



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

3101 Clairmont Ave. Birmingham, AL 35205

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

Visit stsymeon.com

July 31, 2016

Forefeast of the Procession of the Cross

St. Joseph of Arimathea

St. Germanus of Auxerre (448)

The Dormition Fast begins tomorrow, August 1 thru 14

This Week:

† Friday, August 5, 6:30pm *Great Vespers - Feast of the Transfiguration*

† Sat. August 6, 10:00am *Divine Liturgy - Feast of the Transfiguration*

➤ *Blessing of Grapes and Fruit at both services*

Also on Saturday:

† **Holy Baptism – Saturday, August 6: 3:00pm**

~ **Elizabeth Howell, Luke Hobbs, & Andrew Sokoll**

Looking Ahead: Annual Parish Meeting, Sunday, September 18

St. Cosmas Aitolas (+1775) says the following about the necessity of Confession:

"Glory to the All-Good God for giving us a second Baptism, Holy Confession, since it is impossible for an un-baptized and un-confessed man to be saved.,. If you want to cure your soul you need four things. The first is to forgive your enemies. The second is to confess thoroughly. The third is to blame yourself. The fourth is to resolve to sin no more ... If we want to benefit by Holy Communion, like the eleven good Apostles, and not to harm ourselves like the wicked Judas, we must confess sincerely and commune with fear, trembling and piety; then we shall be illumined. But if we dare to partake of Holy Communion without Confession, defiled with sin, we put a consuming fire inside ourselves ... "

Slaves and Sons

"Men keep God's commandments either from fear of going to hell or in order to receive reward from God or, still, out of clean and unselfish love for God. In the first case they behave as slaves, in the second as servants and in the third as sons. We must all aim for the last one. We must do the divine will out of pure love for God, as His sons. This is a sign of perfection. This is what the holy angels in heaven do. As long as man carries out his own will, he cannot find true inner peace. When he performs God's will, he is reconciled with God and finds peace. This is the peace from on high that we ask for in the Divine Liturgy. According to the Holy Fathers, God Himself is to be found in His commandments. For this reason, whoever keeps God's commandments unites with God."

Archimandrite George Capsanis - *The Lord's Prayer*

Come, let us ascend the mountain of the Lord to the house of our God! Let us look upon the glory of His Transfiguration, The glory of the only-begotten of the Father! Through Light, let us receive Light, and exalted in the Spirit! Let us ever sing hymns to the Consubstantial Trinity!

HOW TO SAVE THE SOUL

By St. Theophan the Recluse.



What does one say to the person who asks: "How can I save my soul?"

This: Repent, and being strengthened by the power of grace in the Holy Mysteries, walk in the path of God's commandments, under the direction which the Holy Church gives you through its God-given priesthood. All of this must be done in a spirit of sincere faith which has no reservations.

What then is faith?

Faith is the sincere confession that God, Who is to be worshipped by all, the Trinity, Who created all things and provides for all, saves us who are fallen, through the power of the death on the Cross of the incarnate Son of God and by the grace of the Most Holy Spirit in His Holy Church. The beginnings of renewal, which are established in this life, will appear in all their glory in the future age, in a way that the mind cannot comprehend nor the tongue express.

O our God, how great are Thy promises!

How then does one walk in the path of the commandments unswervingly? This cannot be answered in one word, for life is a complex matter. Here is what is necessary:

a) Repent, and turn to the Lord, admit your sins, weep for them, with heartfelt contrition, and confess them before your spiritual father. Vow in word and in your heart before the face of the Lord not to offend Him further with your sins.

b) Then, by abiding in God in mind and heart, endeavour to fulfil in body the duties and affairs which your station in life imposes upon you.

c) In this labor most of all guard your heart from evil thoughts and feelings—pride, vainglory, anger, judging of others, hatred, envy, scorn, despondency, attachment to things and people, scattered thoughts, anxiety, all sensual pleasures and everything that separates the mind and heart from God.

d) In order to stand firm in this labor, resolve beforehand not to withdraw from what you recognize to be necessary, even if it may, mean death. To achieve this, when you first resolve to do so, offer your life to God in order to live not for your own sake, but for God alone.

e) A support for life in this manner is a humble offering of one's self to the will of God, and not depending on one's self; the spiritual arena in which this life is accomplished is patience or an unswerving stand in the ranks of redeemed

life, with a cheerful endurance of all the labors and unpleasantness that are linked with this.

f) A support for patience is faith, or the assurance that, working in this way for God, you are His servant and He is your Master. Who sees your efforts, is gladdened by them and values them; hope that the help of God which is ever protecting you, is always ready and waiting for you, and will descend upon you in your time of need, that God will not forsake you to the end of your life, and preserving you as one faithful to His commandments here, among all temptations, He will lead you through death to His eternal Kingdom; love, which meditates day and night upon the beloved Lord, in every way strives to do only what is pleasing to Him, and avoids everything that might offend Him in thought, word or deed.

g) The weapons of such a life are: prayers in church and at home, especially mental prayer, fasting according to one's strength and the rules of the Church, vigilance, solitude, physical labors, frequent confession of sins, Holy Communion, reading of the Word of God and the writings of the Holy Fathers, conversations with God-fearing people, frequent consultation with one's spiritual father about all the events of one's internal and external life. The foundation of all these labors in measure, time and place is wisdom, with the counsel of those who are experienced.

h) Guard yourself with fear. For this remember the end—death, judgment, hell, the heavenly Kingdom. Most of all be attentive to yourself: preserve a sober mind and an untroubled heart.

i) Set as a final goal the kindling of the fire of the spirit, so that the spiritual fire will burn in your heart and, gathering up all your strength into one, will begin to build your inner man and finally burn up the tares of your sins and passions.

Arrange your life in this manner, and with God's grace you will be saved.



Provided they live a worthy life, both those who choose to dwell in the midst of noise and hubbub and those who dwell in monasteries, mountains and caves can achieve salvation. Solely because of their faith in Him God bestows great blessings on them. Hence those who because of their laziness have failed to attain salvation will have no excuse to offer on the day of judgment. For He who promised to grant us salvation simply on account of our faith in Him is not a liar.

St. Symeon the New Theologian

Introduction to the Desert Fathers (Part 2)

The Teaching of the Sayings

The essence of the spirituality of the desert is that it was not taught but *caught*; it was a whole way of life. It was not an esoteric doctrine or a predetermined plan of ascetic practice that would be learned and applied. It is important to understand this, because there really is no way of talking about the way of prayer, or the spiritual teaching of the Desert Fathers. They did not have a systematic way; they had the hard work and experience of a lifetime of striving to re-direct every aspect of body, mind, and soul to God, and that is what they talked about. That, also, is what they meant by prayer: prayer was not an activity undertaken for a few hours each day, it was a life continually turned towards God.

Abba Agathon said, "Prayer is hard work and a great struggle to one's last breath"; and there is the story told about Abba Lot: Abba Joseph came to Abba Lot and said to him: 'Father, according to my strength I keep a moderate rule of prayer and fasting, quiet and meditation, and as far as I can I control my imagination; what more must I do?' And the elder rose and held his hands towards the sky so that his fingers became like flames of fire and he said: 'If you will, you can become all flame.'

When he was dying, Abba Pambo said: From the time that I came into this solitude and built my cell and dwelt in it, I cannot remember eating any food that I have not earned with my own hands, nor speaking any word that I have been sorry for until now. And so I go to the Lord, as one who has not yet begun to serve God. For Abba Arsenius, this was a rule for the whole of life: 'Be solitary, be silent, and be at peace.'

The Spiritual Father

In this context of a whole life of prayer, the role of the 'Abba', the spiritual father, was vital, literally, that is to say, 'life-giving'. The abba was the one who, really knowing God in his own experience, could most truly intercede for his sons. He was the one who discerned reality and whose words, therefore, gave life. The key phrase of the Apophthegmata is, 'Speak a word, Father'. This recurs again and again, and the 'word' that was sought was not a theological explanation, nor was it 'counseling', nor any kind of a dialogue in which one argued the point; it was a word that was part of a relationship, a word which would give life to the disciple if it were received. The abbats were not spiritual directors in the later western sense; they were fathers to the sons whom they begot in Christ. A monk had only one abba, and he was not continually discussing his spiritual state with him. There is a great economy of words about the desert. A monk once came to St. Basil the Great of Caesarea and said, 'Speak a word, Father'; and Basil replied, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart'; and the monk went away at once. Twenty years later he came back, and said, 'Father, I have struggled to keep your word; now speak another word to me'; and he said, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself'; and the monk returned in obedience to his cell to keep that also.

The Coptic monks were simple men, and their understanding of this relationship is difficult to recapture in a sophisticated society. The Father was not the teacher or scholar. When Evagrius first came to Scetis he made the mistake of lecturing to the brethren during a discussion on some matter; they let him finish, and then one said, 'We know, Father, that if you had stayed in Alexandria you would have been a great bishop... - after which Evagrius was understandably quiet. The great Arsenius, tutor to the Emperor, came to Scetis, too. He talked with the unlettered Egyptians about himself; when someone asked him the reason, he said, 'I know Greek and Latin, but I have not begun to learn the alphabet of these peasants yet.' This awareness of the importance of the word spoken within a relationship made the monks very wary about books—perhaps too wary—but it was an emphasis we have lost and could well recover.

Many people, as well as their own monastic disciples, came to the fathers for their life-giving words. There were plenty of opportunities for theological discussion in the towns; it was for another kind of wisdom that they came to the desert. The Fathers, for their part, were shrewd enough to know that some of those who came to them were moved by curiosity rather than devotion, and they distinguished the genuine 'hearers' of the word, whom they called 'visitors from Jerusalem', from the superficial and curious, whom they called 'visitors from Babylon'. The latter were given a bowl of soup and sent away. The former were welcome to stay all night in conversation.

Radical Simplicity and Common Sense

The Desert Fathers withdrew from ordinary society and sought the solitude of the desert. This was the first step in their 'spirituality'. Then they placed themselves under spiritual fathers. After that, the daily life was their prayer, and it was a radically simple life: a stone hut with a roof of branches, a reed mat for a bed, a sheep-skin, a lamp, a vessel for water and oil. It was enough. Food was reduced to the minimum; sleep also: 'One hour's sleep a night is enough for a monk if he is a fighter', they said. They had a horror of extra possessions: 'A disciple saw a few peas lying on the road and he said to his father, "Shall I pick them up?" but the elder said in amazement, "Why? Did you put them there?" and he said, "No." "Then why should you pick them up?"'

They tried many experiments, especially with fasting, but the final conclusion was, 'For a man of prayer, one meal a day is sufficient.' When a young monk boasted of fasting longer, they asked him searching questions about the rest of his life.

The ideal was not sub-human but super-human, the angelic life; but this was to be interpreted in the most practical and common-sense way. There is the story of John the Dwarf who announced to his brother that he was going off into the desert to live as an angel. After several days of acute hunger, his brother heard a knock at the door. He asked who was there, and when a voice said, 'John', he replied, 'John is now an angel and has no need of food and shelter'; but at last he took in the humbled John and set him to work again.

It was a life of continual 'striving', but not of taut effort the whole time. It was said of St. Anthony that one day he was relaxing with the brothers outside the cell when a hunter came by and rebuked him for their relaxation. Anthony said, 'Bend your bow and shoot an arrow', and he did so. 'Bend it again and shoot another', and he did—and again and again. The hunter said, 'Father, if I keep my bow always stretched it will break.' 'So it is with the monk', replied Anthony; 'if we push ourselves beyond measure we will break; it is right for us from time to time to relax our efforts.'

The result of this common-sense attitude is most beautifully illustrated in the story of St. Nilus and the harlot Pelagia: when she rode naked through Antioch, all the clergy around Abba Nilus hid their faces, but he 'gazed along and intently at her; then turning to the rest he said, "Did not the sight of her great beauty delight you? Verily, it greatly delighted me!"

Charity

The aim of the monks' lives was not asceticism, but God, and the way to God was charity. The gentle charity of the desert was the pivot of all their work and the test of their way of life. Charity was to be total and complete. To quote from a *Life*, rather than a *Saying*:

Abba Abraham had a niece, Mary, who became a harlot in Alexandria: "and he dressed himself as a soldier and went to find her. . . they feasted together at the inn and he took her to his room to talk with her, 'Come close to me, Mary,' he said and took her in his arms to kiss her . . . but she recognized him and wept and she said, 'Go before me and I will follow for you have so loved me and grieved for me that you have come even into this cesspool to find me'; and so they went home.

Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person (NY Times article)

IT'S one of the things we are most afraid might happen to us. We go to great lengths to avoid it. And yet we do it all the same: We marry the wrong person.

Partly, it's because we have a bewildering array of problems that emerge when we try to get close to others. We seem normal only to those who don't know us very well. In a wiser, more self-aware society than our own, a standard question on any early dinner date would be: "And how are you crazy?"

Perhaps we have a latent tendency to get furious when someone disagrees with us or can relax only when we are working; perhaps we're tricky about intimacy after sex or clam up in response to humiliation. Nobody's perfect. The problem is that before marriage, we rarely delve into our complexities. Whenever casual relationships threaten to reveal our flaws, we blame our partners and call it a day. As for our friends, they don't care enough to do the hard work of enlightening us. One of the privileges of being on our own is therefore the sincere impression that we are really quite easy to live with.

Our partners are no more self-aware. Naturally, we make a stab at trying to understand them. We visit their families. We look at their photos, we meet their college friends. All this contributes to a sense that we've done our homework. We haven't. Marriage ends up as a hopeful, generous, infinitely kind gamble taken by two people who don't know yet who they are or who the other might be, binding themselves to a future they cannot conceive of and have carefully avoided investigating.

For most of recorded history, people married for logical sorts of reasons: because her parcel of land adjoined yours, his family had a flourishing business, her father was the magistrate in town, there was a castle to keep up, or both sets of parents subscribed to the same interpretation of a holy text. And from such reasonable marriages, there flowed loneliness, infidelity, abuse, hardness of heart and screams heard through the nursery doors. The marriage of reason was not, in hindsight, reasonable at all; it was often expedient, narrow-minded, snobbish and exploitative. That is why what has replaced it — the marriage of feeling — has largely been spared the need to account for itself.

What matters in the marriage of feeling is that two people are drawn to each other by an overwhelming instinct and know in their hearts that it is right. Indeed, the more imprudent a marriage appears (perhaps it's been only six months since they met; one of them has no job or both are barely out of their teens), the safer it can feel. Recklessness is taken as a counterweight to all the errors of reason, that catalyst of misery, that accountant's demand. The prestige of instinct is the traumatized reaction against too many centuries of unreasonable reason.

But though we believe ourselves to be seeking happiness in marriage, it isn't that simple. What we really seek is familiarity — which may well complicate any plans we might have had for happiness. We are looking to recreate, within our adult relationships, the feelings we knew so well in childhood. The love most of us will have tasted early on was often confused with other, more destructive dynamics: feelings of wanting to help an adult who was out of control, of being deprived of a parent's warmth or scared of his anger, of not feeling secure enough to communicate our wishes. How logical, then, that we should as grown-ups find ourselves rejecting certain candidates for marriage not because they are wrong but because they are too right — too balanced, mature, understanding and reliable — given that in our hearts, such rightness feels foreign. We marry the wrong people because we don't associate being loved with feeling happy.

We make mistakes, too, because we are so lonely. No one can be in an optimal frame of mind to choose a partner when remaining single feels unbearable. We have to be wholly at peace with the prospect of many years of solitude in order to be appropriately picky; otherwise, we risk loving no longer being single rather more than we love the partner who spared us that fate.

Finally, we marry to make a nice feeling permanent. We imagine that marriage will help us to bottle the joy we felt when the thought of proposing first came to us: Perhaps we were in Venice, on the lagoon, in a motorboat, with the evening sun throwing glitter across the sea, chatting about aspects of our souls no one ever seemed to have grasped before, with the prospect of dinner in a risotto place a little later. We married to make such sensations permanent but failed to see that there was no solid connection between these feelings and the institution of marriage.

Indeed, marriage tends decisively to move us onto another, very different and more administrative plane, which perhaps unfolds in a suburban house, with a long commute and maddening children who kill the passion from which they emerged. The only ingredient in common is the partner. And that might have been the wrong ingredient to bottle.

The good news is that it doesn't matter if we find we have married the wrong person.

We mustn't abandon him or her, only the founding Romantic idea upon which the Western understanding of marriage has been based the last 250 years: that a perfect being exists who can meet all our needs and satisfy our every yearning.

WE need to swap the Romantic view for a tragic (and at points comedic) awareness that every human will frustrate, anger, annoy, madden and disappoint us — and we will (without any malice) do the same to them. There can be no end to our sense of emptiness and incompleteness. But none of this is unusual or grounds for divorce. Choosing whom to commit ourselves to is merely a case of identifying which particular variety of suffering we would most like to sacrifice ourselves for.

This philosophy of pessimism offers a solution to a lot of distress and agitation around marriage. It might sound odd, but pessimism relieves the excessive imaginative pressure that our romantic culture places upon marriage. The failure of one particular partner to save us from our grief and melancholy is not an argument against that person and no sign that a union deserves to fail or be upgraded.

The person who is best suited to us is not the person who shares our every taste (he or she doesn't exist), but the person who can negotiate differences in taste intelligently — the person who is good at disagreement. Rather than some notional idea of perfect complementarity, it is the capacity to tolerate differences with generosity that is the true marker of the "not overly wrong" person. Compatibility is an achievement of love; it must not be its precondition.

Romanticism has been unhelpful to us; it is a harsh philosophy. It has made a lot of what we go through in marriage seem exceptional and appalling. We end up lonely and convinced that our union, with its imperfections, is not "normal." We should learn to accommodate ourselves to "wrongness," striving always to adopt a more forgiving, humorous and kindly perspective on its multiple examples in ourselves and in our partners.

Naked Truth

On Noticing That Modern Science Has Rendered Atheism Irrational

HARRY BILTZ TOUCHSTONE JULY / AUGUST 2016

As a Catholic who made his living writing computer software, I have an interest in science as well as in what's going on these days in what is still mistakenly referred to as "Catholic" higher education. Any number of those who teach in these academies are willing to take contemporary atheism seriously, yet I wonder how many of them realize that modern science has rendered it irrational. Those who do realize it must be more committed to being accepted by atheistic academia than to promulgating orthodox Christianity.

For the fact is that modern science now has very well corroborated evidence that the natural universe (time, space, matter, and energy) had a beginning. Since that fact makes it irrational to take the very unscientific position that things popped into existence uncaused, from true nothingness (nothingness in terms of the absence of time, space, matter, and energy), the rational person would conclude that the natural universe must have been caused by a reality that transcends the natural, that is, by a supernatural reality.

Modern science now knows that even the simplest reproducing, single-celled life form consists of ultra-sophisticated, digital-information-based nanotechnology the functional complexity of which is light years beyond anything modern science knows how to build from scratch. It would be far easier to explain how a laptop computer might come about mindlessly and accidentally than to come up with a plausible explanation of how such beyond-our-own nanotechnology might have been produced that way. The computer you use every day is crude technology compared to that of a living organism. Can your computer replicate itself; or even a simpler version of itself, using available resources? Can it build and install new parts for itself? Single-celled, reproducing life forms do all that and more using digitally stored assembly instructions.

Technology, by definition, is the result of the application of knowledge for a purpose. That is why technology never comes about mindlessly and accidentally. It is utterly obvious that life is technology that is astoundingly superior to our own, and therefore it must be the result of the application of knowledge (tremendously superior to our own) for a purpose.

MORE CERTAIN THAN GRAVITY

There are individuals who, because they are extremely naive about what it takes to develop software, could be convinced that a given suite of functionally complex applications running on a computer actually came about mindlessly and accidentally. But there are very, very few individuals who would believe, in addition to that, that the computer itself came about mindlessly and accidentally. Yet that is basically what contemporary atheism is asking the world to believe.

Life is a suite of complex applications running in an environment that was far more unlikely to be arrived at mindlessly and accidentally than were the computer and operating system required by any functionally complex software. Just how unlikely was it that the Big Bang would produce an environment where life was a possibility? Renowned physicist/mathematician Roger Penrose (Stephen Hawking and Penrose were jointly awarded the Eddington Medal of the Royal Astronomical Society), in his book *The Road to Reality: A Complete Guide to the Laws of the Universe*, calculates that the odds of the Big Bang mindlessly and accidentally producing a universe where life was possible were one in $10^{10^{123}}$. The double exponent makes that number so large that one can have far more certainty that the universe was not a mindless accident than that the laws of physics will continue to apply consistently to nature.

So, except, I suppose, for those who have all their possessions tied down just in case gravity stops working, it is now apparent that it is simply irrational to conclude that the universe and the living things within it are mindless accidents.

Thus God, in his perfect providence, has mocked the arrogant and darkened minds of the so-called Enlightenment with the results of militantly atheistic science's own discoveries. It is too bad Catholic academia seems to be among the last to have noticed this, or worse, finds it easier to deny the truth than to point out the irrationality of the atheistic establishment. It was the humility of the child that allowed him to point out that the emperor was wearing no clothes.

Harry Blitz is a past president of Kansans for Life; the Kansas affiliate of the National Right to Life Committee, and has advocated and practiced peaceful, pro-life civil disobedience. Having picked up software expertise while working for the phone company, he made a living doing "C" programming until his retirement. He and his wife Melanie have raised ten children.

From Archimandrite Athanasios Mitilinaios. Homilies on the Book of Revelation. trans. Constantine Zalalas (St.Nikodemos Publications: Bethlehem, 2009), 201-202:

When you begin to climb spiritually, at some point you will reach a critical point. And the crisis is that you will have that feeling that you cannot climb anymore because you are tired. This is a crisis that we meet along the way. Everyone goes through this. Those that set out toward a spiritual life go on and on and on and then at some point they become afraid, they panic...We need to understand that when we come to the point of panic or exhaustion, it means that we have reached that critical plateau.

...Let us consider an example from the area of supersonics. When a jet takes off, and its speed increases, the behavior of the air changes as the plane goes faster and faster. The air becomes increasingly a solid mass. At a certain point, as the speed of the plane increases and comes close to the speed of sound, the air takes on the dimension of a solid, and the jet feels like it is cutting through a mountain. The jet feels almost ready to fall apart because the air acts like a solid mass. Now if the jet succeeds in passing this critical level, which is called the sound barrier, then the airplane glides very nicely. Not only does it escape danger but now this plane becomes supersonic. It went beyond the sound barrier; it flies very comfortably and it feels that the air does not exist anymore. Well, my friends, this very thing happens in the spiritual life. The moment you have reached this critical point, you will succeed – if you do not lose heart.

...Now if you do not cower, if you do not give up from exhaustion, and you succeed in passing this barrier, then the spiritual life that awaits you is wonderful; it is actually great. It feels so great and so natural that you could not consider living in any other way. It feels like it is in your blood, like something woven into your entire existence.

So if you happen to meet a very spiritual person, an ascetic, he will act surprised if you tell him that you cannot reach that sort of spirituality, that you cannot possibly reach his level. He will say, "How can you say that? But it is so easy. It is not hard at all." It feels like the easiest thing for him because he went beyond the critical point and now that he is beyond that point, the life of the spirit is for him something very natural and effortless.

Expectations

"Sometimes, in our predicaments, we become excessive and thoughtless. The things we ourselves did not achieve, we expect our children to accomplish. Because we did not manage to become doctors, we expect our children to do so — without regard to whether or not they have the capacity to do so. We do not let them study what they like, but what will bring them more money. We even try to tell them what to wear, where to go, and which person they should marry. And yet God Himself, Who rules over us, is not so overly authoritative with us." ~ Monk Moses of Mt. Athos (+2014)