and death. In His love He insists that I choose the former, and avoid sin. Sin is not simply a no-no, and God hates it not because He is irritable, unreasonable, mean, or feisty, but because He sees that embracing sin is never in one's best interests.

One form of sin is unchastity—i.e. any sexual activity before marriage. Sexual activity is a fire, which can only be safely contained in something strong, hard, and permanent—like a fire-place. If a fire is lit in the fire-place, then the house and its occupants will be warmed by it. If it is lit in the living room outside the fire-place, it will burn the house down. And here a miss is as good as a mile—lighting the fire very close to the fire-place but not actually in it is no better than lighting it across the room from the fire-place, for the resultant fire will still burn the place down. In the same way, sexual activity can only safely fulfill its function when contained in the strong, hard, and permanent vows of a marriage commitment—and for Christians, marriage involves the union of two opposites with the potential for personal and numerical growth—i.e. a family...

The main issue here is not homosexuality, but obedience to Christ, who simply disallows His disciples to be sexually active outside of marriage, and who defines marriage as the union of man and woman. Our own culture has for a generation considered Christ's expectation of chastity an impossible demand, but our generation is both historically myopic and lacking in courage. Previous eras assumed that life-long chastity, though difficult, was not impossible. We have been trained to regard all our desires as "natural" (i.e. legitimate) by definition, and also as irresistible. In fact they are neither, and so part of our parental counsel to our adolescent children must teach them that. Our culture gives everything a sexual tinge and declares that sexual abstinence is unhealthy, psychologically morbid, all but impossible, and more than a bit pathetic. We must teach all our fourteen year olds that in this instance our culture is insane.

"In these spiritually confused times, when many are being led astray by social norms that employ the pretensions of compassion to abandon the creation order and the teachings of Christ, which are the only true source of authentic compassion and genuine spiritual healing, there can be no room for ambiguity or false witness on such critical matters. Only the Gospel, which Christ proclaims in His Church, provides true spiritual medicine; all deviations from its life-creating message only contribute to the wounds and illness of an already-beleaguered society."

— Synod of Bishops, ROCOR

My Cane By Joseph Sobran, May 15, 2007

"Explaining the phenomenon of praise is a real challenge for the Darwinian."

Two years ago, after foot surgery, I started walking with a cane. The ankle has healed, but I've kept the cane. I like it. It helps my balance, it's funny, and it strengthens my faith. In this allegedly Darwinian world, where life is a ruthless competition for survival, my cane is magic. It causes young people, fitter than I am for physical existence, to call me "sir" and hold doors and show me a respect I've never enjoyed before. Nobody ever told me a stick of wood could exert such spiritual power. I think I'll keep it.

Admit it, you atheists: the sight of an old geezer with a cane brings out something sweet in you that, according to Darwin, can't be there. The truth is that love for others is a profound instinct, a powerful atavism so to speak, harder to resist than hate.

Of course we all want to survive. But we want just as strongly for others to survive too. Darwinism can't explain the environmentalist movement (though I think it's misguided). Nor can it explain why we write wills giving all we can to those who outlive us. Nor the Bill Gates foundation. Nor the sacrifices of parents who give their lives for their children. Nor the willingness of some people to suffer so that other people won't kill unborn children. Nor nuns and priests who consecrate themselves to God in lives of charity and chastity (the pay isn't all that good). Nor a hundred other forms of altruism.

Altruism sticks in the craws of the reductionists who think man is, and ought to be, selfish. Ayn Rand tried in vain to persuade us that Moses and Jesus were wrong, that altruism is bad, and that selfishness is a virtue. She failed to make much of a dent in the popularity of St. Francis of Assisi. Frustrating, isn't it? We're all selfish by nature, but we're so sheepish about it that we reserve our most fervent admiration for people like the man who, without even stopping to think, throws himself in front of an onrushing subway train to save the life of a total stranger. If, rationally speaking, he's a fool, nobody says so; or even thinks so.

Animals may do that sort of thing for their own young, but not for other animals they've never met. Man is separated from the beasts by the faculty of reason, of course — the point the old philosophers used to harp on; but I prefer to stress his capacity for praise and appreciation, disinterested joy in things outside himself. A boy in love doesn't just desire the girl; he may not even desire her at all. He simply marvels that so lovely a creature can exist, as he may marvel at Mozart's music or Shakespeare's poetry, things that offer nothing beyond themselves to desire.

As I write these words, I'm listening to a stunning recording: Laurence Olivier reading the Psalms in the King James translation. They tempt me to superlatives, of course, but the real point is that I can't think of, or even imagine, anything comparable in the animal kingdom. There are no analogies. Bulls don't praise cows, let alone their Creator.

Explaining the phenomenon of praise is a real challenge for the Darwinian; it doesn't appear to confer any particular advantage in that ruthless struggle for survival we're always hearing about. I can understand why atheists think religion does a lot of evil, because sometimes it surely does. But they never explain why man wastes so much time and energy in activities they insist are pointless and have no biological utility. If we found all the cattle in the pasture dancing and mooing in unison, wouldn't we be curious about why they were behaving in this extraordinary fashion?

I suppose killing your own children makes some sort of sense from an atheistic and Darwinian point of view. If survival is a ruthless competition, your kids are your competitors, right? No wonder Darwin's legions are in favor of this "choice." It accords perfectly, methinks, with Ayn Rand's "virtue of selfishness."

"My Cane" by Joe Sobran was published originally by Griffin Internet Syndicate on May 15, 2007.

St. Porphyrios *of Kavsoalyvia* on the Jesus Prayer

"And what are you looking for regarding prayer, like a recipe to prepare food or medicine? I told you to only seek the salvation of your soul."

In other words, you should try to become an inheritor of the eternal Kingdom of the Heavens. And everything else you should leave to the judgment of God. I remind you, again, to "seek first the Kingdom of the Heavens."

Is this not enough for you? If this is not enough for you, or if you are not satisfied completely, restrict yourself to noetic prayer. **For me, the "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me", says everything.** And whatever else from that which you are saying. It is enough to say it with faith and determination.

And of course, at that hour, perceive that you have before you, the crucified Jesus. And listen. The hour that you saw it, turn your *nous* here, towards me. And I will understand your thought, and will pray with you for you. This is the best. I recommend you to do this...

"Believe that just as the most bitter medicine drives out poisonous creatures, so prayer joined to fasting drives evil thoughts away." Amma (Mother) Syncletica of Alexandria

"GOD does not accept prayers, fasting, or mortification without reverence, good order and humble-mindedness." St. Joseph of Volokalomsk (1515)

"THE HOLY CHURCH cries out: fasting is not just avoiding food, but putting away all evil, controlling the tongue from idle-talking and gossip, forbearing from anger, and abstaining from lust, falsehood and flattery. Whoever fasts in this way, his fast is pleasing to God." St. Anthony of Optina (1865)

If someone has repented once of a sin, and again does the same sin, this is a sign that he has not been cleansed for the causes of the sin, wherefrom, as from a root, the shoots spring forth again. St. Basil the Great

HOMILY ~ **About Judgment and Condemnation** ~ St. Nikolai of Serbia

"Whoever believes in Him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned" (St. John 3:18).

He who believes in Christ the Lord is not condemned for he alone judges himself and directs his footsteps toward the light, which goes before him. As a man in profound darkness who adjusts his footsteps according to the candle in his hand, thus, is the one who believes in Christ, i.e., who has embarked after Christ as after a light in the darkness of life.

He who does not believe "has already been condemned." That is, he who does not have a guide on the unknown path just as soon as he took the first step, lost his way and strayed. Who does not believe in Christ is condemned to ignorance, to weakness, to anger, to staggering along the crooked and winding road and intertwining roads, to vice, to despair, and perhaps even to suicide. He is condemned in two worlds: in this world to a senseless physical and deceiving existence and in the other world, to eternal damnation! O how dark is the path of the children of unbelief and how deep is the abyss between their every first and third steps!

Offering Incense to God

The offering of incense to God is a practice which dates back to the time of Moses when God gave commands as to how to burn it:

"You shall make an altar to burn incense upon... And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it; every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall burn it, and when Aaron sets up the lamps in the evening, he shall burn it, a perpetual incense before the Lord throughout your generations. You shall offer no unholy incense thereon" (Ex. 20:1,7-9).

The burning of incense as an offering to God will continue even to the end of the world, as revealed by God to St. John the Theologian:

"And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censor, and he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne; and the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God" (Rev. 8: 3-5).

Because of the command and revelation of God regarding the offering of incense, the Church uses incense as an acceptable offering. Families as the family church may use incense as an offering pleasing to God. On Saturday evenings, on the eves of Feasts and on other occasions, the house is 'blessed' with incense. The head of the household carries the hand censor with burning incense throughout the entire dwelling and makes the sign of the cross in each room and over the beds. Some Orthodox have the custom of saying with each sign of the Cross thus made: "This room (or bed) is blessed by the sign of the Holy Cross." The person censuring is accompanied by all members of the household chanting "Holy God...", the Troparion of the Feast or Sunday or other appropriate ode, and bearing icons or candles. The procession begins at the icon corner, proceeds through the entire dwelling and returns to the icon corner. The hand censor, charcoal (for burning the incense) and the incense may be purchased at some parish churches or from monastic communities. The charcoal and incense ashes should not be discarded in the garbage, but should be put along the foundation of the building, buried in the ground or put in some other appropriate place where no one will step.

Feast days are celebrated by Orthodox families as special and joyous occasions. These days are not regarded as normal days and for this reason Orthodox homes often are decorated especially for the Feast. The decorating of the home and icon corner can be a project for the parents together with the children. The decorations themselves, the decorating, and the blessing of the house with the hand censor, all place emphasis on the specialness and the importance of the Feast. These are not to be surpassed by any secular celebrations at home, for after all, the Orthodox home is a family church and God is at the center of its existence. There is nothing so empty as a Christmas celebrated, as many westerners do, so that the house decorations, the meal, the gifts, or the family-get-together are the center and reason for the celebration. In other words, Christ has been made alien to the celebration.

From Marriage and the Christian Home. Rev. Michael B. Henning.
Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, NY.

A Better World is Within You

July 17, 2017 · Fr. Stephen Freeman, *Glory to God for All Things Blog*

“We must eliminate poverty, oppression, racism...”

How is it possible to disagree with the demand for justice? Who would not agree to end all suffering? How can we not commit our lives to bringing about a better world?

The desire for justice and an end to suffering are deeply seductive in our modern world. Being told that these are false desires flies in the face of almost everything that characterizes our present culture. On their surface, these desires seem deeply religious. But as religions go, they are married more to hell than to heaven. And, just to keep my readers a little off-balance, I will start by thinking of this from a Buddhist perspective.

An easy summary of the teachings of the Buddha is to say that he offered a way to escape the world of suffering. It is possible to critique his method and his conclusions. But, prior to the modern period, no one would have criticized his observations regarding suffering in this world.

Siddhārtha Gautama lived some centuries before Christ. Disease and death were unavoidable, medical help of but little benefit. A large part of any population would not live to see adulthood. His story was that his parents sheltered him from all this. His spiritual journey began when he left that safety and first encountered old age, suffering and death. His experience posed the essential religious question: what of suffering?

It can be said that every religion in the world addresses the problem of suffering. They vary in their accounts of suffering's origin and of the means of addressing it. But all recognize that the problem of suffering is at the very core of human existence. The Modern Project can itself be seen as a religious response to the problem of suffering. However, in a strange twist of Christian eschatology, modernity assumes that suffering, sorrow and injustice can be ended. And, if those things cannot be utterly obliterated, then the world is still rightly engaged in the ever-increasing pursuit of that goal.

A common point in any endeavor is that the first 90-95 percent of a project is the most easily accomplished. The last 5 percent or so, the completion that encompasses perfection, is the most pernicious and persistent. I have friends in Rotary International. One of them was the primary leader in Rotary's efforts to eradicate polio. I recall the incredible efforts in my childhood that removed polio from the list of American dangers. The same work has successfully reduced its existence to only three countries. And yet, year by year, it persists. Completion is a very difficult thing.

Eliminating a disease is but a little thing. There are no vaccines against racism and poverty, no medicines that protect us from anger and greed. Indeed, even our drive against disease has sometimes resulted in new and unforeseen disease. Current studies suggest that our overly antiseptic world is producing allergies and other intractable problems. We may need dirt more than we know.

Christianity does not envision a world without suffering and injustice, except as a final gift from God in the Eschaton. God has not created an evil world, but neither has He removed evil from the world or destroyed disease. Christ tramples down Death by death, but does not thereby exempt His followers from enduring the same: we're all going to die. His invitation to take up the Cross is a blank invitation to share in His sufferings.

I have written before about the deception of “building a better world.” Perhaps it would be proper to say that it's fine to work for a “slightly better world,” or “improvements.” This is similar to saying that a glass of wine a day is good for your health. However, it doesn't take much more than that to harm your health. The drive for improvement is itself fraught with problems.

Justice is an insatiable goal. Nothing can ever be fair enough, equal enough, right enough. Real or imagined, injustice remains and will remain until God alone makes it otherwise. In the modern world, the pendulum swings. Revolutions destroy empires and eradicate oppressors, always replacing them with new empires and new faces of oppression. Every swing of the pendulum seems to leave justice at a remove.

Christ said, "The Kingdom of God does not come with observation.... the Kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:20-21). It is only with the apprehension of the inner Kingdom that human beings can be made to understand just how difficult the Kingdom's coming truly is. If I can't bring forth the Kingdom within my own heart, surely I shouldn't imagine that by some act of force or law I could bring it forth within the larger world.

All of this being true, the virtues required for life in this world are not a passion for justice and zeal for a better world. Patient endurance and the ability to bear suffering are of much greater use. For the Church, an abiding question must be, "How do we become the kind of community that can support people in the sufferings of their lives?" This is not an acquiescence to suffering. It is the sober recognition that the limits of our power to remake the world require us to learn how to live in the world. Our hope is in the Kingdom of God, whose coming is sheer gift and wonder.

Fr. Stephen's follow-up comment: "At a certain point in modern history – perhaps identifiable with the early Whigs in England, the movement from inner transformation to social transformation began to take shape. The earlier efforts of the Puritans and a few others presaged this change. The first great, and largely successful effort of the Whigs (which were strongly allied with the Evangelical, Low Church side of the Church of England) was the abolition of slavery. Women's suffrage followed it but was much later in succeeding. A rather disastrous effort, however, was the movement for prohibition of alcohol. When it succeeded in America, its collateral damage was far worse than the problem it sought to cure – much like today's misguided "War on Drugs."

It is worth research and reading and examining early primary documents surrounding these various movements. Their religious fervor and assurance that these changes would usher in a new world are astounding – particularly now that we have the perspective of hindsight. Of course, these movements were minor when compared to the more radical vision of the Marxists. Their "better world" included the slaughter of many millions and a very sad, failed experiment.

Today's angry rhetoric surrounding race, gender, etc., is a direct heir of these movements, with much less connection to reality or more grounding in mere ideology. The success of the abolition of slavery, and women's suffrage are frequently trotted out as examples and a proper paradigm for social action. It is a very antiseptic reading of the history of the various social change movements. You have 20 tests in the course of a semester. You got an A on two of them. The other 18 ranged from D's to F's. You only talk about the two and proclaim yourself an academic success. We need to read much, much more history."

De-Christianization: "It is in their cultural and moral diseases that Europe and America certify that they share the same chromosomes, that they belong to one culture and one civilization. The same traits of decrepitude on both sides of the Atlantic include the primary cause, the loss of religious faith, and a number of secondary ones... The loss of meaningful religious impulse started with the Renaissance, made a quantum leap in the Enlightenment, and was near-complete when the guns fell silent in the West in 1918. The result is that, in today's Britain, France, or Germany, more people pray in mosques on Fridays than in churches on Sundays. Two thirds of Americans still define themselves as "Christian," but those who have no religion of any kind dominate the academy, the media, the entertainment industry, "the arts," business, and politics. De-Christianization creates neurotic, addictive people, prone to excess and self-abuse. Young Westerners in particular are estranged from their parents, ignorant of their culture, ashamed of their history." - Srdja Trifkovic