

Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

3101 Clairmont Ave. Birmingham, AL 35205

Church Tel. 930-9681 / 907-9447

Visit stsymeon.com

✘ December 16, 2012 ✘

Sunday of the Forefathers

Holy Prophet Haggai (500 B.C.)

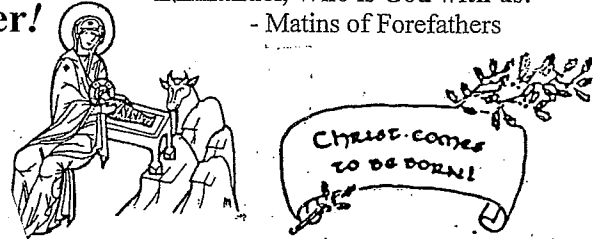
Blessed Empress Theophania (894)

Come, let us all faithfully celebrate the Fathers before the Law! Our yearly commemoration of Abraham and those with him! Let us rightly honor the tribe of Judah, and praise the Youths in Babylon who quenched the flames of the furnace for they were an image of the Trinity! With them, let us praise Daniel, and holding fast to the predictions of the Prophets! With Isaiah let us cry aloud: Behold, a Virgin shall conceive in her womb and bear a Son, Emmanuel, Who is God with us!
- Matins of Forefathers

⇒ *Many Years! Newly-Illumined child Mary Boyer!*

This Week:

- ✘ Tues. Dec. 18, 6:30pm ~ Inquirer's Class
- ✘ Wed. Dec. 19, 6:30pm ~ Prefeast Vespers



Baptisms:

- ✘ Sat. December 22, 3:00pm - Matthew & Leah Vest & their two sons Jude & Lucas.

Nativity Services:

- 🔔 Monday, December 24: 10:00am Royal Hours of Nativity
3:00pm ~ Holy Supper / 6:00pm ~ Christmas Eve Vigil
- 🔔 Tuesday, December 25: 10:00am Nativity Divine Liturgy 🔔

Make Your Heart a Manger

✘ So make your heart into a manger for the newborn Lord, and surround it with holy dispositions – a will for salvation, active assimilation of the whole economy of our salvation, peace in the Lord and a grateful doxology to Him. This will be the highest occupation of your spirit in these days. It will sanctify your feast days, and at the same time will allow you to fulfill strictly the words of the song: Christ comes from Heaven, go to meet Him!

St. Theophan the Recluse

REFLECTION on St. Ignatius of Antioch

The holy Martyrs, seized with the love of Christ, were like unquenchable flames. This love eased their sufferings and made their deaths sweet. St. Chrysostom says of St. Ignatius: "He put off his body with as much ease as one takes off his clothes." Traveling to Rome to his death, Ignatius feared only one thing: that Christians would somehow prevent his martyrdom for Christ, by their prayers to God or in some outward manner. Therefore he continually implored them, in writing and in speech, not to do this. "Forgive me," he said. "I know what is for my benefit. I but begin to be a disciple of Christ when I desire nothing, either visible or invisible, save to attain Christ. May every diabolical torture come upon me: fire, crucifixion, wild beasts, the sword, tearing asunder, the crushing of my bones, and the dismemberment of my whole body – only that I may receive Jesus Christ! It is better for me to die for Christ than to reign to the ends of the earth.... My love is nailed to the Cross, and there is no fire of love in me for any earthly thing."

When he was brought to the circus, he turned to the people with these words: "Citizens of Rome, know that I am not being punished for any crime, neither have I been condemned to death for any transgression, but rather for the sake of my God, by Whose love I am overcome and Whom I insatiably desire. I am His wheat, and the teeth of the wild beasts will grind me to be His pure bread." When he had been devoured by the wild beasts, by God's Providence his heart remained among the bones. When the unbelievers cut open the Saint's heart, they saw inside, inscribed in golden letters, the name Jesus Christ

Pearls of the Holy Fathers (9.1)

Bringing doxology to the One born of the Virgin in Church hymns and spiritual songs, we must, outside the Church as well, unceasingly praise Him and give Him thanks for His ineffable lovingkindness to us sinners, who are atoned by His honourable blood and who have received through this promise life eternal, blessed, and unceasing.

St. Ambrose of Optina

If we wear our heavenly robe, we shall not be found naked, but if we are found not wearing this garment, what shall we do, brethren? We, even we also, shall hear the voice that says, "Cast them into outer darkness; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." (Matt. 22:13) And, brethren, there will be great shame in store for us, if, after having worn this habit for so long, we are found in the hour of need not having put on the wedding garment. Oh what compunction will seize us! What darkness will fall upon us, in the presence of our fathers and our brethren, who will see us being tortured by the angels of punishment!

Abba Dioscorus

Let us consider, then, brethren, of what matter we were formed, who we are, and with what nature we came into the world, and how He Who formed and created us brought us into His world from the darkness of a grave, and prepared his benefits for us before we were born. Since, therefore, we have everything from Him, we ought in everything to give Him thanks, to Whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. **St. Clement of Rome**

Prove your love and zeal for wisdom in actual deeds. **St. Callistus Xanthopoulos**

What purposelessness, oh the deceit of life; truly in vain does each man vex himself, and truly blessed and thrice-blessed are those who have left everything for the Lord, that they may attain the good things announced in the Gospels. For what profit will it be for a man to enjoy the whole world, but lose his soul, to which the whole universe is not equivalent? All the splendor of man is like the blossom of grass. For the grass departs and the blossom dies, but the word of the Lord abideth for ever.

Abbot Nikon

What, then, are the things which are being prepared for those who wait for Him? The Creator and Father of the ages, the All-holy One, Himself knows their greatness and beauty. Let us then strive to be found among the number of those that wait, that we may receive a share of the promised gifts.

St. Clement of Rome

Even if an angel should indeed appear to you, do not receive him but humiliate yourself, saying, 'I am not worthy to see an angel, for I am a sinner.'

Apophthegmata Patrum (Anonymous Sayings)

We should zealously cultivate watchfulness, my brethren; and when, our mind purified in Christ Jesus, we are exalted by the vision it confers, we should review our sins and our former life, so that shattered and humbled at the thought of them we may never lose the help of Jesus Christ our God in the invisible battle.

St. Hesychius the Presbyter

**A Series of Commentaries on the Great Old Testament Saints ~
From St. Nikolai of Serbia in his *Prologue of Ochrid*.**

HOMILY ~ On Melchisedek

“Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchisedek” (Psalm 110:4, Hebrews 7:17, 21).

Oh, how many hidden and faithful servants does the Lord have who serve Him day and night! Oh, how many shining comets are seen by men to cross the starry heavens, which appear unexpectedly, glistening, and then are lost in the vastness of the universe, leaving only tales about them! The righteous Abraham, with his descendants, is known to us like the starry heavens over our heads, but Melchisedek is known to us like a shining comet, which suddenly appeared, was bowed down to us by the starry heavens, and was again hidden in the unknown. Who is this Melchisedek? The King of Salem ... the priest of the Most-high God (Genesis 14:18). He brought bread and wine to Abraham; he blessed Abraham, and Abraham gave him one-tenth of all that was his. When Abraham was so greatly blessed by God, how much more blessed was he who blessed Abraham? Oh, how unfathomable are the depths of God's providence! A man's thought extends from today until tomorrow, but the thought of God extends to the very end of time.

According to the words of the Holy Apostle Paul, Melchisedek prefigures the Lord Jesus Christ Himself (Hebrews 7:10). For while the forefather Abraham was a wonderful and God-pleasing peasant, this Melchisedek was both a king and priest, as our Lord is King and Priest. Melchisedek offered Abraham bread and wine, and our Lord offered His Body and Blood to the entire human race. Abraham bowed down to Melchisedek and gave him a willing tribute. Abraham's true descendants, the Christians, bow down to the Lord Jesus and offer Him their willing sacrifice, a gift in return for a gift, the gift of His Body and Blood on the Cross. And who shall declare His generation? (Isaiah 53:8). This refers to both Christ and Melchisedek. Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it and was glad (John 8:56). Thus spoke the Lord to the Jews. How did Abraham see it? He saw it in the Spirit. God revealed it to him, and he also saw the prefiguration of Christ in this glorious and wonderful Melchisedek, king, priest and servant of the Most-High God.

HOMILY – On Abraham

“I am but dust and ashes” (Genesis 18:27).

These are the words that the righteous Abraham spoke of himself. Brethren, ridiculous are those people who pride themselves on their association with worldly princes and noblemen and begin to think highly of themselves. Abraham was found worthy to converse with the Eternal and Almighty King. Nevertheless, he remained unwavering in his humility, calling himself dust and ashes. Who was this Abraham, that he was found worthy of so much of God's favor in his lifetime and praise after his death, from the Apostle (Galatians 3, Hebrews 11), and even from the Lord Christ Himself (Luke 16:22, John 8:39)? He was a peasant who possessed all the virtues, living always according to the Law of God, a man with a firm faith in God, a lover of justice, hospitable, compassionate, courageous, obedient, pure and humble. However, Abraham is especially glorified for his faith, a powerful faith. Abraham was one hundred years old when God told him that his wife, barren until then, would bear a son, and he believed. And even before Sarah had given birth to Isaac, God said to Abraham: I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth (Genesis 13:16). Abraham believed and doubted not. And when an only son was born to Abraham, God commanded him, as a test, to offer his only son as a sacrifice. Abraham was prepared to do this, had God not turned him from it at the last moment. How complete was this wonderful man's faith and obedience to God! Therefore God blessed him and made him glorious on earth and in heaven. Brethren, blessed are they who, without hesitation, believe in God and fulfill His holy commandments. The blessing of God will accompany them in both worlds.

HOMILY – On Isaac

“And the Lord appeared unto him the same night, and said, I am the God of Abraham thy father: fear not, for I am with thee, and will bless thee” (Genesis 26:24).

Brethren, from time immemorial, the path upon which the righteous walk has always been difficult. From time immemorial, they have been hard pressed either by those who do not believe in God or by those who maintain an incorrect belief. Abel was hard pressed by his brother Cain; Noah and Lot, by a completely corrupt generation; and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, by the pagans. However, God does not forsake the righteous to walk the difficult path alone. This we also see with Isaac: *I am the God of Abraham thy father; fear not.* Isaac understood these very meaningful words. By these words, God encouraged and reminded him. He was saying: “Because of Abraham, I will bless thee also; and, as I protected Abraham among the pagans, so in a like manner will I protect thee.” And further: “Be faithful to Me as was Abraham thy father.” Isaac followed the example of his father and did not turn away from God at any time in his life. Isaac was a farmer and a cattle-breeder as was his father; he was righteous and meek, avoiding strife with men and doing good for people. *We saw certainly that the Lord was with thee* (Genesis 26:28), as his haters and persecutors finally had to admit. And Isaac was made worthy that God be called His God: just as God was called the God of Abraham, so later He was called the God of Isaac.

HOMILY- On Jacob

“For I have seen God face to face and my life is preserved” (Genesis 32:30).

The God of Abraham and Isaac is also the God of Jacob the faithful, the obedient, the merciful and the meek. The meek beholder of God, Jacob, can be called the “one who saw God.” For in truth he was meek, and he saw God and spoke with God, and he saw the angels of God and the ladder from earth to heaven. By his meekness he defeated Laban his father-in-law, and Esau his brother; by his meekness he made peace between his wives, Leah and Rachel; for his meekness he was even dear to pharaoh. Jacob's meekness is a prefiguration of the meekness of Christ. Blessed are the meek, said the Lord, for they shall inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5). These words were also realized in Jacob. He inherited the land of his fathers; his descendants were delivered from Egypt and inherited the Promised Land; through Christ the Lord, his descendant according to the flesh, he inherited the whole earth, that is, the Church of God which spread over the entire world. I have seen God face to face. Jacob saw God in the form of man but not as true man. And even this vision was only a prefiguring of the true Incarnation of God as man. And my life is preserved. His soul was preserved from fear and from every unrighteousness. If Jacob was preserved by only seeing a vision of God, how much easier is it for us to be preserved who know God as true man and as the God-man.

The Voice of Our Own Souls

✘ “The voice of the readings in church, the hymns, prayers and supplications, is the voice of our own souls, pouring forth from the acknowledgment and feeling of our spiritual needs and requirements; it is the voice of all mankind acknowledging and feeling its poverty, its accursedness, its sinfulness, the necessity of a Savior, the necessity of gratitude and praise, for the innumerable benefits and the infinite perfections of God. Wonderfully beautiful are these prayers and hymns; they are the breathing of the Holy Spirit.” **St. John of Kronstadt**

God's Second Gift of Grace

✘ If from the start we had wanted to keep the commandments and to remain as we were when baptized, we would not have fallen into so many sins or have needed the trials and tribulations of repentance. If we so wish, however, God's second gift of grace--repentance--can lead us back to our former beauty. **St. Peter of Damascus**

From The Spiritual Counsels of Father John of Kronstadt:

At the approach of a great feast you must watch yourself with particular care. The enemy endeavours beforehand to chill your heart towards the subject, the event, celebrated; so that you will not honor it by whole-heartedly considering its reality. He acts upon us through the weather, or through the food and drink we have taken, or through his own arrows, thrown plentifully at the heart and inflaming the entire man, at which time evil, impure and blasphemous thoughts occur to us, and we feel thoroughly averse to the solemnity. We must overcome the enemy by forcing ourselves to meditate and pray devoutly.

HUMILITY - this is something great and divine, and the path to it is to consider yourself below everyone. What does it mean, to consider yourself lower than everyone? Not to notice the sins of others. Look at your own sins. Pray unceasingly.

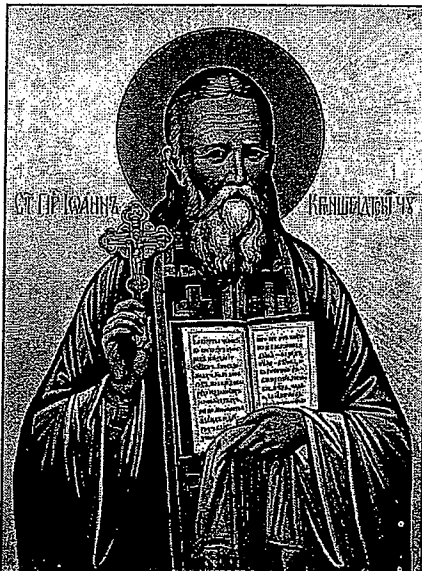
St. Nikon of Optina

Many people are under the impression that the Saints are far from us. They are indeed far from those who have, of their own will, withdrawn themselves, but they are very near to those who keep the commandments of Christ and have the grace of the Holy Spirit. In the heavens, all live and all are sustained by the Holy Spirit; but the Spirit is the same also upon the earth. The Holy Spirit unites all men and that is why the Saints are near to us. When we pray to them, by the Holy Spirit they hear our prayers and our souls feel that they are praying for us.

Saint Silouan of Mount Athos (+1938)

Know your saints . . .

Saint John of Kronstadt (1829 - 1908)



ONE of the most beloved Orthodox saints of the early 20th century, St. John of Kronstadt was born into a poor family in 1829 in the little village of Soura. He considered being a missionary to Siberia, but instead he came to the conclusion that there were many people around him who were as unenlightened as any pagan. So he decided to work for their salvation, after a dream in answer to prayer,

in which he saw himself officiating in some unknown cathedral.

He was ordained priest on the 12th of December 1855. Appointed as assistant priest at Saint Andrew's Cathedral, Kronstadt, when he entered it for the first time he recognized it as the church he had seen in his dream; and there, first as assistant priest, and afterwards as rector, he served throughout the fifty-three years of his ministry.

The inhabitants of Kronstadt, a naval base situated on an island at the mouth of the Neva, not far from Saint Petersburg, were in 1855 drawn largely from the very worst elements of the population of the capital, and much of the place was a festering sore of sin and filth, of poverty and misery, of disease and starvation. Father John, whose predecessors, apparently, had hardly even dared to penetrate the worst parts of the town, spent much of his time there, striving to heal bodies and souls alike, attracting to himself first the children, and then, through them, their parents. Often he found no time to eat until the late evening, and even then he would sometimes be summoned out again, and not return before the small hours; he gave away his own shoes, he gave away the housekeeping money: his wife gradually accustomed herself to it, and finally became something like his keeper.

Early each morning, after a period of intense prayer before an icon at home, he would go to church and there sing the Liturgy in a deep, clear, and powerful voice. He usually celebrated the Divine Liturgy or at least received Communion every day. His church was packed to the doors, Sundays and weekdays alike. The great cathedral of Saint Andrew at Kronstadt could hold **seven thousand people**, and when Father John celebrated the liturgy it was so crowded that, as the Russian saying has it, "even an apple could not have found room to fall to the ground."

An object of Father John's concern and labor was the removal of the widespread poverty that afflicted Kronstadt. At first he gave these beggars money for food and shelter, but he soon came to see that this was not merely useless, but positively harmful. In 1868 he conceived the idea of founding a House of Industry, comprising a number of workshops, a dormitory, a refectory, a dispensary, and a primary school. He formed a committee, and appealed for funds. His appeal was answered by rich and poor from all over Russia, and the House of Industry was founded in 1873. Father John administered a total of over \$25,000 a year in numerous charities, half of it in Kronstadt.

Father John's health began to decline in 1906, and towards the end of 1908 he became very ill, and was unable to get any rest from his sufferings, except during his daily Liturgy, which he continued to celebrate as long as possible, doing so for the last time on December 10. Having with great difficulty received Communion for the last time, he died on the morning of the 20th of December. His body was taken solemnly to Saint Petersburg, and there interred in the great church of the convent of Saint John, which he had founded. At least sixty thousand people attended the funeral.

He who in this life cared so much for his children, and interceded for them so powerfully, has not abandoned them: the stream of healing, both bodily and spiritual, through his prayers, has not ceased to flow. During the few years between his death and the catastrophe of the Communist revolution, which he foretold, pilgrims journeyed to his tomb. Now the pilgrims come in even greater numbers.

St. Ignatius of Antioch ~ BEING GOD-BEARERS

One of the most important Saints of the early Church was Saint Ignatius of Antioch, whose memory we celebrate on December 20th. Born in Syria, probably around the year 35, St. Ignatius became a student of St. John the Apostle and Evangelist and was appointed Bishop of Antioch (a position he held for decades) with the consent and encouragement of both Saints Peter and Paul.

One reason why he is so important is because of the seven writings he left behind (letters to six churches and one to St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna). In these letters, Ignatius spoke on many theological matters. In his writings, St. Ignatius demonstrated phenomenal wisdom, insight, and a clear understanding of the faith, of the person of Christ, of the Virgin Birth of the Lord, of the Eucharist, of Church order, as well as many other topics. For example, in his letter to the faithful of the Church in Smyrna [1], he writes that Christ is, "truly of the race of David according to the flesh, but Son of God by the Divine will and power, truly born of a virgin."

Ignatius is also important because he lived the faith daily, doing so in a way that served as an example to many others – even though his example of Christian faith was not always well received. Living in a time of persecutions, Ignatius suffered arrest and imprisonment. It was during his travels to Rome (as a prisoner), and his time in Rome (awaiting his own death), when he wrote his letters and when his firm and unshakable faith in Christ was witnessed by so many fellow Christians.

Saint Ignatius is often called "Theoforos" ["Godbearer"], and for a few reasons. One example is due to his constant teaching that one who bears Christ within himself is "Theoforos." Another example is the commonly accepted belief (even from the time of the early Church) that he was the child picked up into the arms of Jesus, used as an example by the Lord when speaking of the humility of a child as a prerequisite to entering into Heaven [Matthew 18:1-5].

As St. Ignatius was being led to his death, he courageously insisted that none of the faithful interfere. He was eventually placed among lions who, after devouring the good Saint's body, left only bones and his unscathed heart. According to tradition, on the way to his own persecution, Ignatius continually repeated the name of Jesus Christ and, when asked why, he responded that Christ's Name was written in his heart. After examining his remains, some pagans cut open his heart and, to their astonishment, found the name "Jesus Christ" inscribed inside Ignatius' heart in gold letters!

Saint Ignatius died in Rome, probably around the year 107, and – even after his death – continued to appear to many faithful. From the writings of this spiritually powerful Saint we are reminded that we are called to be perfect in faith and love toward Jesus Christ, "for these are the beginning and end of life – faith is the beginning and love is the end – and the two being found in unity are God."

As we come closer to the Feast of Christ's Nativity, we would do well to remember the life of St. Ignatius. He never allowed anything to pull him away from a fervent and loving relationship with Christ. That is why he tells us: "The tree is manifest from its fruit; so they that profess to be Christ's shall be seen through their actions."

Two from St. John of Kronstadt: On Faith and Humble Submission

✠ "Faith is the key of God's treasury. She dwells in simple, kind, loving hearts. 'All things are possible to him that believeth.' Faith is a spiritual mouth, the more freely it opens the greater the stream by which the Divine springs enter into it; let this mouth freely open, as your bodily one does; do not let your lips be compressed by doubt and unbelief: if you compress them by doubt and unbelief, the treasury of God's blessings will be closed to you. The more openly, the more heartily you believe in God's omnipotence, the more bountifully will God's heart be opened to you. 'What things so ever ye desire, when ye pray believe that ye receive them and ye shall have them.'"

✠ "Bear with humble submission to the will of God every sorrow, every sickness and infirmity, every labor, every offense and disappointment, saying: Thy will be done' (Lk. 11:2), knowing that God's mercy orders everything for your good, and that the Lord can easily change every disappointment into happiness and joy."

THE WAY OF THE SAINT *by Father Thomas Hopko*

—Every Saint pays attention to details and does the smallest, seemingly most insignificant act with the greatest love and devotion. For the Saint, no act is too small, no work too trifling, no task too demeaning, no deed too insignificant. Every little thing, for the Saint, has eternal value and importance. Every little thing is done before God and has meaning and fulfillment in Him.

—Every Saint pays attention to persons . . . and not to structures, institutions, parties, programs or roles. For the Saint only the person counts, and everything else is subordinated and ordered to the good of the person. The Saint is never impersonal. He never loves or serves "humanity in general." He only loves and serves the person near at hand, the neighbor given by God—the most difficult and most divine manner of acting that there is.

—Every Saint loves the whole of God's good creation, not only living persons, but animals, plants and all that positively exists. The Saint never blasphemes God's good world, but rejoices in the beauties of creation to the glory of their Creator.

—Every Saint is an utter realist. There is no sentimentality in the Saint, no partial views, no prejudicial opinions, no petty interests. There may be real passions and fanatically impassioned actions. There may be factual one-sidedness and fierce conviction, but it is always in the light of the total reality of God and man, and it is always for the good of all. The Saint is not self-indulgent in his sanctity. He is not a "spiritual glutton."

—Every Saint suffers—with joy and gladness—for others. The Saint does not "come down from his cross." He loves his cross as the way to his resurrection. He loves his death to himself as the way to his life in God. He loves to put himself down, and be put down, if it means that someone else will be saved and exalted. The Saint is not a masochist. He does not love sufferings and pains for their own sake. But he is a realist who knows that what is lasting and good requires the payment of a great price, and he is willing to pay the price in his own blood. When one does good in the sinful world, he suffers. It is as simple as that. And the Saint does good.

—Every Saint hates sin, in himself and others, but he loves the sinner, including his own "self," as created in the image and likeness of God, and as loved and saved by God in Christ. The Saint knows himself to be the "greatest of sinners."