



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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✠ **August 3, 2014** ✠

The Dormition Fast

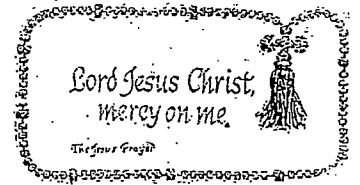
Sts. Isaac, Dalmatus & Faustus

of the Dalmatian Monastery, Constantinople (5th C)

St. Cosmas, Hermit of Palestine (6th C)

St. Anthony the Roman of Novgorod (1147)

Thy chosen ones were filled
with fear!
Seeing Thy Transfiguration
on Mount Tabor!
O Christ, the fulfillment
of the Law and the Prophets!
We join them to worship Thee!
With the Father and the Spirit!



- + **Tuesday, August 5 6:30pm** Feast of the Transfiguration – Great Vespers with Litiya
Blessing of Grapes and Fruit
- + **Wed. August 6 10:00am** Feast of the Transfiguration – Divine Liturgy
Blessing of Grapes and Fruit

Transfiguration ~ Our Holy Father, St. Symeon the New Theologian (1022)

As soon as your mind has experienced what the Scripture says: "How gracious is the Lord," it will be so touched with that delight that it will no longer want to leave the place of the heart. It will echo the words of the Apostle Peter: "How good it is to be here."

The Sign of the Cross

The devil is afraid when we pray and make offerings. He is also afraid when we are humble and good. He is especially afraid when we love Jesus very much. He runs away when we make the Sign of the Cross.
~ St. Anthony the Great (4th C)

Three Witnesses to the Transfiguration

Why did our Lord not manifest His divine glory on Tabor before all the disciples instead of before three of them? First, because He Himself gave the Law through the mouth of Moses: "At the mouth of two witnesses or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established" (Deuteronomy 19:15). Therefore, three witnesses are sufficient. These three witnesses represent three main virtues: Peter Faith, for he was the first to confess his faith in Christ as the Son of God; James Hope, for, with faith in the promise of Christ, he was the first who laid down his life for the Lord, being the first to be slain by the Jews; John Love, for he reclined on the bosom of the Lord and remained beneath the Cross of the Lord until the end. God is not called the God of many but rather the God of the chosen. "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6). God often valued a faithful man more than an entire nation. Thus, on many occasions, He wanted to destroy the entire Jewish nation, but because of the prayers of righteous Moses, spared that nation to live. God listened more to the faithful Prophet Elijah than to the entire unbelieving kingdom of Ahab. Thus, the sinful town of Ustiug was to be destroyed by fire and hail had it not been saved by the prayers of the one and only righteous man in it, St. Procopius, the "fool for Christ" (July 8). ~ St. Nikolai of Ochrid

+ **A person in this world must solve a problem: to be with Christ, or to be against Him. And every one decides this, whether he wants to or not. He will either be a lover of Christ or a fighter of Christ. There is no third option.**
~ St. Justin Popovich (+1979)

The New Martyrs Lydia, Cyril and Alexis – August 2

The New Martyrs Lydia, Cyril and Alexis (20th July / 2nd August) are among the best beloved of the New Martyrs of Russia. Lydia was the daughter of a priest in Ufa, but when her father joined the Renovationist schism in 1922, she could not in conscience follow him, and so she prostrated before him, saying: "Bless me, father, to leave you, so that I will not bind you in the salvation of your soul." The old man, who knew the uprightness of his daughter's soul, and that the course he had taken he had done so out of weakness, blessed her and foretold that she would gain the crown of martyrdom. She left him and found employment in the Forestry Department. She did not go to the churches legalized by the Bolsheviks, but secretly attended Catacomb services. Eventually she was arrested in 1928. She had been distributing hand-typed texts to the workers in her department for their spiritual edification. The "k" in these tracts was broken and thus her type-writer was traced. For ten days she was interrogated but refused to say anything or betray her fellow believers. On 20th July, the interrogator became infuriated with her steadfastness and ordered that she be taken to a cellar room for "special command" treatment. As Private Cyril Ataev was escorting her to "special command," he noticed her extreme weakness and helped her down the steps. She thanked him with the words, "May Christ save you," and these words touched his heart. She was tortured for over an hour and a half, and then they thought of a new plan of attack: sexual assault. Private Ataev was called in again, but when he understood what was required of him, instead of abusing the martyr, he turned his revolver on her torturers and shot two of them. He was felled by two others and shot. As he died, he looked to the martyr and prayed; "Saint, take me with you." "I will take you," she assured him. Then a madness overcame the interrogators and they shot at their victims until their revolvers were empty. Of the two GPU men who emerged from that terrible scene, one became completely insane, and the other died shortly afterwards of nervous shock. The latter told his friend, Sergeant Alexis Ikonnikov, who was brought to God by this witness and told the story to the believers. For his zealous propagation of the truth concerning the martyrs, he himself suffered a martyr's death. The feastday of the three martyrs falls on the commemoration of the holy Prophet Elias the Thesbite, whose day we keep with a Vigil.

Get ready to go out to your work, and gird yourself to cultivate your field. The field is your present life. And for a hoe take with you the Old together with the New Testament. Put a hedge of thorns about your field and your soil, by prayer and fasting together with instruction. If you are protected by this enclosure, the wild beast shall not invade you—by which I mean the devil. Tend your soul like a beautiful vineyard. And as the guardians of the vineyard strike at the thieves with their fists . . . so you cry out in prayer, and shout with the song of psalmody.

—St. Ephrem the Syrian

The Light of Tabor

During the time of St. Gregory Palamas, in the fourteenth century, a great theological controversy arose within the Church regarding the Feast of the Transfiguration. St. Gregory affirms that the light which the Fathers of the Philokalia beheld in their mystical experiences is of the same essence as the light of Tabor—of uncreated energy—which emanates from God and transfigures the world. St. Gregory professes that this Divine light is uncreated. It is the radiance of the Holy Spirit, or the light of the grace of God, which enters the soul when the name of Jesus is called upon.

The few Fathers whom God granted to be carried away in ecstasy while practicing the prayer of the heart confess that they beheld the Divine light. "It is the same God that said, 'Let there be light shining out of darkness,' who has shone in our minds to radiate the light of the knowledge of God's glory, the glory of the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). "Send out Thy light and Thy truth, let these be my guide, to lead me to Thy holy mountain" (Ps. 43:3). "Show us the light of Thy face turned toward us" (Ps. 4:6).

The light which shone upon St. Paul on the road to Damascus was the light of the power of the Spirit of God. Though he was found worthy to experience this light, he was unable to bear it with his physical eyes, and thus was blinded, but his spiritual eyes were opened by this very same light.

It was the same light of Tabor which carried St. Paul off to the third heaven where he beheld indescribable mysteries. Yet, he says of this, "whether still in the body or out of the body, I do not know" (2 Cor. 12:2).

Many of the Holy Fathers were carried off in this same way: [for example] St. Gregory of Sinai, St. Symeon the New Theologian, St. Andrew the Fool for Christ, and St. Seraphim of Sarov. St. Seraphim gripped Motovilov's hand and let him live for a moment "in grace" (V. Zander, *The Life of St. Seraphim*[^] SVS Press, 1975, p.37).

St. Gregory Palamas says that the Divine grace is the same uncreated energy which pervaded the three Apostles on Mt. Tabor and

made them dwell outside the body in the presence of Moses and Elijah. It was so powerful that St. Peter did not even realize what he was saying. He spoke of three tents: one for Jesus, one for Moses and another for Elijah. Yet regarding himself and the other Apostles, how they felt, he said only, "Master, it is wonderful for us to be here" (Lk. 9:30-33; Mk. 9:2-6). Later, in the first chapter of his second Epistle, St. Peter says that since he was a witness of the actual Transfiguration of Christ, he knows from his own experience that man is a "partaker of the Divine nature" (v. 4).

Thus, St. Gregory Palamas is in agreement with the tradition of the Holy Fathers when he affirms that man may be deified without *becoming* God. For according to the Holy Fathers, man is deified by grace, not by the work of creation. Creation endowed us with the image of God, not the likeness. Likeness, deification, is a dynamic process of collaboration between man and God. The difference between the Creator and creation will exist for all time. Anything else is impossible, for this was the meaning of God's Incarnation: that He became man like Adam, so that Adam might be as God. (This is a major theme throughout the *Triodion*.)

What is man?

God created the angels, yet Holy Scripture does not say that He told them, "you, too, are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you" (Ps. 82:6) as He said to man. Scripture also does not say that the angels were created by God in any special way, as it says about the creation of man. They are only "spirits whose work is service, sent to help those who will be the heirs of salvation" (Heb. 1:14).

This is why the Psalmist asks, "Ah, what is man that Thou should spare a thought for him, the son of man that Thou shouldst care for him⁹ Yet Thou hast made him little less than a God. Thou hast crowned him with glory and splendor...Thou hast set all things under his feet" (Ps. 8:4-6).

Though St. Dionysius the Arcopagite says that the angels continually grow in God and are

infinitely being perfected, Holy Scripture does not say that they are partakers of the Divine nature, as it says of man. This participation is only possible through the inter-penetration of human nature with Divine nature in the person of the Savior Christ—true God and true man, the new Adam, our perfect model. This is why St. Paul, in speaking of the Incarnation of God says, "for verily He took not on Him the nature of angels, but He took on Him the seed of Abraham" (Heb. 2:16).

What does the Feast of the Transfiguration say to us?

Nothing other than this: the deification of man, like the Incarnation of God, was in the plan of salvation from the very beginning. Salvation is more than just redemption for sin: the Savior did not come only to pay Adam's debt—through His Incarnation, human nature is sanctified and deified.

The deification of nature and of man was not possible in paradise, for [in paradise] God had not taken upon Himself human nature. Through Jesus Christ; human nature is brought to the right hand of the Father in the Holy Trinity, and thus is deified.

What else does the Transfiguration say to us?

It tells us that what actually happened on Mt Tabor is *not* a miracle! Jesus was revealed in His Divine nature simply because He *is* God. The true miracle is the fact that *He accepted to descend and become man*. That is, through the Incarnation, He accepted suffering, the Passion, and death.

The Transfiguration tells us that man must work for his deification; it does not come about passively. Jesus showed us, through His life; the way of suffering. This is why it is necessary for [Christians including] monastics to kill the passions. They call upon the name of Jesus in the prayer of the heart and invite Him to enter into the innermost temple of their being and to

remain there. This is as St. Paul says: "We are the temple of the living God. We have God's word for it: 'I will make My home among them and live with them; I will be their God and they will be My people'" (2 Cor. 6:16-7).

Those who labor for deification do not necessarily have to fall into ecstasy or behold the uncreated light. This was revealed by God to only some of the holy Fathers, just as it was revealed to only three of the twelve Apostles. God revealed these things to only a few people, so that we can see that deification is possible, even in our bodily lives.

The prayer of the heart is only done under the direction of a spiritual father. Otherwise it easily degenerates into a seeking and pursuit of ecstasy as something "sensational," as happened with speaking in tongues which God gave only to the apostles so that they might spread the Gospel. The early Christians forced themselves to speak in tongues, for they felt it was something spectacular, and it thus degenerated into unintelligible gibberish which was of no service to the Church. This is why St. Paul felt it necessary to put a stop to the mumbling (*cf.*: 1 Cor. 12). Thus, we can see that it is not necessary to fall into ecstasy while in prayer. This is the error which is happening even today in the Pentecostal movement. The people involved in this do not understand St. Paul's words: "The particular way in which the Spirit is given to each person is for a good reason...prophecy, administration, wisdom..." (1 Cor. 12:7-11).

The light of Tabor, as a Divine energy, is not given only to monks or those who practice the prayer of the heart. Rather, this light encompasses all of creation and transfigures it, for "all things are from the Holy Spirit" (Vespers of Pentecost). When man draws near to God, he does not come alone; he brings all the universe with him, for he is a part of it.

In the end, the light of Tabor will transform everything. For, as Scripture tells us, "There will be a new heaven and a new earth" and all will rest with God as it was in the beginning.

**From "Life Transfigured" Vol. 15 #2,
Summer 1983**

Genuine and False Experiences of the Grace of God (Part 1)

A recorded speech of Archimandrite George of our Holy Monastery of Saint Gregory of the Holy Mountain at Stratoní of Halkidiki, on 14/27 January 1989, at the invitation of the Most Reverend Nikodemos, Metropolitan of Hierissou, of the Holy Mountain and Ardameri.(excerpt)

The purpose of our life, as you know, is our union with God. As the Holy Bible says, man was created "in the image and likeness" of God, namely to unite with Him. The likeness of man with God, our holy Fathers call it "theosis". Can you see how great is the purpose of man's life? Not simply to become better, more virtuous, more courteous, but a god by grace. And what is the difference between the Holy God and deified man? That our Maker and Creator is God by nature and according to His nature, while we become gods by grace, for although by nature we remain men, with His grace we are deified.

When person unites with God by grace, he receives also the experience of God, he feels God. For otherwise how could we unite with God without feeling His grace?

The first-created in Paradise, before they sinned, could converse with God, could feel divine grace. God created man to be a priest, prophet, king: Priest to accept His existence and the world as gifts of God, and to offer in return himself and the world to God eucharistically and doxologically; Prophet to understand the mysteries of God; King to reign in the material creation and himself, and to use nature not as a tyrant but as a ruler, not to abuse creation, but to use it thankfully. Today man does not use nature logically but acts selfishly and foolishly, with the result of destroying his natural surrounding and within it destroying himself.

If man had not sinned and replaced his love and obedience to God with his selfishness, he would not have separated from God, but would have been king, priest and prophet. However, our Holy God who hurts for His creature, wishes to return man back to the state where he again can become a true priest, prophet and king. To be able to again receive the experience of God and to unite with Him. For this, in the history of the Old Testament we see God preparing slowly the salvation of man with the coming of His Only Son. He thus gives graces like those that man had before his fall, like the grace of prophesy. In the Old Testament there were men, like the prophet Elijah, the prophet Isaiah, the prophet Moses, who received the prophetic grace and saw the glory of God. Except this grace was not generally given to all, nor was it for the full period of their lives, but was a partial grace that God gave them for a specific purpose and for defined occasions. Namely, whenever God wished these just men to declare the coming of Christ to the world or to declare His Will, they were given the capacity to receive some experiences and revelations.

However, the Prophet Joel prophesied that a time will come when God will give the grace of the Holy Spirit not only to select men and for a specific purpose, but to all people. Here is what the prophesy of Joel says: "I shall pour My Spirit upon all flesh", I shall give My Spirit to every person, "and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions" (Joel 2:28). Namely, my people will see spiritual visions, will see the mysteries of God. This pouring of the Holy Spirit happened during Pentecost. Then the grace of the Holy Spirit was given to the whole Church. This grace was not given during the period of the Old Testament because Christ was not yet incarnate. The communion of man with God had to first be restored for God to give the grace of the Holy Spirit to all the people. This communion our Savior Christ achieved through His Incarnation

The first union that God had with man in Paradise was not hypostatic and for this it failed. The second union is hypostatic, namely personal. In the hypostatic person of Christ, human nature was united undisturbed, properly, indivisibly, inseparably, with the divine nature forever. **No matter how much men sin, it is no more possible for human nature to separate from God, because in Jesus Christ, the God-man, it is united forever with the divine nature.**

For man therefore to be able to receive the Holy Spirit, to become priest, king and prophet, to know the mysteries of God and to feel God, he must become a member of the Body of Christ, of the Church. Jesus Christ is the only one, true and perfect priest, king and prophet. What Adam and Eve were created to do, they failed due to sin and selfishness, but was done by Christ. Now all of us, united with Christ, can partake in the three offices of Christ - the royal, the prophetic and the priestly. At this juncture we must clarify that with Holy Baptism and Chrismation, the Christian receives the priesthood but not the special priesthood that is obtained through tonsuring and through which the liturgists of the Church receive the grace to perform in the Church and to shepherd the laity.

Forms of Experience of the Grace of God

What are the experiences of grace that a Christian can receive so that his faith and Christian life not be for him something mental and external, but a true spiritual feeling of God, a communion with God, a habitation of God in which the complete man participates.

It is foremost an internal information that through faith in God he finds the true meaning of his life. He feels that his faith in Christ is a faith that comforts him internally, that gives meaning to his life, and guides him, that it is a strong light that illumines him. When he perceives the Christian faith within himself this way, he begins to live the grace of God. God is not something external to him.

Another experience of the grace of God man receives is when he hears in his heart the invitation of God to repent of his dark and sinful deeds, to return to the Christian life, to confess, to enter on the path of God. This voice of God he hears inside him is an early experience of the grace of God. All those years he lived away from God he could not understand anything.

He starts to repent: he confesses to the Confessor for the first time in his life. After confession he feels a great peace and joy that he never felt before. And then he says: "I have been comforted". This comfort is the visit of divine grace in a soul that has repented and God wishes to comfort it.

The tears of a repenting Christian when he prays and asks to be forgiven by God or when he confesses are tears of repentance. Those tears are very comforting. They bring lots of peace to the soul of man. Then man feels that these are the gifts and experiences of divine grace.

The deeper man repents and comes to a greater love of God and prays with godly eros, that much more those tears of repentance become tears of joy, tears of love and divine eros. Those tears that are higher than the tears of repentance, are also a higher visitation and experience of the grace of God.

We approach to commune the Body and Blood of Christ having repented, confessed, and fasting with spiritual preparation. After Holy Communion what do we feel? Deep peace in our soul, spiritual joy. This too is a visitation of Divine grace and an experience of God.

There are however other higher experiences of God. The higher experience of God is the vision of the uncreated Light. This Light the disciples of the Lord saw on the Mount of Transfiguration. They saw Christ shine like the sun with heavenly and divine light, which is not material, created light, like the sun and the other created lights. It was the uncreated Light, namely the Light of God, the Light of the Holy Trinity. Those who are completely cleansed from their passions and sin, and pray with true and pure prayer, they are found worthy of this great experience to see the Light of God in this life. This Light is what will be shining in eternal life. Not only can we see eternity from now, but we can also see from now this Light. For this Light envelops the Saints. We do not see it, but the pure of heart and Saints do see it. The bright halo that is painted around the faces of the Saints is the Light of the Holy Trinity that has illumined and sanctified them.

In the life of Basil the Great we read that Basil, when he was praying in his cell, he could be seen entirely shining as well as his cell which was illumined by the uncreated Light. We see the same in the lives of many Saints.

So, therefore, for someone to be found worthy to see the uncreated Light is one of the highest experiences of God, which is not given to everyone but to very few, those who have progressed in spiritual life. According to Abba Isaac, in every generation almost one man manages to see lucidly the uncreated Light. There are however even today Christians who are worthy to have this unique experience of God.

Of course we should also say that everyone that sees light does not mean that he sees the uncreated Light. The devil deceives and shows them other lights, demonic or psychological, to believe that it is the uncreated Light, when it is not. For this every Christian that hears something or has a certain experience, must not accept it as if from God, because he could be deceived by the devil. He must however confess it to his Confessor who will then tell him whether it is from God or if it is a deceit of demons. A lot of caution is needed in such cases.

Determination of a pure experience of the Grace of God

Let us now look at the conditions which ensure whether different experiences we have are genuine and not false.

The first condition is that we should be people of repentance. If we do not repent of our sins and cleanse ourselves of our passions we cannot see God. As the Lord says in His beatitudes, "Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God". The more man cleanses himself from his passions, repents and returns to God, that much better he could feel and see God.

To attempt to receive experiences of God with artificial ways and methods as is done in the heresies of Hinduism and in Yoga is false. Those experiences are not from God. Those are experiences that are derived from psychological ways.

The Holy Fathers tell us: "Give blood and receive the Spirit". The second condition: if you do not give the blood of your heart with your repentance, prayer, fasting, and asceticism, you cannot receive the grace of the Holy Spirit. **True spiritual experiences are given to those who through humility do not ask for spiritual experiences, but ask God for repentance and salvation.** To those who are humble and say, "My God, I am not worthy to receive a visitation of Thy grace, and divine and heavenly solace and spiritual pleasures". To those however who through pride ask God to give them experiences, He will not give them true and genuine experiences due to their pride. So therefore the second is humility.

The third condition to receive a true spiritual experience is to be in the Church. Not outside the Church. For outside the Church the devil will deceive us. When a sheep becomes separated from the flock, it will be destroyed by the wolf. Within the flock there is security. The Christian inside the Church is secure. However, when he leaves the Church, he is exposed to the deceits of other people and of demons. We have many examples of many people who did not obey the Church and in their spiritual state they fell into deceits. And they believed that they saw God or that they were visited by God when in reality the experiences they had were demonic and destructive to them. Also it helps greatly to have pure and warm prayer. The truth is that at the time of prayer God gives most spiritual experiences to man. For this, those who pray with longing, zeal and patience, receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the feeling of the grace of God.

As you may know, there is a prayer we say at the Holy Mountain and which you may also be saying: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner". This prayer which is characterized as noetic, heartfelt and unremitting when it is said with humility, with longing and persistence, brings in the heart of man the feeling of the grace of God.

{to be continued}

Why are Candles Lit and Lamps Placed in Front of Icons?

St. Nicholai (Velimirovich), Bishop of Ochrid, Serbia

First, because our faith is light. Christ said I am the light of the world. The light of candles reminds us of the light with which Christ enlightens our souls.

Second, in order to remind us of the light of the soul of that Saint before whom we are lighting the candle, for all Saints are called sons of light.

Third, in order to serve as a reproach to our dark deeds, sinful thoughts and desires, and to call us to life in the light of the Gospel, so that we will zealously strive to fulfill the commandments of the Savior: Let your light shine forth before men, that they may see your good works.

Fourth, that this might be our small sacrifice to God, Who sacrificed Himself for us; that the candle might be a small sign of our great gratitude and our holy love towards Him Whom we implore for life, health and salvation, and everything which only infinite, heavenly love can give.

Fifth, so that this might frighten the dark powers which sometimes attack us in time of prayer, drawing our thoughts away from our Creator to other subjects. For dark powers love darkness and flee from light, especially that light which is devoted to God and his Saints.

Sixth, in order to spur us to self-sacrifice. Just as the oil and the wick burn in the lamp, subject to our will, so let our souls burn with the flame of love in times of suffering, always subject to the will of God.

Seventh, in order to teach us that just as the candle cannot be lit without our hand, so also our heart, our inner lamp, cannot be lit without the holy fire of Divine Grace, even though it may be filled with all virtues. Because all of our virtues are only material, but from God comes the fire which ignites it.

St. John of Kronstadt:

"When you look at the candles and lamps burning in church, rise in thought from the material fire to the immaterial fire of the Holy Spirit, for our God is a consuming fire. When you see and smell the fragrant incense, rise in thought to the spiritual fragrance of the Holy Spirit, for we are unto God a sweet savor of Christ. Also, in contrast think of the spiritual stench, which is sin and endeavor to be filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit."

"Why is it necessary to pray at home and go to church to attend Divine services? And why it is necessary for you to eat and drink and walk in the fresh air every day or to work every day? In order to support the life of the body and strengthen it. It is also absolutely necessary to pray in order to support and stimulate the life of the soul, to strengthen the soul which is sick with sins, to cleanse it."

"I have to tell you: I'm disgusted when the church services are cut short, they're not done properly, our choirs don't practice enough, our people are sloppy at entry and exit. When we approach the church with that kind of level, what do you expect? What do we expect that our kids are going to do?"

+ Fr. Alexander Atty