



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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✠ **December 6, 2015** ✠

Advent: The Nativity Fast

St. Nicholas the Wonderworker,
Archbishop of Myra in Lycia (4th C)

O Nicholas,
the Servant of Christ!
Thou wast shown as truly
victorious to the faithful people!
Strong against temptation,
And worthy of thy name!
Called from all places,
Thou art swift to come
to those who turn with love
to thy protection!
Appearing by day and night
to the faithful,
Thou dost save them
from danger and temptation!
~Vespers Stikhera of the Feast

✠ **Tomorrow: Inquirer's Class – 6:30pm**

✠ **Wednesday, December 9, 6:30pm ~ Akathist to the Theotokos**

✠ **Nativity Schedule** ✠

✠ **Christmas Eve, Thursday, December 24:**

✠ **10:00am Royal Hours of the Nativity**

✠ **Christmas Eve Supper 3:00pm Church Hall**

✠ **Nativity Eve Vigil – 6:00pm Compline & Matins**

✠ **Christmas Day, Friday, December 25:**

✠ **Nativity Divine Liturgy ~ 10:00am** ✠



'Lord, You created us to tend toward You....and our hearts are restless until they come to rest in you.'

— St. Augustine of Hippo

And he said to them, "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."
{Luke 12:15}

St Nicholas the Wonderworker and Archbishop of Myra in Lycia

Saint Nicholas, the Wonderworker, Archbishop of Myra in Lycia is famed as a great Saint pleasing unto God. He was born in the city of Patara in the region of Lycia (on the south coast of the Asia Minor peninsula), and was the only son of pious parents Theophanes and Nonna, who had vowed to dedicate him to God.

As the fruit of the prayer of his childless parents, the infant Nicholas from the very day of his birth revealed to people the light of his future glory as a wonderworker. His mother, Nonna, after giving birth was immediately healed from illness. The newborn infant, while still in the baptismal font, stood on his feet three hours, without support from anyone, thereby honoring the Most Holy Trinity. St Nicholas from his infancy began a life of fasting, and on Wednesdays and Fridays he would not accept milk from his mother until after his parents had finished their evening prayers.

From his childhood Nicholas thrived on the study of Divine Scripture; by day he would not leave church, and by night he prayed and read books, making himself a worthy dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. Bishop Nicholas of Patara rejoiced at the spiritual success and deep piety of his nephew. He ordained him a reader, and then elevated Nicholas to the priesthood, making him his assistant and entrusting him to instruct the flock.

{continued on p. 3}

Pearls of the Holy Fathers (12)

✠ A person who approaches a fountain marvels at the endless stream of water always gushing forth and bubbling out; never could he say that he has seen all the water. In the same way, the person looking at the divine, invisible beauty will always discover it anew, since it will be seen as something newer and more wondrous in comparison to what he had already comprehended.

~ **St. Gregory of Nyssa**

✠ God does not allow the same warfare and temptations to this generation as He did formerly, for men are weaker now and cannot bear so much.

St. Anthony the Great

✠ Judge no one and love especially those who tempt you. If you think deeply, you will find that it is they who lead us to achievement.

St. Barsanouphios of Gaza

✠ Man is like a tree; physical work is the leaves and guarding what lies within is the fruit. Now it says in the Gospel, "Every tree which brings not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire" (Matt. 3:10). Clearly, then, all our care should be about the fruit, that is, about guarding the mind. But we also need the protection and adornment of leaves, that is, physical work. **Abba Agathon of Egypt**

✠ To preserve heedfulness one must retire into oneself, according to the word of the Lord: "Salute no man by the way" (Luke 10:4), that is, do not speak without need, unless someone run after you to hear from you something profitable.

St. Seraphim of Sarov

✠ If you find yourself in a monastery, do not go to another place, for that will harm you a great deal. Just as the bird who abandons the eggs she was sitting on prevents them from hatching, so the monk or the nun grows cold and their faith dies, when they go from one place to another.

Amma Syncletica

✠ When you take food to nourish your body, you can scarcely be induced to leave the table before you have fully satisfied your need and, except for an urgent reason, you will not readily do so. How much more eagerly ought you to linger over spiritual nourishment and strengthen your soul with prayer; for the soul is as far superior to the body as heaven is above the earth and heavenly things above those of earth.

St. Basil the Great

✠ A holy man who had seen someone in the act of committing a sin wept bitterly and said, "He today, and I tomorrow. In truth, even if someone commits a sin in your presence, do not judge him, but consider yourself a worse sinner than he."

Apophthegmata Patrum (Anonymous Sayings)

✠ Do not make light of a fall even if it be the most venial of faults; rather, be quick to repair it by repentance, although many others may commit a large number of faults, slight and grievous, and remain unrepentant.

St. Basil the Great

✠ So long as we are on earth, we must learn to wage war with the enemy.

~ **St. Silouan the Athonite**

✠ The whole essence and effort of the devil is to separate and remove our attention from God and entice it toward worldly concerns and pleasures. He works interiorly, in the heart, suggesting good works and resolutions and reasonable, or rather unreasonable, thoughts. We must not pay the slightest attention to these things. The spiritual combat consists in keeping the mind fixed on God, in not entertaining or approving impure thoughts, and in not paying any attention to the phantasms which the detestable, diabolic picture-maker stirs up in our imagination. **St. John Chrysostom**

In serving the Lord the youth was fervent of spirit, and in his proficiency with questions of faith he was like an Elder, who aroused the wonder and deep respect of believers. Constantly at work and vivacious, in unceasing prayer, the priest Nicholas displayed great kind-heartedness towards the flock, and towards the afflicted who came to him for help, and he distributed all his inheritance to the poor.

There was a certain formerly rich inhabitant of Patara, whom St Nicholas saved from great sin. The man had three grown daughters, and in desperation he planned to sell their bodies so they would have money for food. The Saint, learning of the man's poverty and of his wicked intention, secretly visited him one night and threw a sack of gold through the window. With the money the man arranged an honorable marriage for his daughter. St Nicholas also provided gold for the other daughters, thereby saving the family from falling into spiritual destruction. In bestowing charity, St Nicholas always strove to do this secretly and to conceal his good deeds.

The Bishop of Patara decided to go on pilgrimage to the holy places at Jerusalem, and entrusted the guidance of his flock to St Nicholas, who fulfilled this obedience carefully and with love. When the bishop returned, Nicholas asked his blessing for a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Along the way the Saint predicted a storm would arise and threaten the ship. St Nicholas saw the devil get on the ship, intending to sink it and kill all the passengers. At the entreaty of the despairing pilgrims, he calmed the waves of the sea by his prayers. Through his prayer a certain sailor of the ship, who had fallen from the mast and was mortally injured was also restored to health.

When he reached the ancient city of Jerusalem and came to Golgotha, St Nicholas gave thanks to the Savior. He went to all the holy places, worshiping at each one. One night on Mount Sion, the closed doors of the church opened by themselves for the great pilgrim. Going round the holy places connected with the earthly service of the Son of God, St Nicholas decided to withdraw into the desert, but he was stopped by a divine voice urging him to return to his native country. He returned to Lycia, and yearning for a life of quietude, the Saint entered into the brotherhood of a monastery named Holy Zion, which had been founded by his uncle. But the Lord gain indicated another path for him, "Nicholas, this is not the vineyard where you shall bear fruit for Me. Return to the world, and glorify My Name there." So he left Patara and went to Myra in Lycia.

Upon the death of Archbishop John, Nicholas was chosen as Bishop of Myra after one of the bishops of the Council said that a new archbishop should be revealed by God, not chosen by men. One of the elder bishops had a vision of a radiant Man, Who told him that the one who came to the church that night and was first to enter should be made archbishop. He would be named Nicholas. The bishop went to the church at night to await Nicholas. The Saint, always the first to arrive at church, was stopped by the bishop. "What is your name, child?" he asked. God's chosen one replied, "My name is Nicholas, Master, and I am your servant."

After his consecration as archbishop, St Nicholas remained a great ascetic, appearing to his flock as an image of gentleness, kindness and love for people. This was particularly precious for the Lycian Church during the persecution of Christians under the emperor Diocletian (284-305). Bishop Nicholas, locked up in prison together with other Christians for refusing to worship idols, sustained them and exhorted them to endure the fetters, punishment and torture. The Lord preserved him unharmed. Upon the accession of St Constantine (May 21) as emperor, St Nicholas was restored to his flock, which joyfully received their guide and intercessor.

Despite his great gentleness of spirit and purity of heart, St Nicholas was a zealous and ardent warrior of the Church of Christ. Fighting evil spirits, the Saint made the rounds of the pagan temples and shrines in the city of Myra and its surroundings, shattering the idols and turning the temples to dust.

In the year 325 St Nicholas was a participant in the First Ecumenical Council. This Council proclaimed the Nicene Symbol of Faith, and he stood up against the heretic Arius with the likes of Sts Sylvester the Bishop of Rome (January 2), Alexander of Alexandria (May 29), Spyridon of Trymethon (December 12) and other Fathers of the Council.

St Nicholas, fired with zeal for the Lord, assailed the heretic Arius with his words, and then hit him in the face. For this reason, he was deprived of the emblems of his episcopal rank and placed under suspension and guard. That night several of the holy Fathers had the same vision, seeing the Lord Himself and the Mother of God returning to him the Gospel and omophorion. The Fathers of the Council agreed that the audacity of the Saint was pleasing to God, and restored the Saint to the office of bishop.

Having returned to his own diocese, the Saint brought it peace and blessings, sowing the word of Truth, uprooting heresy, nourishing his flock with sound doctrine, and also providing food for their bodies.

Even during his life the Saint worked many miracles. One of the greatest was the deliverance from death of three men unjustly condemned by the Governor, who had been bribed. The Saint boldly went up to the executioner and took his sword, already suspended over the heads of the condemned. The Governor, denounced by St Nicholas for his wrong doing, repented and begged for forgiveness.

Witnessing this remarkable event were three military officers, who were sent to Phrygia by the emperor Constantine to put down a rebellion. They did not suspect that soon they would also be compelled to seek the intercession of St Nicholas. Evil men slandered them before the emperor, and the officers were sentenced to death. Appearing to St Constantine in a dream, St Nicholas called on him to overturn the unjust sentence of the military officers.

He worked many other miracles, and struggled many long years at his labor. Through the prayers of the Saint, the city of Myra was rescued from a terrible famine. He appeared to a certain Italian merchant and left him three gold pieces as a pledge of payment. He requested him to sail to Myra and deliver grain there. More than once, the Saint saved those drowning in the sea, and provided release from captivity and imprisonment.

Having reached old age, St Nicholas peacefully fell asleep in the Lord. His venerable relics were preserved incorrupt in the local cathedral church and flowed with curative myrrh, from which many received healing. In the year 1087, his relics were transferred to the Italian city of Bari, where they rest even now (See May 9).

The name of the great Saint of God, the hierarch and wonderworker Nicholas, a speedy helper and suppliant for all hastening to him, is famed in every corner of the earth, in many lands and among many peoples. In Russia there are a multitude of cathedrals, monasteries and churches consecrated in his name. There is, perhaps, not a single city without a church dedicated to him.

Many of the churches devoted to the Saint were those established at market squares by Russian merchants, sea-farers and those who traveled by land, venerating the wonderworker Nicholas as a protector of all those journeying on dry land and sea. They sometimes received the name among the people of "Nicholas soaked."

St Nicholas is the patron of travelers, and we pray to him for deliverance from floods, poverty, or any misfortunes. He has promised to help those who remember his parents, Theophanes and Nonna. St Nicholas is also commemorated on May 9 (The transfer of his relics).

O Holy Father Nicholas, pray unto God for us!

On masculine Orthodoxy...

The Most-Holy Virgin Theotokos

...from Frederica Matthews-Green, and her book, *The Corner of East and Now*

“...western Christian faith has long been considered women’s business.”

“Through the prayers of the Theotokos, O Savior, save us.” This is our title for the Virgin Mary, which proclaims that the child she bore was God Himself; “Theotokos” means “God-bearer.” Orthodox sing to Mary a lot, and in this as in other things I find less softness and sentiment than in the West. She is our Dread Champion, as we sing during Matins; elsewhere she’s hailed as Captain Leader, and even Queen of War.

My daughter Megan comes home from her Roman Catholic college with prayer cards spilling out of her textbooks: dreamy Marys gazing tenderly, fresh-faced virgin saints, roses and clouds and blushes. Even the soldier saints look like adolescent boys with dewy expressions. I hope those rough old soldiers, now bivouacked upstairs, get a good laugh out of these cards.

Western and Eastern Christianity have so much overtly in common that the underlying differences in approach are easy to miss. **To use archetypal terms, the eastern interest in challenge and rigor could be described as masculine. In Orthodoxy, Mary is a strong figure, not a helpless or vapid one.** She’s our Captain because she is first in the pack, the leader of all Christians, and it is her example we all follow, men as well as women. We strive like athletes, as St. Paul said (I Corinthians 9:24—27), to overcome the petty self-defeating behaviors that distract us from union with God.

Western Christianity, I find, has a comparatively feminine flavor. The emphasis is on nurturing and comfort; reunion with God occurs as He heals our inner wounds. In the West, we want God to console and reassure us; in the East, we want God to help us grow up and stop acting like jerks.

This situation in the West has been heightened in recent years by pervasive consumerism, which encourages self-focus and self-indulgence. Yet

western Christian faith has long been considered women’s business. Forty years ago Norman Rockwell captured the idea with his “Easter Morning”: Dad slouches in his pajamas, awash in newspapers, while Mom and the kids march past him in their Sunday best. A hundred years before that clergy were already being stigmatized as prissy and effeminate, and in the seventeenth century Cotton Mather complained that only women came to church.

Author Leon Podles traces this situation all the way back to the thirteenth century and the writings of St. Bernard of Clairvaux. St. Bernard’s mysticism was based on imagining oneself the Bride of Christ, which made it immensely popular with women though less accessible to men. As this emotional, individualized, and self-focused spirituality spread, there arose in reaction the dry and deliberate Scholastic theology epitomized by St. Thomas Aquinas. The outcome was an enduring and unfortunate split in the West between heart and head. In annoying confirmation of stereotypes, women generally preferred and patronized heart-based spirituality, while men went for the head.

As far as popular practice is concerned, heart won. Podles cites church growth expert Lyle Schaller as finding a 1986 average of 60 percent women to 40 percent men in American churches, a split that has since widened. The inner circle of laity who actually run the parish is even more likely to be populated by females, even when ordained leadership is all-male. Podles quotes Jesuit theologian Patrick Arnold as finding the female-to-male balance in churches he’s visited ranging from 2:1 to 7:1, and “some liberal Presbyterian or Methodist congregations are practically bereft of men.” Sociologist Edward H. Thompson states that “throughout all varieties of black religious activity, women represent from 75 to 90 percent of the participants.”

For hundreds of years now it’s been assumed that being religious is women’s work. Men stay out of that kitchen. They still hunger for transcendence and meaning, of course, but seek these through alternative means that do not include felt banners, balloons, or hugs: career power, competitive sports, or, when particularly belittled or hopeless, through violence, drugs, and danger.

It's not religion that's feminine, but specifically western Christianity of recent centuries. Islam and Judaism, rigorous and demanding faiths, are balanced the other way, with more active men than women. Eastern Orthodoxy, likewise, is strongly attractive to men, and church attendance is more gender balanced. As Podles points out, among Christians only the Orthodox write basso profundo church music.

But while there is rigor in Orthodox spirituality, there is passion as well, and strict categories of masculine and feminine don't consistently apply. When you're used to a culture that presumes a division between head and heart, coming into one that doesn't is a little disorienting. Orthodox women as well as men fast and adhere to spiritual disciplines, led by our Champion Leader; men as well as women offer prayers of startling vulnerability, and cultivate humility, gentleness, and peace.

The image of the Church as the Bride of Christ was not invented by St. Bernard, but is just as much a part of Scripture as the image of the athlete; both, in fact, come from the pen of St. Paul. Some have said that ultimately all creation is feminine in response to the Creator's masculine. I recently heard my Bishop Basil expanding on this theme. "Imagine what heaven will be like! The Scripture calls it a wedding feast, and we know what happens on a wedding night, that two become one flesh. St. Paul says of married love that it represents Christ and His Church. Somehow, that is our destiny. We are all going to be the bride of God," said this hearty, bearded forty-nine-year-old, without hesitation or blush.

His comfort with this idea, which might in another context be called "genderbending," startled me, but I saw that it was strange only if you think that religion is really about sex. The reverse is more likely true: that sex is about religion, that God invented sex to teach us something about eternal reality. How could we understand what it's like for two to become one, union without annihilation? God came up with a human experience that would be universal, common, and enjoyable, and said, "Here, this is what it's like.

This is where you're going." Likewise, eating food helps us to understand union in the Eucharist, and parenting teaches us what the Father's love is like. Sex, eating, parenting are all good things in themselves, but are also handy object lessons, available to give us ready, simple, intimate analogies for what heavenly reality will be like. In light of this, I think heaven is going to be not so bad.

Contrary to popular belief, the Church is not anti-sex. In speaking of the union of the Church with Christ, St. John Chrysostom draws a frank parallel to marital union; the sexual bonding of husband and wife, he says, is like the uniting of fragrance and ointment in the making of perfume. He rebukes those who were shocked at his words: "You call my words immodest, because I speak of the nature of marriage, which is honorable. . . By calling my words immodest you condemn God, Who is the author of marriage." Chrysostom affirms St. Paul's image of the Church as the Bride of Christ: "Shall I also tell you how marriage is a mystery of the Church?" he writes. "The Church was made from the side of Christ, and He united Himself to her in a spiritual intercourse."

So which is it? Are Christians archetypally feminine, vessels of grace nurturing the wounded of the world, rapt in intimate communion with the Divine? Or are we archetypally masculine, athletes, warriors, leaving all behind for Christ's sake, taking up our crosses, valiantly shedding blood in martyrdom? Gender has a certain fluidity when we enter the spiritual world; both males and females can wear attributes of the opposite sex, and both sexes are necessary for glorious completion. It might be observed that in these examples the individual Christian bears masculine traits, but the assembled body, the Church, takes on the feminine role of Bride. No analogy should be pressed too far. Ideally, these gender roles are intriguing and even delightful in their playful contrasts but not rigidly assigned. The reality they reflect is appealing but will someday be shown to be not ultimate. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. . . . There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-28).

This is Not a Day Care. It's a University!

Dr. Everett Piper, President, Oklahoma Wesleyan University

This past week, I actually had a student come forward after a university chapel service and complain because he felt “victimized” by a sermon on the topic of 1 Corinthians 13. It appears that this young scholar felt offended because a homily on love made him feel bad for not showing love! In his mind, the speaker was wrong for making him, and his peers, feel uncomfortable.

I'm not making this up. Our culture has actually taught our kids to be this self-absorbed and narcissistic! Any time their feelings are hurt, they are the victims! Anyone who dares challenge them and, thus, makes them “feel bad” about themselves, is a “hater,” a “bigot,” an “oppressor,” and a “victimizer.”

I have a message for this young man and all others who care to listen. That feeling of discomfort you have after listening to a sermon is called a conscience! An altar call is supposed to make you feel bad! It is supposed to make you feel guilty! The goal of many a good sermon is to get you to confess your sins—not coddle you in your selfishness. The primary objective of the Church and the Christian faith is your confession, not your self-actualization!

So here's my advice:

If you want the chaplain to tell you you're a victim rather than tell you that you need virtue, this may not be the university you're looking for. If you want to complain about a sermon that makes you feel less than loving for not showing love, this might be the wrong place.

If you're more interested in playing the “hater” card than you are in confessing your own hate; if you want to arrogantly lecture, rather than humbly learn; if you don't want to feel guilt in your soul when you are guilty of sin; if you want to be enabled rather than confronted, there are many universities across the land (in Missouri and elsewhere) that will give you exactly what you want, but Oklahoma Wesleyan isn't one of them.

At OKWU, we teach you to be selfless rather than self-centered. We are more interested in you practicing personal forgiveness than political revenge. We want you to model interpersonal reconciliation rather than foment personal conflict. We believe the content of your character is more important than the color of your skin. We don't believe that you have been victimized every time you feel guilty and we don't issue “trigger warnings” before altar calls.

Oklahoma Wesleyan is not a “safe place”, but rather, a place to learn: to learn that life isn't about you, but about others; that the bad feeling you have while listening to a sermon is called guilt; that the way to address it is to repent of everything that's wrong with you rather than blame others for everything that's wrong with them. This is a place where you will quickly learn that you need to grow up!

This is not a day care. This is a university!

The Pornography Plague and Family Breakup

“Western culture has renounced renunciation, has cast off the ascetic spirit, and therefore has de-converted from Christianity whether it knows it or not.”

Rod Dreher:

I was talking recently with a Catholic priest friend who works as a campus minister. He was telling me that the No. 1 problem the college students he works with face is pornography. Nothing else is remotely close. He says it affects the kids profoundly, in particular their ability to form normal, healthy relationships with the opposite sex. The sexual instinct is so powerful in the human person, especially in males, that once it attaches itself to pornographic images, the bondage is extremely strong. This is particularly true within a culture in which any kind of restraint on sexual fantasy and activity is rapidly dissolving — indeed, in a culture in which sexual desire is considered at the core of one’s identity as a person.

Western culture has renounced renunciation, has cast off the ascetic spirit, and therefore has de-converted from Christianity whether it knows it or not. In bringing this up with my priest friend, I asked him why he thought sex was at the center of the Christian symbolism that has not held.

“It goes back to Genesis 1,” he said. “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Then he told them to ‘be fruitful and multiply.’ We see right there in the beginning the revelation that male and female, that complementarity, symbolizes the Holy Trinity, and in their fertility they carry out the life of the Trinity.”

In other words, from the perspective of the Hebrew Bible, gender complementarity and fertility are built into the nature of ultimate reality, which is God. Our role as human beings is to strive to harmonize our own lives with that reality, because in so doing we dwell in harmony with God.

“Do you know what the word ‘symbol’ means in the original Greek?” he asked. I said I did not.

“It means ‘to bring together,’” he said.

“To integrate,” I replied.

“Yes. Now, do you know what the antonym for symbol is?”

“No.”

“It is diabolos, which means to tear apart, to separate, to throw something through another thing.”

“So when something is diabolic, it means it is a disintegrating force?”

“You could say that, yes,” he said. “All the time I’m dealing with the fallout from divorce and families breaking up. Kids who don’t know their fathers. You should hear these confessions. It’s a huge deal. You can see the loss of the sense of what family is for, and why it’s important.”

The priest said that the students he works with are so confused, needy, and broken. Many of them have never seen what a functional, healthy family looks like, and have grown up in a culture that devalues the fundamental moral, metaphysical, and spiritual principles that make stable and healthy family formation possible — especially the belief that the generative powers of sex, within male-female complementarity, is intimately related to the divine nature, and the ongoing life of the Trinity. Nobody has ever explained it to them, he says. If they’ve heard anything from the Church, it’s something like, “Don’t do this because the Bible says not to” — which is not enough in this time and place. And many of them have never, or have rarely, seen it modeled for them by the adults in their lives.

- Rod Dreher