

## ***Fire & Light***

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

3101 Clairmont Ave. Birmingham, AL 35205

Church Tel. 205-930-9681 / 205-907-9447

Visit [stsymeon.com](http://stsymeon.com)

✠ **February 21, 2016** ✠

### **Sunday of the**

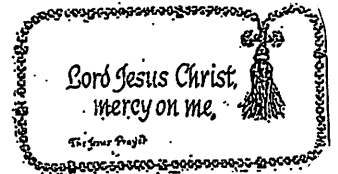
### **Publican and Pharisee**

St. Timothy of Symbola in Bithynia (795)

St. Eustathius, Archbishop of Antioch (337)

### **Fast- Free Week!**

Brothers, let us not pray  
like the Pharisee!  
He who exalts himself  
will be humbled!  
Let us prepare to abase  
ourselves by fasting!  
Let us cry aloud with the  
voice of the Publican:  
O God, forgive us sinners!



➤ **House Blessings conclude this week**

✠ **Holy Baptism – Saturday, February 27, 3:00pm ~ The Zannis Family:**

**George, Tamara, Nicole and Alexandra**

Friday and Saturday: Pre-Lenten Retreat at Holy Trinity Cathedral - with Bishop Savas of Pittsburgh. See flyer for details.

✠ "The evil one cannot comprehend the joy we receive from the spiritual life; for this reason he is jealous of us, he envies us and sets traps for us, and we become grieved and fall. We must struggle, because without struggles we do not obtain virtues." **Elder Ieronymos of Aegina (1966)**

✠ For now is the time to labor for the Lord, for salvation is found in the day of affliction: for it is written: 'In your patience gain ye your souls' (Luke 21:19) **Abba Isidore of Skete**

✠ It is by warfare that the soul makes progress. ~ **Abba John the Short**

✠ Why do you beat the air and run in vain? Every occupation has a purpose, obviously. Tell me then, what is the purpose of all the activity of the world? Answer, I challenge you! It is vanity of vanity: all is vanity. **St. John Chrysostom**

✠ If you guard your tongue, my brother, God will give you the gift of compunction of heart so that you may see your soul, and thereby you will enter into spiritual joy. But if your tongue defeats you— me in what I say to you— will never be able to escape from darkness. If you do not have a pure heart, at least have a pure mouth, as the blessed John said. **St. Isaac the Syrian**

✠ Keep in mind your future death, remembering that you do not know at what hour the thief will come. **Abba Rufus**

✠ **Metropolitan Kallistos Ware** reminds us: "Loyalty to Tradition, properly understood, is not something mechanical ... An Orthodox thinker must see Tradition from within, he must enter into its inner spirit. In order to live within Tradition, it is not enough simply to give intellectual assent to a system of doctrine, for Tradition...is a life, a personal encounter with Christ in the Holy Spirit."

## **Excerpts from an Interview with Fr. Thomas Dietz, a German convert who is a priest in the Russian Orthodox Church (from Pravoslavie.ru):**

"Nowadays there is a strong tendency among Orthodox people in Russia to believe that basically there is not much difference between Orthodoxy and Catholicism. This is not true. The difference between Orthodoxy and Catholicism is much greater than the difference between Protestantism and Catholicism. Conversion from Catholicism to Orthodoxy is much more difficult. Why? Because dogmatically there is a huge gap. What helped me was that I really liked the ecclesiology, the theological study of the Church...."

"Imagine what would happen if the Bulgarian Church put forth a thesis about its primacy and absolute supremacy in the Church. What would we think about that? Naturally, we'd think that this was the beginning of heresy. With Catholics, this heresy took root and became an integral part of their belief system. Nowadays, Catholics are even less inclined to give in than 50 or 100 years ago. They hold their own ground. The Second Vatican Council changed nothing in this respect. Despite declaring ecumenism, the Catholics firmly insist on their points of view... "

"When I understood the fallacy of the teaching about the Pope's primacy, it was as if the entire foundation of Catholicism collapsed in my mind. And when I saw that Orthodoxy does not deviate from the Sacred Tradition and truly preserves it in its entirety, I became Orthodox.... It is very important to understand that prior to the great schism of 1054, there was one Orthodox Church that included the Roman Church. I think that the correct perception of the Church is very important for development of the Christian way of thinking."

**Father Thomas, in your opinion, what difference between Orthodoxy and Catholicism is the most important?**

**Father Thomas:** "Papal primacy. We are used to considering the issue of primacy of Peter and his service as an isolated fact, as if this teaching applies only to administration and jurisdiction. However, it also affects the spiritual life of people in Catholic Church. The fact that the Pope is considered to be infallible is a distortion of the Sacred Tradition for us Orthodox people. This is not acceptable for Orthodoxy as not a single person is infallible. Acceptance of infallibility is related to the issue of obedience. An infallible person, even if he is infallible only in the questions of faith, must be unconditionally obeyed. All stages of the Catholic hierarchy are based on this perception."

"You need to get used to Orthodoxy and fall in love with it. You need to love the life based on serving God. I wish every Catholic and Protestant would step on that path, discover Orthodoxy and cherish the Truth more than people's traditions."

# Curing the Sickness of Pharisaism

*"...Why we can't understand those who love God."*

Transcript of a tape-recorded homily by  
**Metropolitan Athanasius of Limassol, Cyprus**

Most people know that the famous "Fr. Maximos" in the well known book "Mountain of Silence" is the Metropolitan of Lemessos, Athanasios. He was a monk on Athos, who had the opportunity to spend time with such holy Elders as Elders Paisios and Ephraim of Katounakia and others. He was, at the time of the writing of the book, the abbot of the monastery of the "Panaghia Macherá". Since then he was consecrated bishop of Lemessos (or Limassol). His Eminence gives talks almost weekly and these talks - in the thousands - have now circled the globe, being reproduced by his spiritual children.

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...One wonders: everything that we do - our pilgrimages, our candles, our night-vigils, our prayers, our fasts, our gestures of charity - everything that we do in our life - are for what purpose and what is the reason that we do them? The answer to this question is very important, because our correct or incorrect spiritual life is dependent on it.

Let me give you an example: I ask the children at the summer camps that we have now: "*what is God's greatest commandment? What is God's most important commandment, my children?*" And all the children - all of them - quote various commandments: do not steal...do not lie....do not be unjust to your fellow-man....respect your parents.... how should I know?.....love your neighbor... but not one child has suspected that none of these commandments is God's first commandment.

People think that the first commandment is "love thy neighbor", and when I'd tell the children "*no, that is not the first commandment*", a child would reply "*yes, yes, I know which one it is...*". "*Which is it?*" I would ask. "*Increase and multiply*". Well, of course that wasn't the first commandment either, right?

God's first and only commandment - the **first and only** one, as all the other commandments are the result of this first one - is to love God with all of your heart. Christ Himself said that the first commandment is: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all of your soul, with all of your heart, with all of your might and with all of your mind.*"

And a second commandment - a second one, similar to the first - which springs from within the first commandment - is the one that says "*love your neighbor*". Everything else is a result of these. If you love your neighbor, you will not rob him, you will not lie to him, you will not be unjust with him, you will not take his things, you will not tamper with his wife, you will not interfere with his home, you will not censure him...that's

what we mean by "results of the first commandment". The "love your neighbor" is likewise a result of the first commandment. If you truly love God, it is impossible to not love your neighbor. A person who loves God will have - as a natural result of his love towards God - a love towards his brethren also.

Therefore, the first and only commandment by God is to love God Himself with all our heart. Subsequently, whatever we do in church, has that precise purpose. And that is why we go to pilgrimages, why we fast, why we pray, why we go to confession, why we light candles, why we read the lives of Saints, why we do everything: it is our way of loving Christ.

Now, where is the mistake? The mistake is that unfortunately, we say that we do all these things in order to just become good people.... to become better people....and that is where the big hoax lies. It is the step that we all stumble over. Because, if the purpose of the Church was just to make us better people, then there wouldn't be any need for a personal relationship with Christ, nor would there be any reason for Christ to have come to the world. Why do you think we aren't able to understand the Saints? Or, to say something simpler, why we can't understand those who love God.

### **Love Transcends Logic**

We tend to say "*is it necessary to do this thing in order to be saved - to be near to God? Is it necessary, let's say, to depart to the mountains? Must we go and do all these things?*" Of course not. It is not a necessity. If we could understand that our relationship with God is not only for the sake of salvation, but is a relationship of love, only then will we understand the Saints also and why they did the things they did (which can't be interpreted rationally). This is because love transcends logic. Even secular love - the way that one person loves another person - for example when one wants to get married he loves his wife; he loves the young lady that he will wed - and the same applies to the young lady - then they do things that seem totally irrational. If, for example, you were to ask her or him who is the most beautiful or handsome one in the world, they will probably say it is their beloved. Naturally, they are seeing the other through their own eyes.... Our eyes see other things.... If, for example, you were to ask her who the best man in the world is, she will describe the man she loves with the finest words. She sees no flaws in him, no faults... she can't see anything bad about him, because love transcends all these things.

Love cannot be forced into the molds of logic. Love is above logic. That is how God's love is. God's love surpasses human logic. That is why we can't judge with logical criteria those people who love God. That is why the Saints reacted with a logic of their own - they had a different kind of logic, and not the logic of humans; because their logic was the "logic" of love. So, the Church does not teach us just to become good people - not in the least. It is only natural, that we have to become good people, because if we don't, then what have we succeeded in doing? These are nursery school things. Our Church teaches us to love Christ - to love the person of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Inside the Church, a relationship develops. It is a personal relationship between man and Christ; not with the teaching of Christ - no - not with the Gospel. The Gospel is something that helps us to reach the point of loving Christ. When we reach that point of loving Christ, the Gospel will no longer be needed. Nothing will be needed...all these things will cease...only man's relationship with God will remain. That is the difference between the Church and religion.

Religion teaches you to do your duties, the way the idolaters did. An example: let's say that we went to our pilgrimage sites, paid our respects, left some money in the charity box, left some lit candles, some oil, or even our entreaties, our names, our offering-bread, everything. All these things are religious duties, but our heart has not changed in the least. The hour of duty ends, and we are the same as we were before: we are ready to attack the other, ready to protest about the other, ready to be sour again, the way we were before.... Our heart doesn't change. We do not acquire that relationship with Christ, because we simply confine ourselves to duties - to religious duties.

And you must know that such people - you know, "religious" people - are the most dangerous kind in the Church. Those religious people are truly dangerous. May God preserve us from them... Once, when I was officiating in church and we were citing the words "*Lord, save the pious...*", a Holy Mountain monk jokingly remarked: "*Lord, save us from the pious...*"... In other words, God save you from those "religious" types, because "religious person" implies a warped personality, which has never had a personal relationship with God. These types [of persons] merely perform their duties towards Him, but without any serious relationship involved and that is why God does not say anything about this type of person. And I too must confess that - from my own experience - I have never seen worse enemies of the Church than "religious people".

Whenever the children of religious people, or of priests and theologians - or even of those who in church act like theologians and with self-importance - tried to become monks or priests, they [the parents] became even worse than demons. They would become exasperated with everyone. They became people's worst enemies. I remember parents who would bring their children to homilies, and when their child moved one step further, they became the worst of people, who would say the worst about others. And I would say to them: "*but **you** were the ones who brought the child to the homily; I didn't bring it.*"

One other time, I told a father whose daughter I could tell had a zeal for the church: "*Make sure you don't bring her again to any homily. Don't bring her to talk with me, because your daughter will become a nun and afterwards you will say that I was to blame.*" He replied: "*Oh no, father, far be it! We adore you!*" And his daughter did in fact become a nun.... It has been seven years now, and he still isn't talking to me...

People who wouldn't miss a homily - not a single homily... those who were always the first... at homilies, night-vigils, reading books.. I don't know... at doing everything.... they would also bring their children along, but when the time came for the child to exercise its freedom - to decide by itself which path to choose - then those people would move to the extreme opposite camp, thus proving that Christ had never spoken to their hearts.... They were merely "religious people". That is why religious people are the toughest kind in the Church. Because you know what? Sometimes, people like these will never be cured, because they only **think** they are close to God.

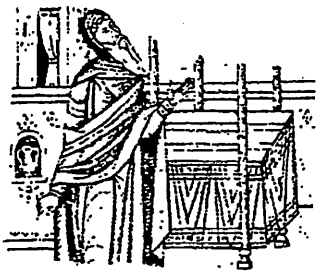
Sinners, on the other hand - the "losers", so to speak - at least they know they are sinners. That is why Christ said that publicans and whores will go to the Kingdom of God, whereas to the Pharisees He had said: *"You, who are 'religious', shall not enter the Kingdom of God. Because the word of God had never changed your heart."* They had merely adhered to the observance of religious formalities.

Therefore, we should all pay close attention and understand that the Church is a hospital that cures us and helps us to love Christ, and our love for Christ is a flame that ignites inside our heart so that we can examine ourselves, to see if we are within God's love. If we discern all those forms of malice and selfishness and wickedness inside us, then we should be concerned, **because it is not possible for Christ to be in our heart when we are full of "vinegar" inside.** How can you be praying and at the same time **be full of bile towards another person? How is it possible to read the Gospel and not accept your brother?** How is it possible to say *"I have been in the church for so many years"* - either as a monk or a priest or whatever - and yet, where is that alpha and omega, which is love? Where is that patience - showing some patience towards your brother?

By not embracing that, it means you have accomplished nothing. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. We saw how Christ reached the point of telling those virgins that He would have nothing to do with them. He threw them out of the wedding hall even though they had all the virtues, because what they didn't have was love. Because He would have wanted to tell them that *"you may have external virtues, you may have remained virgins, you may have done a thousand things, but you didn't achieve the essence of that which is the most important."* If you can't achieve that, then what do you need the rest for? What's the use, whether I consume olive oil today, or I don't? I may [fast and] **not eat olive oil** - for example - but I devour my brother from morning to night.... They used to say on the Holy Mountain *"don't ask if I eat fish; as long as one doesn't eat the fisherman, he can eat fish"*; or, *"as long as you don't eat the oil-bearer, you can have a drop of olive oil to eat"*... To "devour" someone with a sharp tongue is far worse than consuming a spoonful of olive oil. And yet, we focus on things like that: we eat oil - we don't eat oil; we eat fish - we don't eat fish...

{to be continued}

## Saint Cyril of Alexandria on the Prayer of the Pharisee



*The Pharisee prayed thus to himself.  
God I thank Thee that I am not like  
the rest of mankind, extortioners,  
unjust adulterers, or as this publican.*



Into how many faults has the Pharisee fallen. First, he is senselessly boastful, for he praises himself, although Sacred Scripture cries aloud, *let a neighbor praise thee, and not thine own mouth: a stranger and not thine own lips.* Behold those who lead a life of good and holy actions. Not only are they slow to listen to flatterers, but if men extol them, they are covered with shame, drop their eyes to the ground, and beg those who praise them to be silent. But this shameless Pharisee praises and extols himself because he is better than extortioners, the unjust and adulterers. Yet how did it escape thy notice, that a man's being better than those who are bad does not prove him to be worthy of admiration.

Furthermore, our virtue must not be contaminated with fault, but must be single-minded and blameless, and free from all reproach. For what profit is there in fasting twice in the week, if thy so doing serve only as a pretext for ignorance and vanity? Thou tithest thy possessions, and makest a boast thereof, but thou in another way provokest God's anger, by condemning men generally on this account and accusing others; and thou art thyself puffed up though not crowned by the divine decree for righteousness. Be moderate, O pharisee, *put a door to thy tongue, and a lock.* Thou speakest to God who knoweth all things. Await the Judge's decree. None of those skilled in the practice of wrestling ever crowns himself; nor does any man receive the crown of himself, but awaits the summons of the arbiter. Lower thy pride, for arrogance is both accursed and hated by God. Although thou fastest with puffed up mind, thy so doing will not avail thee; thy labor will be unrewarded; for thou hast mingled dung with thy perfume. Even according to the law of Moses a sacrifice that had a blemish was not capable of being offered to God. Since thy fasting is accompanied by pride, thou must expect to hear God say, *this is not the fast that I have chosen saith the Lord.*

## Proud of Their Progress

In our time the majority of people, proud of their progress and claiming to be Christians who do a lot of good, have been striving for the perfection of the righteousness of fallen nature and have turned their backs with scorn on the righteousness of the Gospel. Let this majority listen to what the Lord says:

*'This people draws near to Me with their mouth and honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. So they worship me in vain, while teaching the doctrines and commandments of men.'* (Matthew 15:8)

The man who practices human righteousness is full of self-opinion, arrogance, self-deception. He preaches and blows his own trumpet about his good deeds without paying the least attention to what our Lord forbids, (Matthew 6:1-18) He repays with hatred and revenge those who dare to open their mouths for the most reasonable and well-meaning contradiction of his righteousness. He considers himself deserving and more than deserving of both earthly and heavenly rewards.

On the other hand, one who practices the commandments of the Gospel is always immersed in humility. Comparing the loftiness and purity of the holy commandments with his own fulfillment of

them, he constantly admits that his efforts are extremely unsatisfactory and unworthy of God. He sees himself meriting temporal and eternal punishments for his sins, for his unbroken fellowship with satan, for the fall that is common to all men, for his own countenance in a fallen state, and finally for his insufficient and frequently fickle fulfillment of the commandments. Whenever trouble or suffering comes his way by the ordering of Divine Providence, he submissively bows his head, knowing that by means of suffering God trains and educates His servants during their earthly pilgrimage. He is kind and merciful to his enemies and prays for them as brothers who have been allured away by demons, as members of one body who are spiritually sick, as his benefactors, and as instruments of the providence of God.

From *The Arena - An Offering to Contemporary Monasticism*, Bishop Ignatius (Branchaninov).

Translated by Archimandrite Lazarus, Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, New York



"Let us therefore consider how we ought to conduct ourselves in the sight of the God-head and of His Angels, and let us take part in the psalmody in such a way that our mind may be in harmony with our voice."

- SAINT BENEDICT OF NURSIA