



## *Fire & Light*

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

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✠ **March 25, 2012** ✠

### **The Feast of the Annunciation**

St. John of the Ladder

### ✠ **Fifth Week of Great Lent** ✠

✠ **Wed. Mar. 28, 6:30pm ~ Presanctified Liturgy**

✠ **Thurs. Mar. 29 6:30pm ~ Canon of St. Andrew**

✠ **Fri. Mar. 30, 6:30pm ~ Akathist to the Theotokos**

A friend of silence comes close to God. In secret he converses with him and receives his light.

Humility is constant forgetfulness of one's achievements.

-- St. John Climacus

Lord Jesus Christ  
have mercy on me!

Most Holy  
Theotokos,  
save us!

### **Do you fast?**

Do you fast? Give me proof of it by your works. If you see a poor man, take pity on him. If you see a friend being honored, do not envy him. Do not let only your mouth fast, but also the eye, and the ear, and the feet, and the hands, and all the members of our bodies. Let the hands fast, by being free of avarice. Let the feet fast, by ceasing to run after sin. Let the eyes fast, by disciplining them not to glare at that which is sinful...let the ear fast by not listening to evil talk and gossip...let the mouth fast from foul words and unjust criticism. For what good is it if we abstain from birds and fishes, but bite and devour our brothers?"

St. John Chrysostom

### **Tell it to the Panaghia (The Theotokos)...**

✠ **Don't pressure your children.** In your prayers, say the things you want to tell them. Children don't listen through their ears, but only when divine grace comes to enlighten them. Then they listen to the things we want to tell them. When you want to say something to your children, tell it to the Panaghia and she will bring it to pass. This prayer of yours will be like a spiritual caress that will embrace your children and grab their attention. Sometimes we try to caress them and they react, but they never react against the spiritual caress.

~ Blessed Elder Porphyrios (+1991)

### **Troparion of Annunciation - Tone 4**

Today is the beginning of our salvation; the revelation of the eternal mystery!

The Son of God becomes the Son of the Virgin; as Gabriel announces the coming of grace. Together with him let us cry to the Theotokos: Rejoice, O Full of Grace!

The Lord is with thee!

✠ Knowing the Savior and thus acquiring eternal blessedness is man's primary happiness on earth, and his only treasure...

~ St. Ignatius Brianchaninov (1867)

## On Thoughts, Confession and Prayer

✘ Repulse evil thoughts and do not let them penetrate the heart and settle there: for when passion imbued thoughts persist they bring the passions themselves to life and are the death of the intellect. As soon as you sense that they are attacking you, try to destroy them with the arrow of prayer. If they go on importuning you to be let in, confusing your mind, now withdrawing, now assailing you again, you may be sure that a desire for them on your part is giving them strength. Because the soul's free will has been overcome in this way, they now have a lawful claim against it, and so they perturb and pester it.

Hence you should expose them through confession, for evil thoughts take flight as soon as they are denounced. Just as darkness recedes when light shines, so the light of confession dispels the darkness of impassioned thoughts. The vanity and self-indulgence that provide an opening for such thoughts are destroyed by the shame felt in confessing them and by the hardship of the penance imposed. Evil thoughts flee when they find the mind already free from passions as a result of continuous, truly contrite prayer. ~ Theoleptos, Metropolitan of Philadelphia

## Drowning for Lack of Love

Imagine yourself in the middle of the ocean, but there's no boat, no island, and no one to help you. You're drowning out there all by yourself. You're exhausted and terrified. Suddenly, a man grabs you from behind and drags you under the water. Completely overwhelmed by fear and anger, you struggle wildly to get free, but no matter what you do, your head remains underwater.

Just as you're about to pass out and drown, I arrive in a small boat and pull you from the water. After catching your breath, you turn and see that the man who dragged you under is actually drowning himself and only grabbed you in a desperate attempt to save his own life. He wasn't trying to harm you at all. Once you realize that, your anger vanishes immediately and you quickly help him into the boat.

That's how it is with relationships. People really don't do things with the principal goal of hurting you. When people hurt you, they're like the man who dragged you under the water—they're simply drowning and trying to save themselves. People who don't feel unconditionally loved are desperate and will do almost anything to eliminate the pain of their emptiness. Unfortunately, as they struggle to get the things that give them temporary relief—approval, money, sex, power, and so on—their behavior often has a negative effect on the people around them, including you. But that is not their first intent. Other people hurt us only because they're reacting badly to the pain of feeling unloved and alone. When we truly understand that, our feelings toward people, and our relationships with them, will change dramatically.

Without Real Love, we feel like we're drowning all the time. In that condition, almost everything seems threatening to us, even the most innocent behaviors. When people get angry or criticize us, we don't see them as drowning and protecting themselves. We become afraid, defensive, and angry, and we respond by using behaviors that may hurt them. Naturally, they react by protecting themselves and hurting us with even greater intensity and until we understand that Real Love is the solution, we can only perpetuate this cycle of self-protection and injury..."

~ From a book titled, *Real Love*

✘ Acknowledge your sinfulness and pride and impatience and humble yourself under the strong hand of God, accusing no one but yourself, and then you will see Divine help: how God will calm you and cause the hearts of those who oppose you to be favorably disposed towards you.

**St. Macarius of Optina**

✘ The day will come when we shall stand before God and be judged, but as long as our pilgrimage continues, as long as we live in the process of becoming, as long as there is ahead of us this road that leads to the full measure of the stature of Christ which is our vocation, judgment must be pronounced by ourselves.

+ **Metropolitan Anthony Bloom of London**

## **For the Annunciation**

### **The Holy Fathers – The Most Holy Theotokos**

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From the very beginning, the Most Holy Virgin Mary was regarded with the greatest esteem, held in the highest honor, and venerated for the purity and sinlessness of her life. Among the earliest Church Fathers--that is, among those that received the Faith directly from the Apostles--we already find wonderful tributes. For instance, St. Dionysius the Areopagite, Bishop of Athens, who was converted to Christ by St. Paul himself,<sup>[1]</sup> visited the Mother of God in Jerusalem and afterward wrote about it to St. Paul:

"It is impossible for the human mind to grasp what I have seen not only with the eyes of my soul, but with my bodily eyes, too. I have seen with my own eyes the most beautiful and holy Mother of Our Lord Jesus Christ .... That time was for me a time of supreme happiness, thank the most high and most gracious God, and the Most-Holy Virgin, the great Apostle John, and you (St. Paul), for having mercifully granted me such a great blessing,"

Another Church Father that wrote about the Holy Virgin was St. Ignatius the God bearer, a disciple of the Apostle John, to whom he wrote these words:

"If it is made possible, I intend to come to you in order to see the faithful gathered in Jerusalem, and especially the Mother of Jesus: they say of her that she is honorable, affable, and arouses wonder in all, and all wish to see her. But who would not wish to see the Virgin and to converse with her who bore the true God? With us she is glorified as the Mother of God and the Virgin full of grace and virtue. They say of her that she is joyful in troubles and persecutions, does not grieve in poverty and want, and not only does not get angry with those who offend her but does good to them still more. All who see her are delighted."

The Holy Virgin was often called by the title "Mother of God," but in the 5th century an Archbishop of Constantinople, Nestorius, began to teach a strange doctrine. Nestorius believed that Jesus Christ was truly and fully God, the Second Person of the Trinity, but he was unable to understand that the nature of God and the nature of man had been perfectly united in the Person of Christ, as indeed they must have been if human nature were to be offered salvation. Nestorius taught that two distinct persons somehow "coexisted" in Christ, and that one must distinguish between the Christ, the Son of God, and Jesus, the Son of Mary. The one to whom the Virgin gave birth was not God, but the man, Jesus. God then dwelt in Jesus, as in a temple. For this reason, Nestorius taught that Mary could not be called Mother of God; at most, she could be called "Mother of Christ" (*Christotokos*).

There then arose, in opposition to this error, the Archbishop of Alexandria, St. Cyril. Calling on Nestorius to teach the Orthodox Faith as handed down from the Apostles, St. Cyril and others summoned a Council of the Church in the year 431. More than 200 bishops gathered in Ephesus from all over the Christian world. (The city of Ephesus was specifically chosen because there the Mother of God had lived for a while.) St. Celestine, Bishop of Rome, was unable to attend, but he asked that St. Cyril of Alexandria defend the Orthodox doctrine. At earlier Councils, the Book of the Gospels was placed on a throne in the midst of the Fathers to show that Christ, as the only Head of the Church, governed invisibly in their midst.

When Nestorius declared that Mary was only the Mother of Christ's humanity, St. Cyril replied with this verse from Scripture: *The Word was made flesh* (John 1:14). As Bp. Kallistos Ware has written in "The Orthodox Church":

"What Mary bore was not a man loosely united to God, but a single and undivided person, who is God and man at once. The name Theotokos (Mother of God) safeguards the unity of Christ's person: to deny her this title is to separate the Incarnate Christ into two, breaking down the bridge between God and man .... Thus we see that not only titles of devotion were involved at Ephesus, but the very message of salvation."

St. Cyril of Alexandria, and the decree of the Council of Ephesus-the Third Great Council of the Church, was the voice of Orthodoxy, defending not only the Holy Virgin, but Jesus Christ, perfect God and man. Since that time Mary has been given the full title, used in all Orthodox services, of "Our All-holy, immaculate, most blessed and glorious Lady, the Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary." This includes Theotokos (Mother of God), Aeioparthenos (Ever-Virgin), and Panagia (All-Holy). The Fifth Church Council (held in Constantinople in 553), officially added "Ever-Virgin" to the list of titles. Bp. Kallistos gives a good explanation for our use of the term "All-holy":

"Among all God's creatures, she is the supreme example of synergy or cooperation between the purpose of the deity and the free will of man. God, Who always respects human liberty, did not wish to become incarnate without the free consent of His Mother. He waited for her voluntary response: *Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word* (Luke 1:38).. If Christ is the New Adam, Mary is the New Eve, whose obedient submission to the will of God counterbalanced Eve's disobedience in Paradise." - Fr. Alexey Young

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[1] St. Dionysius was the judge of the Areopagus mentioned in Acts 17:34.

The Virgin-Mother is, as it were, the sole border connecting the created and the uncreated Divine Essence. And all who see God also recognize her has the place [containing] the Uncontainable. And all who lift up praise unto God also sing her praises after God. She is the reason for and blessing of those who came before her, and the gift and giver to those present and intercessor for those in eternity. She is the basis of prophets, beginning of apostles, confirmation of martyrs, and foundation of teachers. She is the glory of those on earth, joy of those in Heaven, adornment of all Creation. She is the beginning, the spring and root of hope prepared for us in the Heavens, the hope that we might all be vouchsafed by her prayers for us, to receive Jesus Christ our Lord, in glory Born of the Father before all ages, and latter days Incarnate of her.

St. Gregory Palamas

### **A Prayer to the Most Holy Mother of God by Fr. Arseny**

O You, my blessed Queen, my Hope, O Mother of God, protector of orphans and of the estranged, patron of those who have been offended, savior of those who are sinking, consolation of all those who suffer, You see my pain, You see my grief and my despondency. Help me, I am helpless, strengthen me in my pain. You know what I have lived through, help me, place your hand over my head because I have no one to place my hope in. You are my only protector, You are my protector and my intercessor before God. I have sinned, I have sinned before You and before my brothers. O my Mother, be my comforter, be my helper, and save me, drive from me my grief, pain and despair. Help me, O Mother of my God.

+Fr. Arseny: *A Cloud of Witnesses*

### **An Icon of the Theotokos – Heaven!**

"When you see an icon of the Theotokos with the infant Christ in her arms, do you know what you are looking at? Heaven and earth! Heaven is Christ, Who is above the heavens; He is the Creator of heaven and earth. And the Mother of the Lord represents all the people on the face of the earth, for she was chosen from among us. She was born from both royal and priestly lineage. The arms of the Mother of the Lord are more powerful than the shoulders of the Cherubim and the most blessed Thrones. Who does she hold in her arms? Do you know? She holds the One Who made heaven and earth, all things visible and invisible!"

+Elder Cleopa Ilie (+1998)

# THE VENERABLE JOHN CLIMACUS

*(Remembered on March 30 and Fourth Sunday in Great Lent)*

St. John Climacus is the author of "The Ladder of Divine Ascent." St. John came to Mt. Sinai as a sixteen year old youth and remained there, first as a novice under obedience, and afterwards as a recluse, and finally as abbot of Sinai until his eightieth year. He died around the year 563 A.D. His biographer, the monk Daniel, says about him: "His body ascended the heights of Sinai, while his soul ascended the heights of heaven." He remained under obedience with his spiritual father, Martyrius, for nineteen years. Anastasius of Sinai, seeing the young John, prophesied that he would become the abbot of Sinai.

After the death of his spiritual father, St. John withdrew into a cave, where he lived a difficult life of asceticism for twenty years. His disciple, Moses, fell asleep one day under the shade of a large stone. St. John, in prayer in his cell, saw that his disciple was in danger and prayed to God for him. Later on, when Moses returned, he fell on his knees and gave thanks to his spiritual father for saving him from certain death. He related how, in a dream, he heard St. John calling him and he jumped up and, at that moment, the stone tumbled. Had he not jumped, the stone would have crushed him.

At the insistence of the brotherhood, St. John agreed to become abbot and directed the salvation of the souls of men with zeal and love. From someone St. John heard a reproach that he talked too much. Not being angered by this, St. John however remained silent for an entire year and did not utter a word until the brothers implored him to speak and to continue to teach them his God-given wisdom.

On one occasion, when six-hundred pilgrims came to the Monastery of Sinai, everyone saw an agile youth in Jewish attire serving at a table and giving orders to other servants and assigning them. All at once, this young man disappeared. When everyone noticed this and began to question it, St. John said to them, "Do not seek him, for that was Moses the Prophet serving in my place." During the time of his silence in the cave, St. John wrote many worthwhile books, of which the most glorious is "The Ladder." This book is still read by many, even today. In this book, St. John describes the method of elevating the soul to God, as ascending a ladder. Before his death, St. John designated George, his brother in the flesh, as abbot. George grieved much because of his separation from St. John. Then St. John said to him, that, if he [St. John] were found worthy to be near God in the other world, he would pray to Him, that, he, [George], would be taken to heaven that same year. And, so it was. After ten months George succeeded and settled among the citizens of heaven as did his great brother, St. John.

## ON FREEDOM FROM ANGER AND ON MEEKNESS

From The Ladder of Divine Ascent

1. As the gradual pouring of water on a fire completely extinguishes the flame, so the tears of true mourning are able to quench every flame of anger and irritability. Therefore, we place this next in order.

2. Freedom from anger is an insatiable appetite for dishonor, just as in the vainglorious there is an unbounded desire for praise. Freedom from anger is victory over nature and insensibility to insults, acquired by struggles and sweat.

3. Meekness is an immovable state of soul which remains unaffected, whether in evil report or in good report, in dishonor or in praise.

4. The beginning of freedom from anger is silence of the lips when the heart is agitated; the middle is silence of the thoughts when there is a mere disturbance of soul; and the end is an imperturbable calm under the breath of unclean winds.

5. Wrath is a reminder of hidden hatred, that is to say, remembrance of wrongs. Wrath is a desire for the injury of the one who has provoked you. Irascibility is the untimely blazing up of the heart. Bitterness is a movement of displeasure seated in the soul. Anger is an easily changeable movement of one's disposition and disfiguration of soul.

6. As with the appearance of light, darkness retreats; so at the fragrance of humility, all anger and bitterness vanishes.

7. Some who are prone to anger are neglectful of the healing and cure of this passion. But these unhappy people do not give a thought to him who said: "The moment of his anger is his fall."<sup>1</sup>

8. There is a quick movement of a millstone which, in one moment, grinds and does away with more spiritual grain and fruit than another crushes in a whole day. And so we must pay attention with understanding. It is possible to have such a blaze of flame, suddenly fanned by a strong wind, as will ruin the field of the heart more than a lingering flame.

9. And we ought not to forget, my friends, that the wicked demons sometimes suddenly leave us, so that we may neglect our strong passions as of little importance, and then become incurably sick.

10. As a hard stone with sharp corners has all its sharpness and hard formation dulled by knocking and rubbing against other stones, and is made round, so in the same way, a sharp and curt soul, by living in community and mixing with hard, hot-tempered men, undergoes one of two things: either it cures its wound by its patience, or by retiring it will certainly discover its weakness, its cowardly flight making this clear to it as in a mirror.

11. An angry person is a willful epileptic, who due to an involuntary tendency keeps convulsing and falling down.

12. Nothing is so inappropriate to those repenting as a spirit agitated by anger, because conversion requires great humility, and anger is a sign of every kind of presumption.

13. If it is a mark of extreme meekness, even in the presence of one's offender, to be peacefully and lovingly disposed towards him in one's heart, then it is certainly a mark of hot temper when a person continues to quarrel and rage against his offender, both by words and gestures, even when by himself.

**"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth!"**

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<sup>1</sup> Ecclesiasticus 1:22.

St. Silouan of Mt. Athos (+1938) said, in a well-known statement:

**“Keep your mind in hell and despair not.”**

✘ In effect St. Silouan is saying, ‘Remember that destructive thoughts and the actions that follow them put one on a path that leads to Hell. So, keep your mind keenly aware of the very real possibility of Hell, but don’t despair. God will deliver you from the effects of those thoughts if you are willing to repulse them instantly. Don’t despair, for if you repent and cooperate with God, you will be saved from hell, in every sense of the word.’

**We do not believe God throws us into hell, but rather, we put ourselves there by our own free choices.**

- Fr. Silouan of St. Michael’s Skete

### **Divine and Medical Aid — A Counsel of the Elder Epiphanius of Athens (+1989)**

“When we have a certain problem with our health, is it sufficient for us to call upon divine aid or can we take refuge in medical science, also?”

To this question the Elder replied:

“God accepts both. Give the physician his place, for the Lord created him, let him not leave you, for there is need of him. There is a time when success lies in the hands of physicians, for they too will pray to the Lord that he should grant them success in diagnosis and in healing, for the sake of preserving life...healing is from the Highest...the Lord created medicines from the earth, a wise man does not reject them.

“Taking the benefits offered by medical science does not preclude calling upon divine help. That is, the Christians, without rejecting medical aid, must pray that God enlighten the doctors to make the correct diagnosis, to proceed to the necessary tests and to determine the appropriate therapy. They should ask God to enlighten them to cooperate with the doctor, to strengthen them in patience so that they come out gaining profit of soul from their trial and, if it is His will and for the advantage of their soul, to deliver them from the sickness.”

### **On Love of Enemies**

✘ The Russian Elder Sampson (Sievers, +1979) was cruelly persecuted by the Communists. The "executioners" he mentions below are his own. He was shot and left for dead in a pit filled with bodies. He managed to survive, and during the night monks came to carry him away from the place.

Accuse yourself, only do not accuse her; and not because she was wrong to you. This is a weak human being, so take yourself in hand, be demanding only with yourself. This is what Christianity is all about. Only with yourself. Even executioners can be excused and justified. He was fulfilling his duties - as he was ordered, so he acted. They crucified the Lord, but He said, "Father, forgive them."

Love your enemies. Forgive them. This is the proof of Christianity: to excuse those who wrong us and to blame ourselves. The whole secret, the salt, of Christianity lies in this: to forgive, to excuse, to justify, not to know, not to remember evil. The pagans and Moslems do not know about this. Try telling a Moslem to justify and excuse, to love his enemy. He will kill you. The Holy Fathers are the children of the grace of the Holy Spirit. The result of this action of grace is when the heart excuses. It loves, it can speak well of someone and pray for him. It does not remember offense or evil. It is called a Christian heart. It excuses, it does everything possible in order to justify and excuse. This is a Christian quality!

From Seeking the Kingdom Blog, by Fr. Benedict Crawford

✘ **We are called to a life in union with the true and living God. That life infuses every action of the day – every breath we take. Anything less is an agreement with the enemy to place our God at arms length and to serve a god who is no God.**

Fr. Stephen Freeman

## ***Can we forgive God?***

– An excerpt from Fr. Meletius Webber, *Bread & Water, Wine & Oil*, p. 48-49

***Sometimes we have to approach God in a spirit of forgiveness— not because He has done actual wrong, but because He has done something we do not like.***

In the beginning of our relationship with God, there are likely to be some situations we cannot understand, or that lead us to believe erroneous information. This is hardly surprising, since the phenomenon is also encountered when we form relationships with other people; however, we tend to be more forgiving in our relationships with other human beings than in our relationship with God. Even though we test the relationship with God against a pattern of what we have learned in our human relations (for we have no other patterns to test it against), we tend to demand a good deal of God, and often expect a higher standard of cooperation.

We often hear somebody say something like, "I do not like what has happened in this disaster or that; if God existed at all, He would not have allowed it to happen." According to this attitude, God has taken a test and failed; as a result, He has been sent up the river of nonexistence as a punishment. We have a tendency not to give God a chance and to insist that He get it right the first time. There is an absolute quality in God, but it is not found in the way He approaches us—that He does in humility and with great diffidence.

### **ASPECTS OF OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD**

When we meet God, we encounter Him at many different levels, and so there are many ways in which we can categorize our relationship. Sometimes we are like a child going to a parent for a cuddle, for a telling-off or for a little encouragement. Sometimes we are like employees being called to account for some technical quality of life. We often like to dwell on the fact that we are co-creators with God, but so often we simply destroy what He creates. He knows how to make the ecology of a rainforest; we know how to destroy it. He creates life in the womb with our assistance, but we have the power to stamp out that life. Our power and our responsibility do not always match with His, and in many cases we find ourselves needing to realign the reality we face. A quick meeting, an encounter, a judgment is required to get us back on track.

Sometimes we approach God like a friend, sometimes even like a lover. In these cases, the relationship is much more equal, as both parties are equally vulnerable. If this were not true, love in its fullest sense could not happen. At this level, it is possible to talk about God having extremely human qualities—such as trying something out, or even making mistakes. However, we tend to get nervous around a God who can make mistakes, because our need for control is so great.

Sometimes we have to approach God in a spirit of forgiveness— not because He has done actual wrong, but because He has done something we do not like. Any encounter with God is a judgment; most often it is our condemnation which is involved. However, sometimes the judgment is against God. When we have the courage to call God "Father," we also have to have the courage to forgive God our Father—just as, ultimately, we have to forgive our earthly fathers for being less than they might be. For example, the person who loses a young child, friend, or spouse to death has, at some point, to approach God with a view to forgiving Him. Nothing else will do.