



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

3101 Clairmont Ave. Birmingham, AL 35205

Church Tel. 930-9681 / 907-9447

Visit stsymeon.com

✘ **September 7, 2014** ✘

**Forefeast of the Nativity
of the Theotokos**

St. Macarius of Optina (1860)

Martyr Soson of Cilicia (304), St. Cassiane the Hymnographer (9th C)

St. Cloud, Abbot of Nogent-sur-Seine, near Paris (560), St. John, Archbishop of Novgorod (1186)

Today the barren gates
are opened!
The Virgin door of
God comes forth.
Today the fruit of Grace
begins to blossom
Revealing the Mother of
God to the world!
In her, the earthly will
unite with the heavenly,
for the salvation of our
souls! - *Vespers*

- ✘ Tomorrow – Feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos – Divine Liturgy 10:00am
- ✘ Next Sunday – Feast of the Elevation of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross
- ⇒ Church School begins next Sunday, Sept. 14 / Parish Meeting – Sunday, Sept. 21
- Tuesday, Sept. 9 - 6:30pm Inquirer's Class

Mediatress for Everyone

✘ Our Panagia (Theotokos) hastens everywhere. She bestows her grace abundantly upon anyone who fervently cries out to her. She is a mediatress to Christ for everyone, because she was deemed worthy to give birth to the Lord and to become the Mother of God. She carries Him in Her arms and continuously entreats Him. Since we sinners do not have the boldness to run directly to God from the start, we cry out to His Mother. She regenerates us; she intercedes; she anticipates all our afflictions. She is our protectress and helper, more honorable than all the angels, beyond compare more glorious than the Cherubim and Seraphim, second in rank only to the Holy Trinity. Oh, but she is so good, so sweet, that you want to embrace her at every moment and obtain consoling grace. The more you love, the more you are loved.

~ Blessed Elder Joseph the Hesychast ("Monastic Wisdom")

Two from St. Macarius of Optina (remembered today) ~ On the Cross:

✘ To bear the cross does not mean only visible, external sorrows, but also internal spiritual ones. One must endure darkness, faintheartedness and similar things as well. For God sends this for the destruction of our pride and acquiring of humility.

✘ We seek and desire sweet, spiritual enjoyment; I do not argue, it is pleasant-but it is lower than the cross. It is granted to us through the cross and without the cross it cannot last. It comes to us and leaves us according to the degree that we travel the way of the cross and humility.

Clouded Thinking

✘ They (the Apostles) had such a point of fear and despair that in their clouded thinking they thought Jesus was uncaring or indifferent about their salvation (on the stormy Sea of Galilee). How many of us, when distressed or pressured, lose our self-control, become hopeless and, some to ourselves, some aloud, repeat the complaint, "Lord, do you not care that we are perishing?" But! The One we say doesn't care pleads for us as eternal High Priest that we do not lose our faith."

+ Blessed Bishop Augoustinos of Florina

From the Holy Fathers

"... Godhead and flesh are different in their nature, yet the body of the Word of God was the Word's own; the Word that was united to it was not separated from the body. For this is the only way in which we can conceive of Emmanuel, which means 'God with us' (Mt. 1:23). There is no other way. That is precisely why on one occasion, having made Himself manifest to us as man from the point of view of His self-emptying, He says, 'No one takes My life from Me' (Jn. 10:18), while on another occasion, conceived of as God from a heavenly point of view and one with His own flesh, He says, 'No one has ascended into heaven but He who has descended from heaven, the Son of Man' (Jn. 3:13)."

St. Cyril of Alexandria

"Prior to the incarnation of the Logos of God the kingdom of heaven was as far from us as the sky is from the earth; but when the King of heaven came to dwell amongst us and chose to unite Himself with us, the kingdom of Heaven drew near to us all. Since the Logos of God through His descent to us has brought the kingdom of heaven close to us, let us not distance ourselves from it by leading an unrepentant life. Let us rather flee the wretchedness of those who sit 'in darkness and the shadow of death' (Is. 9:2). Let us acquire the fruits of repentance: a humble disposition, compunction and spiritual grief, a gentle and merciful heart that loves righteousness and pursues purity, peaceful, peace-making, patient in toil, glad to endure persecution, loss, outrage, slander and suffering for the sake of truth and righteousness."

St. Gregory Palamas

"The Master's Body is the visible mountain of which Isaiah speaks, the Lord's house above the tops of all the mountains of reason (cf. Isa. 2:2 LXX). Neither an angel nor a man, but the incarnate Lord Himself came and saved us, being made like us for our sake while remaining unchanged as God. In the same way as He came down, without changing place but condescending to us, so He returns once more, without moving as God, but enthroning on high our human nature which He had assumed. It was truly right that the first begotten human nature from the dead (Rev. 1:5) should be presented there to God, as first-fruits from the first crop offered for the whole race of men."

St. Gregory Palamas

"We should give thanks to God, as it is said: 'In everything give thanks' (I Thess. 5:18). Closely linked to this phrase is another of St. Paul's injunctions: 'Pray without ceasing' (I Thess. 5:17), that is, be mindful of God at all times, in all places, and in every circumstance. For no matter what you do, you should keep in mind the Creator of all things. When you see the light, do not forget Him who gave it to you; when you see the sky, the earth, the sea and all that is in them, marvel at these things and glorify their Creator; when you put on clothing, acknowledge whose gift it is and praise Him who in His providence has given you life. In short, if everything you do becomes for you an occasion for glorifying God, you will be praying unceasingly. And in this way your soul will always rejoice, as St. Paul commends (cf. I Thess. 5:16)."

St. Peter of Damascus

"...For our sake loosing within Himself the bonds of bodily birth, He (Christ) granted us through spiritual birth, according to our own volition, power to become children of God instead of children of flesh and blood if we have faith in His Name (cf. Jn. 1:12-13). For the Savior the sequence was, first of all, Incarnation and bodily birth for my sake; and so thereupon the birth in the Spirit through Baptism, originally spurned by Adam, for the sake of my salvation and restoration by grace, or, to describe it even more vividly, my very remaking."

St. Maximos the Confessor

Concerning the Veneration of the Mother of God

From "The Whole Armor of Truth" by Russian New Martyr Fr. Nicholas Varzhansky,
reprinted in The Shepherd.

The All-Holy Virgin Mary is really Mother of God:

The Prophet foretold: "The Lord Himself shall give you a sign:

Behold a virgin shall conceive and bring forth a Son, and they shall call His name, Emmanuel" (Es. 7:14).

The Apostle writes: "Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, which says:

Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bring forth a Son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel, which means, God with us" (Man. 1:22-23).

'The Angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace with God; and behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a Son, and shalt call His name, Jesus. He shall be great and shall be called the Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:30-32).

The Apostle says: "God sent forth His Son (the Only-Begotten), Who was born of a woman" (Gal. 4:4).

"And without controversy, great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh" (1 Tim. 3:16).

Elizabeth called the Virgin Mary Mother of God: "Whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come unto me?" (Luke 1:43).

The Mother of God Brought Forth the Savior Not of a Man, but Miraculously of the Holy Spirit:

"Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her: The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee; therefore also that Holy Thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:30-35).

"The angel of the Lord appeared unto him (Joseph) in a dream, and said: Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife, for That which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:20).

The Mother of God was Ever-Virgin and Did Not Have Other Children:

The Prophet Ezekiel foretold of her: "The Lord said unto me: This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter in by it, because the Lord, the God of Israel, bath entered in by it, therefore it shall be shut" (Ezek. 44:2).

The Archangel Magnified the Mother of God:

"The angel came in unto her, and said, Rejoice, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women" (Luke 1:28).

The Righteous Elizabeth Blessed the Mother of God Through the Holy Spirit:

"Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the Fruit of thy womb" (Luke 1:41-42).

The Mother of God Herself Prophesied that They Would Bless Her:

“From henceforth all generations shall call me blessed” (Luke 1:48).

The Mother of God Recognized Her Own Greatness, Which the Mighty One had Made for Her:

“He that is Mighty hath done to me great things, and holy is His name” (Luke 1:49).

Therefore we must ask the dissenters: 1) Why do you not hymn the Mother of God, as the Archangel Gabriel hymned her? Why do you not imitate the angel? Doubtless you consider yourselves higher [that he]? 2) Why do you not magnify the Mother of God, as did Elizabeth? Do you not know that she spoke by the Holy Spirit? 3) Why do you not bless the Mother of God just as she herself once recognized and foretold that all generations would call her blessed? 4) Why do you not magnify the Mother of God, to whom He that is Mighty had once done great things? Who has permitted you to take away, what the Lord granted the Theotokos?

A Selection of Refutations of the Dissenters

The Tolstoyites say: The Theotokos is not Ever-Virgin, because she had other children, the brothers of the Lord.

The Orthodox reply: Had the All-holy Virgin had other children besides Jesus, then He would not have entrusted her to His disciple John, saying from His Cross: “Woman, behold thy son,” and to the disciple: “Behold thy mother! And from that hour the disciple took her unto his own home” (John 19:26-27), even though James, the brother of the Lord, lived on for a long time as Bishop of Jerusalem (Gal. 1:19), and other sons of Joseph were in Jerusalem (Matt. 13:55).

The dissenters say: The Savior rejected the Mother of God. He said: “Whosoever shall do the will of My Heavenly Father, the same is My brother, and sister, and mother” (Matt. 12:50).

The Orthodox reply: Here the Savior speaks of His spiritual bond with His disciples. But the Lord did not reject His mother. Even on the Cross He showed concern for her: John 19:26. His Most Pure Mother also was one who learned His teaching and was not separate from His other disciples: “these all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with several women and Mary the mother of Jesus” (Acts 1:14).

Can it be that the Mother of God did not do the will of the Heavenly Father? Surely she did so more than all others! Therefore she is the more worthy of honor! The Mother of God is not cast away by the words of Christ (Matt. 12:50).

We must enquire of the dissenters: If you are then the mother of the Savior, can it really be that you are worthy that they should address you: “Rejoice, O full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women?”

Can you really say of yourself, as did the Mother of God, that from henceforth all generations will call thee blessed, that the One that is Mighty hath done to thee great things?

The dissenters say: Why do you say: Most-holy Theotokos, save us? - There is one Savior - Christ.

So, why then does the Apostle Paul write to Timothy, “Continue in them, for in doing this thou shalt save thyself and them that hear thee” (1 Tim. 4:16)? Why does the Apostle Paul write: “And [I] might save some of them” (Rom. 11:14)?

Furthermore: “what knowest thou, O wife, whether thou shalt save thy husband?” (1 Cor. 7:16).

2,000 Years of Saints – Part II

Dr. David C. Ford, PhD

St. Romanos the Melodist - deacon in Constantinople blessed by the Theotokos with a beautiful voice and the gift of hymn-writing; the greatest composer of *kontakia* (hymns in lyrical, dialogue form) in the history of the Church

St. David of Wales - patron saint of Wales; a great abbot-bishop in southern Wales

St. Gregory the Great - very important Roman Pope; greatly strengthened the political power of the Papacy; sent St. Augustine of Canterbury on his mission to England; is especially remembered by Orthodox Christians for his writing of the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts

Seventh Century

The era of continued diligent efforts to win back the Monophysites, one result of which is the rise of the heresy of Monothelitism, which is condemned by the Sixth Ecumenical Council; the rise and spread of Islam, with the Arabs swiftly conquering Syria, Egypt, Palestine, Mesopotamia, Persia, and western North Africa; important mission work in Britain; and consolidation of the Catholic Faith over Arianism in Spain

St. Isidore of Seville - Archbishop of Seville; did much to strengthen Christianity in Spain, founding many schools and convents; had encyclopedic knowledge and wrote voluminously on many subjects, including on the Mozarabic liturgy

St. Sophronios of Jerusalem - renowned monk, then Patriarch of Jerusalem; he was the first major opponent of the heresy of Monothelitism

St. Maximos the Confessor - one of the greatest of the Church Fathers; a prolific writer on the spiritual life and related issues; did the major theological work to refute Monothelitism; died after torture in exile, since Monothelitism had been imposed by imperial decree

Sts. Ethelbert and Bertha - King and Queen of Kent (southeastern England); she was a Christian princess from France who helped to convert her husband to Christianity; together they encouraged the missionary efforts of St. Augustine of Canterbury to firmly establish Christianity in their and neighboring realms

St. Aidan - a monk from Iona, Scotland, who became Bishop of Lindisfarne (the Holy Island) in northeastern England; greatly strengthened Christianity in northern England

St. John Climakos - renowned ascetic Abbot of the Monastery of Mt. Sinai; wrote the *Ladder of Paradise*, one of the most celebrated works on the spiritual life in the history of the Church

Eighth Century

The era of Iconoclasm and the Seventh Ecumenical Council, Christian civilization flourishing in northern England, and important missionary work in northern Europe

St. (Venerable) Bede - an erudite monk in northern England; wrote the very important *History of the English Church and People*; the greatest representative of Northumbrian Christian culture, which will be taken to the Frankish Empire by Alcuin, court theolo-

gian to Charlemagne

St. John of Damascus - a monk at the Monastery of St. Sabas near Jerusalem; greatest theological defender of the icons during the first Iconoclastic era; also wrote the famous summary of Christian theology called *On the Orthodox Faith*

St. Tarasios - Patriarch of Constantinople; presided over the Seventh Ecumenical Council, which defended the icons against the Iconoclasts

St. Boniface - called the "Apostle of Germany"; greatly spread and strengthened the Church there with strong Papal support

Ninth Century

The era of the final Triumph of Orthodoxy over Iconoclasm and the subsequent flourishing of Byzantine Christian civilization; the early evangelization of Denmark, Sweden, and Russia; the beginnings of Slavic Christianity; and the growing estrangement between the Eastern and Western Churches

St. Theodore the Studite - Abbot of the Studios Monastery in Constantinople, restoring it and making it the center of Orthodox monasticism; most important theological defender of the icons during the second Iconoclastic period; helped write and compile the *Lenten Triodion*

St. Photios the Great - brilliant, scholarly, and strong Patriarch of Constantinople; defended the independence of the Byzantine Church against the interference of Pope Nicholas I of Rome; wrote the first, and still the most important, refutation of the *Filioque*, the Western addition to the Nicene Creed; fostered mission work among the Slavs in Moravia, Bulgaria, and Russia

St. Boris (Michael) - first Christian king of Bulgaria; with guidance and support from Patriarch St. Photios, he worked hard to spread Orthodoxy in his realm

Sts. Cyril and Methodios - missionary brothers working in Moravia; devised an alphabet for the Slavic language, did much translation work, and thus laid the basis for Slavic Christianity

St. Anskar - the "Apostle to the North"; great missionary in Denmark and Sweden, where he built the first Christian Church; also was a bishop in Germany

Tenth Century

The era of a growing alliance between the Byzantine Empire and Russia, culminating in the Baptism of the Rus; the Dark Ages in the West

St. John of Rila - renowned hermit in the mountains of southern Bulgaria; his monastery became a great center for the spiritual life

St. Simeon Metaphrastes - the first great Byzantine hagiographer, he compiled the great *Menologion*, a vast collection of Saints' Lives which he adapted (paraphrased - hence his 'surname'), or composed himself, for liturgical use

St. Athanasios the Athonite - founder of the first communal monastery on Mt. Athos, the Great Lavra,

in about 960

St. Dunstan - Archbishop of Canterbury; together with King Edgar did much to strengthen and reform the Church and State in England; he especially revived monasticism, which had become almost extinct there

St. Olga - Russian princess who ruled during the regency of her son Svyatoslav; first Russian ruler to accept Orthodox Christianity - in 957

St. Vladimir - grandson of St. Olga; accepted Orthodox Christianity, married the sister of Byzantine Emperor Basil II, and led the Baptism of the Rus at Kiev in 988; deeply converted, he became a noble Christian ruler, doing much to foster the spread of Christianity in his realm

Eleventh Century

The era of the Great Schism as the Roman Church separates from the Eastern Patriarchates; the Gregorian Reform strengthens the Papacy; the Byzantine Empire suffers aggression from the Normans in southern Italy and Sicily, and from the Seljuk Turks in Asia Minor; Orthodoxy blossoms in Russia in the era known as Kievan Christianity; and Mt. Athos flourishes, with imperial recognition as the center of Orthodox monasticism

St. Symeon the New Theologian - probably the greatest mystical theologian in the history of the Church; was abbot of the St. Mamas Monastery in Constantinople; died in exile in northwestern Asia Minor in 1022

Sts. Anthony and Theodosius - founders of the famous and highly influential Monastery of the Kievan Caves, where both semi-eremitic and communal monasticism flourished

St. Anna of Novgorod - daughter of the first Christian king of Sweden, King Olaf Sketkonung; she became the wife of Grand Prince Yaroslav the Wise of Kiev, and helped him to strengthen the Church in their realm

Twelfth Century

The era of the first three Crusades, which widened the rift between East and West; the great Comneni Dynasty cannot prevent Byzantium from steadily weakening; Serbia takes shape as a new Orthodox nation

Blessed Theophylact - a Greek, he was missionary Bishop of Ochrid for 25 years, ministering to the Slavs of western Bulgaria; highly educated, he wrote Biblical commentaries which are the finest in the Orthodox Church since those written by St. John Chrysostom

St. Irene of Constantinople - daughter of King Ladislas I of Hungary; very pious wife of Byzantine Emperor John Comnenos; under her inspiration and direction, the Monastery of the Pantokrator was built in Constantinople; with the blessing of her husband, she spent her last years as a nun

St. Simeon the Myrrh-Gusher - before entering monasticism, he was Stephen Nemanja, Grand Zupan of Serbia, who in uniting the Serbian principalities became the founder of the modern Serbian nation; fol-

lowed his son St. Sava to Mt. Athos, where he became a monk, taking the name Simeon; since his death in 1200 his relics have gushed myrrh

Thirteenth Century

The era of the fall of Constantinople to the knights of the Fourth Crusade, with a Latin kingdom set up there from 1204 to 1261; in Russia, the brutal invasion of the Tatars; in Serbia, the first archbishopric is established; and in Bulgaria, the Second Bulgarian Empire flourishes

St. Sava - first Archbishop of the Church of Serbia; worked hard to assure that Serbia would accept Orthodoxy, rather than Roman Catholicism

St. Alexander Nevsky - valiant prince of Novgorod who defeated the Swedes at the River Neva in 1240, and the Teutonic Knights at Lake Chud in 1242; wisely realizing he would have to submit as a vassal to the Tatar Golden Horde of Khan Batu, he helped to minimize further Tatar devastation in Russia

St. John Vatatzes - pious Emperor of Nicea (capital of the Byzantine Empire during the Latin occupation of Constantinople); labored much for the strengthening of the Church and State, laying the groundwork for the eventual retaking of Constantinople by the Byzantines

Fourteenth Century

The era of the rise of the Ottoman Turks, with their gradual encirclement of Constantinople and their conquest of Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece; also, the gradual rise of Moscow as the political and ecclesiastical capital of the Russian lands, and the beginning of a tremendous flourishing of monasticism in Russia

St. Gregory Palamas - Archbishop of Thessalonica; an outstanding theologian, most important for his careful articulation of the distinction between God's Essence and His Energies, which played a central role in his defense of the mystical/ascetical practices of the hesychastic monks on Mt. Athos

St. Nicholas Cabasilas - disciple (probably a layman) of St. Gregory Palamas; in his *The Life in Christ*, he emphasized that all Christians are called to experience intimate union with Christ, especially through partaking of the Sacraments

St. Sergius of Radonezh - one of Russia's most beloved saints; founded the famous Holy Trinity-St. Sergius Monastery which would become the premier monastic/spiritual center in Russia; over 200 monasteries would be founded through his direct or indirect influence

St. Dmitry Donskoy - Grand Prince of Moscow; under the guidance of St. Sergius of Radonezh, he met and defeated the Tatars at Kulikovo Pole in 1380 - the Russians' first victory over the Tatars

Fifteenth Century

The era of the failure of the Council of Florence to achieve reconciliation between the Roman and Eastern Churches; the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453; the continued rise of the modern Russian state under Moscow, with the final overthrow of the Tatar yoke.

Spending and Morality

Walter Williams, July 09, 2014 (excerpt)

Is it moral for Congress to forcibly use one person to serve the purposes of another? I believe that most Americans would pretend that to do so is offensive. Think about it this way. Suppose I saw a homeless, hungry elderly woman huddled on a heating grate in the dead of winter. To help the woman, I ask somebody for a \$200 donation to help her out. If the person refuses, I then use intimidation, threats and coercion to take the person's money. I then purchase food and shelter for the needy woman. My question to you: Have I committed a crime? I hope that most people would answer yes. It's theft to take the property of one person to give to another.

Now comes the hard part. Would it be theft if I managed to get three people to agree that I should take the person's money to help the woman? What if I got 100, 1 million or 300 million people to agree to take the person's \$200? Would it be theft then? What if instead of personally taking the person's \$200, I got together with other Americans and asked Congress to use Internal Revenue Service agents to take the person's \$200? The bottom-line question is: Does an act that's clearly immoral when done privately become moral when it is done collectively and under the color of law? Put another way, does legality establish morality?

For most of our history, Congress did a far better job of limiting its activities to what was both moral and constitutional. As a result, federal spending was only 3 to 5 percent of the gross domestic product from our founding until the 1920s, in contrast with today's 25 percent. Close to three-quarters of today's federal spending can be described as Congress taking the earnings of one American to give to another through thousands of handout programs, such as farm subsidies, business bailouts and welfare.

During earlier times, such spending was deemed unconstitutional and immoral. James Madison, the acknowledged father of our Constitution, said, "Charity is no part of the legislative duty of the government." In 1794, when Congress appropriated \$15,000 to assist some French refugees, Madison stood on the floor of the House of Representatives to object, saying, "I cannot undertake to lay my finger on that article of the Constitution which granted a right to Congress of expending, on objects of benevolence, the money of their constituents." Today's Americans would crucify a politician expressing similar statements.

There may be nitwits out there who'd assert, "That James Madison guy forgot about the Constitution's general welfare clause." Madison had that covered, explaining in a letter, "If Congress can do whatever in their discretion can be done by money, and will promote the general welfare, the Government is no longer a limited one possessing enumerated powers, but an indefinite one." Thomas Jefferson agreed, writing: Members of Congress "are not to do anything they please to provide for the general welfare. ... It would reduce the (Constitution) to a single phrase, that of instituting a Congress with power to do whatever would be for the good of the United States; and, as they would be the sole judges of the good or evil, it would be also a power to do whatever evil they please."

The bottom line is that spending is not our basic problem. We've become an immoral people demanding that Congress forcibly use one American to serve the purposes of another. Deficits and runaway national debt are merely symptoms of that larger problem.

Patristic vs. Contemporary Secular Notions Concerning Thoughts

Fr. Alexis Trader, September 21, 2012, *Ancient Christian Wisdom Blog*

I would like to make some general statements about the contemporary secular worldview concerning the thoughts. Such a worldview holds that there is essentially no moral character to thoughts; only actions are right or wrong in relation to the rights of others in society at large. Thoughts are neither good nor bad, but in the language of evolution, adaptive to one's environment leading to self-actualization, or maladaptive leading to mental distress. And of course, the distress is mine to keep if I want it.

Thoughts expressing anger, lust, or jealousy are often justified in terms of one's rights. For example, "I have every right to be angry, can you believe how he spoke to me?" or "I should have received that promotion, instead they give it to someone who has half my experience." This same worldview also maintains that whenever we have been hurt by someone else, we have every right to tell someone about it in order to elicit the requisite sympathy. According to this way of thinking, we are even justified in wishing for retribution on those who have offended or hurt us.

That is not the worldview of the ancient Fathers who take their cue from the Gospel and their dynamic relationship with Christ. Ancient Christian Wisdom provides a lively portrait of the patristic understanding, "Obedience to Christ's commandments and the struggle to attain humility by reproaching oneself, questioning one's thoughts, and seeking advice are actions that weaken the hold that thoughts have over a person. Knowledge about when and how a provocation or suggestion becomes a sin of thought increases the believers' introspective awareness as well as their sense of responsibility for the development of their thoughts. Thus, this knowledge increases the probability that they will arrest a bad thought at an early stage of development."

Perhaps the most fundamental difference between the two worldviews is that one is stiflingly egocentric, based entirely on me and my own fallen world, while the other is expansively Christocentric, having as a foundation the wonderful revelation of Christ that

opens to the believer new, transfigured worlds bathed in the light of holiness. For the contemporary secularist, need fulfillment determines the utility of thoughts. The ancient Fathers' measuring stick is the will of God expressed through the commandments of Christ and the call to humility, compassion, and sacrificial love. The fulfillment of these commandments and the presence of these virtues—and not one's rights and wants—are what determine the quality of the thoughts. And this is something that the soul can empirically sense.

Following egocentric, selfish thoughts to their ultimate aim leaves the soul feeling empty, tired, and ultimately alone. Following the commandments of Christ or the virtues of the Christian life attracts the grace of God that brings fullness, renewed strength, and communion with things holy into human life. Although these two worlds are as different as night and day, through carelessness and negligence Christians can descend into twilight in which direction for thought and action is taken from contradictory sources, pulling this way and that. And without consistent effort, that twilight quickly becomes shrouded in an almost impenetrable darkness. The only protection and path of return at our disposal is a consistent prayer life, frequent confession, fasts, and participation in the Divine Liturgy.

Living in a world with such a different worldview affects us all. It can even affect the clergy, especially in their no doubt well-meaning desire to speak in the language of the wider culture and to be relevant. And although it is good to look at the world and all that is in it as a parable for our instruction, the clergy need to be especially careful in seeking inspiration from contemporary examples from popular culture. They need to take heed to St. Gregory Palamas' advice about the best of classical culture that he likened to a serpent that needed to be handled with great care in order to extract the venom for later pharmaceutical use. To make sure that they offer words and counsels that will introduce the faithful into a worldview that can transfigure their lives, it is incomparably wiser to turn to the holy Fathers, rather than to lesser figures with far lesser lights. And the Fathers, the ancient Fathers, are always relevant. They speak to the deepest problems that people face in life and in death. They surely can speak to all of us.