



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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✘ **December 1, 2013** ✘

The Advent Season

Holy Prophet Nahum (7th B.C.)

St. Philaret the Merciful (792)

What songs shall we sing
to praise the Bishop?
Who wrestled against
godlessness and was the
champion of Godliness!
A great leader, shield and
teacher of the Church,
putting all inglorious heresy to
shame! The destroyer and
fierce opponent of Arius,
whose arrogance Christ laid
low on his account,
through His great mercy!

~ Vespers of St. Nicholas

☞ **Feast of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker** ☞

✘ **Thurs., December 5, 6:30pm Vespers with Litiya**

✘ **Friday, December 6, 10:00am Divine Liturgy**

✘ **St. Herman of Alaska – Vespers only: December 12**

Come Unto Me

✘ Lord never ceases calling us to Himself: "Come unto me, and I will give you rest." He nourishes us with His most precious Body and Blood. In His mercy He schools us by His Word and the Holy Spirit. He has revealed His mysteries to us. He lives in us and in the sacraments of the Church, and leads us to where we shall behold His glory. But this glory shall each man behold according to the measure of his love. The more a man loves, ardently does he set his face towards God, yearning to be with the Beloved Lord, and therefore will he approach the nearer to Him; while the man who loves but little will have but little desire for the Lord, and man who does not love at all will neither wish nor aspire to see the Lord, and will spend his life in darkness.

~ St. Silouan the Athonite

Saint Philaret the Merciful (December 1)

Righteous Philaret the Merciful, son of George and Anna, was raised in piety and the fear of God. He lived during the eighth century in the village of Amneia in the Paphlagonian district of Asia Minor. His wife, Theoseba, was from a rich and illustrious family, and they had three children: a son John, and daughters Hypatia and Evanthia.

Philaret was a rich and illustrious dignitary, but he did not hoard his wealth. Knowing that many people suffered from poverty, he remembered the words of the Savior about the dread Last Judgment and about "these least ones" (Mt. 25:40); the the Apostle Paul's reminder that we will take nothing with us from this world (1 Tim 6:7); and the assertion of King David that the righteous would not be forsaken (Ps 36/37:25). Philaret, whose name means "lover of virtue," was famed for his love for the poor.

One day Moslems attacked Paphlagonia, devastating the land and plundering the estate of Philaret. There remained only two oxen, a donkey, a cow with her calf, some beehives, and the house. But he also shared them with the poor. His wife reproached him for being heartless and unconcerned for his own family. Mildly, yet firmly he endured the reproaches of his wife and the jeers of his children. "I have hidden away riches and treasure," he told his family, "so much that it would be enough for you to feed and clothe yourselves, even if you lived a hundred years without working."

The Saint's gifts always brought good to the recipient. Whoever received anything from him found that the gift would multiply, and that person would become rich. Knowing this, a certain man came to

St Philaret asking for a calf so that he could start a herd. The cow missed its calf and began to bellow. Theoseba said to her husband, "You have no pity on us, you merciless man, but don't you feel sorry for the cow? You have separated her from her calf."

The Saint praised his wife, and agreed that it was not right to separate the cow and the calf. Therefore, he called the poor man to whom he had given the calf and told him to take the cow as well.

That year there was a famine, so St Philaret took the donkey and went to borrow six bushels of wheat from a friend of his. When he returned home, a poor man asked him for a little wheat, so he told his wife to give the man a bushel. Theoseba said, "First you must give a bushel to each of us in the family, then you can give away the rest as you choose." Philaretos then gave the man two bushels of wheat. Theoseba said sarcastically, "Give him half the load so you can share it." The Saint measured out a third bushel and gave it to the man. Then Theoseba said, "Why don't you give him the bag, too, so he can carry it?" He gave him the bag. The exasperated wife said, "Just to spite me, why not give him all the wheat." St Philaret did so.

Now the man was unable to lift the six bushels of wheat, so Theoseba told her husband to give him the donkey so he could carry the wheat home. Blessing his wife, Philaret gave the donkey to the man, who went home rejoicing. Theoseba and the children wept because they were hungry.

The Lord rewarded Philaret for his generosity: when the last measure of wheat was given away, a old friend sent him forty bushels. Theoseba kept most of the wheat for herself and the children, and the Saint gave away his share to the poor and had nothing left. When his wife and children were eating, he would go to them and they gave him some food. Theoseba grumbled saying, "How long are you going to keep that treasure of yours hidden? Take it out so we can buy food with it."

During this time the Byzantine Empress Irene (797-802) was seeking a bride for her son, the future Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitos (780-797). Therefore, emissaries were sent throughout all the Empire to find a suitable girl, and the envoys came to Amneia.

When Philaret and Theoseba learned that these most illustrious guests were to visit their house, Philaret was very happy, but Theoseba was sad, for they did not have enough food. But Philaret told his wife to light the fire and to decorate their home. Their neighbors, knowing that imperial envoys were expected, brought everything required for a rich feast.

The envoys were impressed by the Saint's daughters and granddaughters. Seeing their beauty, their deportment, their clothing, and their admirable qualities, the envoys agreed that Philaret's granddaughter, Maria was exactly what they were looking for. This Maria exceeded all her rivals in quality and modesty and indeed became Constantine's wife, and the Emperor rewarded Philaret. Thus **fame and riches returned to Philaret.** But just as before, this holy lover of the poor generously distributed alms and provided a feast for the poor. He and his family served them at the meal.

Everyone was astonished at his humility and said: "This is a man of God, a true disciple of Christ." He ordered a servant to take three bags and fill one with gold, one with silver, and one with copper coins. When a beggar approached, Philaret ordered his servant to bring forth one of the bags, whichever God's providence would ordain. Then he would reach into the bag and give to each person, as much as God willed.

St Philaret refused to wear fine clothes, nor would he accept any imperial rank. He said it was enough for him to be called the grandfather of the Empress. The Saint reached ninety years of age and knew his end was approaching. He went to the Rodolpheia ("The Judgment") monastery in Constantinople. He gave some gold to the Abbess and asked her to allow him to be buried there, saying that he would depart this life in ten days.

He returned home and became ill. On the tenth day he summoned his family, he exhorted them to imitate his love for the poor if they desired salvation. Then he fell asleep in the Lord. He died in the year 792 and was buried in the Rodolpheia Judgment monastery in Constantinople.

The appearance of a miracle after his death confirmed the Sainthood of Righteous Philaret. As they bore the body of the Saint to the cemetery, a certain man, possessed by the devil, followed the funeral procession and tried to overturn the coffin. When they reached the grave, the devil threw the man down on the ground and went out of him. Many other miracles and healings also took place at the grave of the Saint.

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St. Justin Popovich ~

Commentary on the First Epistle of St. John the Theologian (excerpts):

3:22 *"And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight."*

As the Omniscient, God knows when and what to give the heart of man, so that it may multiply in divine love, and increase with the increase of God, and lead man from struggle to struggle, from one holy virtue to another. God gives all of that for prayer, i.e. when our love becomes prayer, and prayer comes to aid it. For love, in particular, increases and perfects itself through prayer. The greater the prayerfulness is in man, the more perfect love becomes. That is why the most prayerful people – Saints – have the most perfect love. **True are the words of St. Isaac the Syrian: "Love is from prayer"**. Yes, it is implored from God as the most perfect gift. For "God is love", and giving His love to man, God is actually giving His very self. In the divine and evangelic love everything depends on the prayerfulness of the loving ones. That is why the Holy Theologian proclaims: we have confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight. God fulfills man's prayers when man fulfills God's commandments: "Obey God in His commandments, says St. John Chrysostom, so that He may obey you in prayer." The man, who keeps the commandments of God, is always wise, persistent, and sincere in prayer: he knows what he needs, when he needs it, and how to implore God. He always implores for something only if it is beneficial for the salvation of the soul, i.e. that which is evangelic, divine, immortal, and eternal. The Holy Theologian has spoken to us; now we know the mystery of prayer. The mystery is in keeping the commandments of God. The rule of the Gospel: whosoever keeps the commandments of God, God fulfills his every prayer. For example: the Saints keep the commandments of God, therefore God fulfills their prayers, whether they are in Heaven or on Earth.

3:23. *"And this is His commandment, that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as He gave us commandment."*

Behold, the shortened Gospel of salvation: faith in Christ and divine love. Actually, these two things are one commandment; because they combine one feeling with one disposition: whoever believes in Christ believes because he loves Him. Love grows through faith and through love faith grows. One through the other increases and perfects itself. They are spiritual twins. Love increases through faith and faith through love. Whosoever loves the Lord Christ and believes in Him and in everything that is of Him, he has trust in Him, trust that gives him love. Faith reveals to man the mystery of the God-man; the more man knows the Lord Christ, he loves Him that much more; the more he loves Him, the mystery of Christ is revealed to him that much more. The evangelic experience has been attested to: That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love (Eph. 3:17). This, two in one virtue (love and faith) gives birth to the rest of the evangelic virtues in the soul; through all

1 John 4:9. *"In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him."*

Truly, the love of God could not express itself any other way than this: to send into the world God, the Logos, so that man would live through Him. The life of God, through the Incarnation of the Logos, became our human life; the Logos became man, so that He would give man the life of God, to teach him that life, and to give him the powers to realize that life through earthly and human means. What is divine life? The life of Jesus Christ on earth. What does that divine life consist of? Living in divine Truth, divine Love, divine Righteousness, divine Holiness and the rest of the divine qualities. All of these living powers the God-man had transferred to our human world and transformed them in our human life. He came into our world, brought into it powers of divine life and thus, He transformed our human life into the God-life. God the Logos became the God-man so that He would transform our life into the God-life. The entire mystery is contained in this: the entire love of God towards us people. Thus, the God-man, in the most perfect way, solved the problem of the life of man. Man was created for such a God-life and in the image of God. Had the people lived with the powers which were

available to them, who were in the image of God and the power of yearning for God, they would all have increasingly realized the Divine Life and would have forever remained in paradise. For paradise is not something different from life in God, living through God; the God-life.

As soon as man brought sin into himself, into his life, he started to change his life into the devil-life. To live in sin means to live in the devil because the devil lives only in sin. Do you want to know what the devil lives by? Just sin and you will quickly find out. Because in sin is where the secrets of his life lie. The devil is completely in sin; not one part of him is outside of sin. Where the devil is, hell is there too. Hell is not different then living in sins. In reality, the God-life and the devil-life, love of God and the love of the devil are the only two paths in human life on earth, the only two categories of human existence in any world. They are two eternal determinants of the human being; man in no way can be outside of them. If he could liberate himself from them, he would then cease to be a human being.

"That we might live through Him, that we might live by Him through Christ."

When do we live by Him? When we live by His Truth, His Love, His Goodness, simply put: when we live through his Gospel and in His Church. For not only is His Gospel in the Church, but He is as well, the wondrous God-man, with all of His perfections and with all of His holy powers and virtues. And something more: the Church is the immortal Body of the God-man Christ, His immortal organism. and members of the Church are molecules and cells of that organism and all live in Him - through the God-Man - all live from Him and through Him. From there, the great news of St. John, *that we might live in Him* - is constantly implemented and carried out in the Church and in all of its members, from the beginning to the present: for all live in Him and through Him; this is the only unceasing process of the God-life. One has to enter it through the Holy Mysteries; and through the holy virtues one remains in it forever. For the Church is nothing other than the God-man - continued through the ages, and in Him - the God-life.

4;10. *"Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."*

It would be nothing special if we, who are sinful and full of vices, would first show love to God, Who in a very obvious manner constantly shows and gives us good things. For love, towards the untiring and all-generous Benefactor, is our first obligation. But we have not accomplished this because sins have made us enemies of God, and everything that is of God has become bitter for us. Sin is enmity towards God. Also, sin is hatred towards God. Entrenched in sin, man loves sin and all of its pleasures and hates God and all of His Sacred Things. Whosoever loves sin cannot love God, because by nature, sin is a power contradictory to God, it is against God and battles against God. Through voluntary submission to sins, man releases in himself a power that unceasingly wars with God, has enmity towards God, and hates God. With time this power paralyzes man's soul, to such an extent, that it does not feel God, it does not even acknowledge God and starts to profess that there is no God. **The love of sin, at the very end, leads to atheism and enmity towards God: denies God and wars against God and everything that is of God.**

The love of God towards sinful people is the greatest miracle of the mercy of God. For only it could send the Son of God, into the God-opposing world of men, to save man from sin through His boundless and man-loving struggle. Through His entire person, the Lord Christ represents and has the only true love of mankind; and that is why He is called the Only Lover of Man and the man-loving God. For love is composed of this: to be merciful with a sinner, but to condemn the sin; to save the sinner but destroy the sin; to separate sin from man then have mercy on man and condemn the sin. True love of man is composed of just that. The God-man, from His love of mankind, is complete propitiation for our sins: complete mercy, complete compassion and complete sympathy. And through it and because of it - salvation. He has had mercy on mankind in a way no one has ever even dreamed of. For only God, the lover of mankind, could contrive and realize such a perfect manner of salvation from sin: through the God-Man, through His life from birth to death on the Cross, Resurrection and Ascension, to save man from sin, death and the devil. That is a love that does not have an equal... That is truly the only real mercy to befall mankind. **St. Justin Popovich**

Eating in an Anciently Refreshing Way (excerpt)

The writings of St. Gregory of Sinai in the *Philokalia* provides us with these directions:

“The measure of partaking of food that is free from sin and pleasing to God has three degrees: abstinence, adequacy, and satiety. To abstain means to remain a little hungry after eating; to eat adequately means neither to feel hungry nor weighed down. But eating beyond satiety is the door to gluttony through which lust comes in.”

Metropolitan Gregory of St. Petersburg (late 19th C) in his *How to Live a Holy Life* quotes St. John Chrysostom’s guideline for observing moderation of food consumption: “Eat just enough to alleviate your hunger.”

Taking note of your actions – and maybe even writing down some observations that you make about your eating habits – can give you insight into designing a plan that will help you stand strong during the temptation to misuse food. Proper eating does require prayer, mindfulness, and gratitude.

You’re probably thinking: All these ideas sound fabulous, but how do I apply them? Start by listening to your body. We feel satisfied with the amount of food we take in, not in our stomach, but in our brain. It takes at least fifteen to twenty minutes for our stomach to send a message to the brain indicating that we have eaten enough. **So the faster we eat, the more we eat.** Try at your next meal to take at least fifteen minutes to eat your food. Work on slowing down your eating pace.

If you have to eat a meal by yourself, have some spiritual reading material with you at the table. Read about the life of a saint or a spiritually edifying magazine. Focus on reading for a bit, then taking a bite of food. Take your time. Appreciate this time with the Lord. Taste your food. Slowing down your eating pace is a great technique to help with controlling how much you consume.

St. John Cassian’s writings on eating (found in the *Philokalia*) provide us with wisdom on how to deal with **the struggles of misusing food** when he says:

“I shall speak first about control of the stomach, the opposite to gluttony, and about how to fast and what and how much to eat. I shall say nothing on my own account, but only what I have received from the Holy Fathers. They have not given us only a single rule for fasting or a single standard and measure for eating, because not everyone has the same strength; age, illness or delicacy of body create differences. But they have given us all a single goal: to avoid over-eating and the filling of our bellies.... A clear rule for self-control handed down by the Fathers is this: stop eating while still hungry and do not continue until you are satisfied.... As I said, the Fathers have handed down a single basic rule of self-control: ‘Do not be deceived by the filling of the belly’ (Proverbs 24:15), or be led astray by the pleasure of the palate. It is not only the variety of foodstuffs that kindles the fiery darts of unchastity, but also their quantity.”

When you take your time with your food you are able to recognize when that “over-the-edge bite” is going to be the next bite. We all know this bite. It is the bite that officially ruins the meal. We leave the table with a belly ache, and we feel sluggish, lethargic and uncomfortable. It is hard for us to focus on prayer or our daily work when we are feeling weighed down and overly satisfied. Think about it: Do we enjoy food because of the way it tastes or because we love that feeling of being uncomfortably full?

Bishop Platon of Kostroma provides us with a great exercise for mealtime: “At dinner picture to yourself the image of our heavenly Father opening His hand in order to feed you; never omit your prayer before you eat; and leave some of your food for the poor. After dinner consider yourself one of the five thousand who were miraculously fed by Jesus Christ; thank Him from your heart and pray that He not leave you without heavenly food, His word and His most precious Body and Blood.”¹

Start by creating structure around your meal time. Slow down your eating pace. Pray before and after the meal. Ask for God's blessing and prepare yourself to be attentive to share in this food He has provided to you. You may even want to beautify the area in which you are eating. Clear away the clutter, light a candle, or place some flowers on the table. Make mealtime a special time. And get the kids involved.

Many today feel their health could benefit from a little bit of weight loss. A proven and successful – even healthy – weight-loss technique is to reduce caloric intake. Here is a good example, taken from *Greek Monastery Cookery* by Archimandrite Dositheos, about when he was a novice monk:

When it was time for dining, he [Abba Dorotheos] said to him: "Eat and get full. Then just tell me how much you ate." When he ate, he came up to him saying: "I ate one-bread- and-a-half." (The weight of one-bread was four liters.) Then he said to him, "Do you feel well, Dositheos?" He answered: "Yes, master, I feel well." He asked him: "Maybe you feel hungry?" He answered: "No, master, I don't feel hungry." Then he said to him, "Good. Then from now on, eat one-bread-and- a-quarter of the second bread. Break the other quarter into two, eat one piece, and leave the other." He did as he was told. Then he asked him again: "Are you hungry, Dositheos?" He answered, "Yes master, I'm a bit hungry." A few days later, he asked him: "How do you feel, Dositheos? Are you still hungry?" He answered: "No, master. I feel very well, thanks to your prayers." He said to him, "Then omit the first piece of the quarter, too." He did again as he was told. Again, a few days later, he asked him: "How do you feel now? Are you hungry?" He answered: "I feel well, master." He said to him: "Break the other quarter of the bread into two. Eat one piece, and leave the other." Again, he did as he was told. So, with God's help, he gradually came down from six liters to eight ounces only.

From this example, we learn that if we reduce our food intake in small increments – as opposed to all at once – it can make the difference with weight loss. By decreasing the amount of food we consume, we are creating a calorie deficit in our own bodies. By eating less (ingesting fewer calories), sensible weight loss can and will occur.

Do not make massive reductions at one time but do it slowly. Over time you train your body to be satisfied with less food. So at your next meal decrease the portion you usually tend to serve yourself. Focus on eating slowly to allow your body to process the food. Assess how you feel. Did you take that over-the-edge bite or did you eat just the right amount? It takes practice. But the more time you spend focusing on listening to your body, the less often you will notice that you take that over-the-edge bite.

As the writing from St. John Cassian above illustrated, we all need a different amount of food for a variety of reasons. One of those reasons is our exercise patterns. For example, I am quite sure I do not need to eat as much food as an athlete training for the Olympics. So there is no one prescription for weight loss that fits all. As was also mentioned above, however, we know that for an individual to lose weight, focusing on reducing food intake is a key factor. So, start by making changes in your eating. Incorporate one change at a time, and once it has become part of your life, add another. This will help to make it a permanent practice.

We read in Holy Scripture how St. Paul ate for physical strength before he started to teach. We know that food is a source of energy for us to perform our daily tasks. But we also read in Holy Scripture that Jesus said: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God." (Luke 4:4).
Blessed is God, who is merciful unto us and nourishes us from His bounteous gifts by His grace and compassion, always, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

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Too Close to Our Blessings to be Thankful

Linda Bowles, November 24, 1995

The chances are high that you did not do what you were supposed to do on Thanksgiving Day. This column will give you a chance to make amends.

The whole thrust of a day of Thanks- giving is to spend some time in appreciation of what is good and right in our lives — as opposed to what we are inclined to do most of the time, which is to anguish about and dwell upon everything that is bad and wrong.

Now that the holiday feast is over...it is altogether fitting that we, being reasonable people, submit ourselves to a few questions. Yes, this is a test.

On Thanksgiving Day, were you able to back away from your involvement with the bustle and busyness of life? Were you able to disengage? I don't mean watch football or go to the movies or get drunk. I am not talking about the substitution of one distraction for another. My question is on a day designed for personal reflection, were you able to clear your mind long enough to do some serious thinking?

It isn't easy. The workaholic is a classic case of one who can't back off. The dynamics of this psychological trap are simple: There is more work to do than can be done. This creates anxiety. The further away from work, the greater the anxiety. The only way the anxiety can be reduced is to be at the workplace, toiling away.

In our semi-civilized, complex world, we are all stressed. We are trapped in a cycle of increasing dependencies upon increasingly undependable people.

We find it more and more difficult to distance ourselves from our concerns and worries. Our anxiety is a psychological magnet that draws us back, thwarting our escape. This is the mechanism of human addiction: irresistible attraction to the problem.

We pay a price for being unable to back away. There is a voice in the wilderness of life trying to get a message through to us, but it is drowned out by the din and clatter all around us. The comforting message is, "Be still, and know that I am God."

We stand in the midst of miracles, challenging God to show us one to prove His presence. We will pass and never see miracle after miracle as we speed along the highway to an art show or a museum featuring man's accomplishments. Our pride blinds us to the wonder and revelation of a child at play, a soaring hawk, camellia buds bursting open and the light of a shining star in a boundless sky.

We fawn over paintings and sculptures that are nothing more than poor copies of God's originals.

We marvel at ourselves. We set up societies to honor human achievement; we hand out all manner of praise and prizes in recognition of human triumphs. Yet, we ignore and step over God's creations without so much as a nod or a tip of the hat in His direction.

It is hubris — that is to say, it is unjustified arrogance. Man is not capable of adding one speck of dust to the universe or taking a single one away. He cannot create or destroy matter. He can only rearrange. He can describe and label, but he cannot explain even the most rudimentary of natural phenomena.

As cited in Fletcher Bartholomew's remarkable book, *Iconoclasm*, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Daniel Boorstin put science in its place with this observation: "The great obstacle to progress is not ignorance but the illusion of knowledge."

We are in "sophomoric rebellion" against our own origin and identity. We whistle through the darkness in search of a rationale that will explain the nature of the universe and the meaning of life but are thwarted at every turn by our mortality.

We miss the obvious. Intellectual elitists are alive and surrounded by life, but they laugh at the idea of an afterlife. Philosopher Francois-Manie Arouet de Voltaire cut to the quick of this dead-end arrogance when he observed, "It is not more surprising to be born twice than once."

We are too close to our own blessings to be thankful for them. Because they are free for the asking and in great supply, we take them for granted. In our eyes, it is scarcity, not plenty, that makes something valuable. It is a reflection of the perversity of human nature that if all the world were made of gold, a wheelbarrow full of dirt would be a priceless treasure.

So, what is the sum of these ideas? They add up this way: Each of us is a miracle living in an infinite universe full of miracles and mysteries. **God is at the center, holding all together and giving it meaning. Surely, that's worth a thank you.**

My message to those who scoff is this: If the thoughts generated by your superior intelligence stand between you and faith, think again.

Personally, if I could identify just two things for which to be thankful, I would choose first to be thankful for amnesty — that is, forgiveness for all those accumulations of sin and error that could otherwise weigh us down and steal away our freedom of spirit and enthusiasm for life.

Second, I would give thanks for the promise that one day, you and I will see His face.