

Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

3101 Clairmont Ave. Birmingham, AL 35205

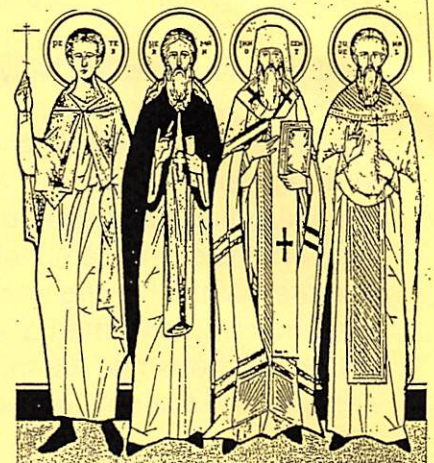
Church Tel. 205-930-9681 / 205-907-9447

Visit stsymeon.com

October 2, 2016

Sts. Cyprian & Justina of Antioch (304)

St. Andrew, Fool-for-Christ of Constantinople (911)



'From the first missionaries came the desire to establish a local Church in this land. Their labors and sacrifices inspire us to bring to life and share what they have heard with their ears, seen with their eyes and looked upon and touched with their hands concerning the word of life.'

Today! ~ Protection Sisterhood Anniversary Breakfast

✦ **Marriage Blessing: George and Tamara Zannis - 2:00pm**

Happy 39th Anniversary, St. Symeon Orthodox Church !

WE do not go to church to pretend to be people we are not. We go to church to discover who we are.

– a priest of the Church

The Story of a Priest and the Divine Liturgy

There was once a priest in Russia who did not want to serve the Liturgy because it was a cold winter day (*Ed.: or call it a "hot summer day."*).

The temperature was 10 degrees below zero and the priest knew that the only person who was likely to come to the service was the chanter. The priest had no idea about the Church's teaching on the presence of the Triumphant Church and how the Divine Liturgy benefits the living and the departed. With difficulty he forced himself to go to church. On the way to church he kept wishing that the chanter would not come so that he would not have to serve and go home. However, the chanter did come.

The priest did the Proskomedia (the service of preparing the holy gifts) in a hurry and began the Divine Liturgy. Shortly after, some bishops, priests, monks and nuns and some lay people arrived. Most of them sat in the choir section and began to chant so beautifully that the priest forgot about how cold and lonely he was earlier. His whole body was warm and his whole being was all a flame... When he did the small entrance he noticed that the church was full of people – most of them familiar – he did not pay much attention and just continued with the Divine Liturgy.

When the time came for the Sanctification of the Holy Gifts he saw three bishops, brightly clothed and radiant entering the Holy Altar. They knelt with him and prayed. The priest then stood up very carefully with fear, took the censer and in a loud voice said,

'Especially our All Holy, Immaculate, Most Blessed and glorious Lady Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary...'

The soul of the priest was amazed and filled with divine joy. Peace and heavenly stillness, hesychia, dominated his inner self. When the time came for the elevation and dividing of the Host (Lamb) the whole church filled with the sweetest melodies. The whole multitude of people who were present along with the monks, priests and bishops chanted not only once but many times,

{over}

'One is Holy, One is Lord: Jesus Christ, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.'

Next they chanted the Holy Communion hymn, *'O taste and see that the Lord is good, Alleluia.'*

The priest was wondering what to do. Should he partake of the Holy Communion first or step aside for the three bishops who were present. Just as he was thinking this, one of the bishops nodded to him indicating that he should receive Holy Communion and then to divide and place the remaining of the portions of the Lamb into the Chalice along with the portions in memory of the Holy Theotokos and the Saints. Having completed this the priest then opened the Beautiful Gate ... and saw no one in the Church... he turned and looked back into the holy altar, he looked to the right, looked to the left, the bishops had disappeared, he stood there speechless, amazed. He slowly opened his mouth and chanted the next petition,

'With the fear of God and faith and love, draw near...'

and the chanter slowly drew near to take Holy Communion. The priest was still amazed, still wondering! The whole Triumphant Church was present. All those present in the church were persons familiar to him, they were persons that had departed from this life and he would from time to time commemorate their names during each Liturgy:

'that's why they were present, that's why they all seemed so familiar', he thought.

As for the bishops in the altar they were the Three Hierarchs: Saint John Chrysostom, Saint Basil the Great and Saint Gregory the Theologian.

So many years of study at university, so much research and so many sleepless nights he spent studying and these efforts were not able to give him not even one drop of the sweetness and divine knowledge that this one Divine Liturgy gave him.

The power of the story:

This story is powerful because it shows us what truly happens when the Divine Liturgy is celebrated. The Liturgy is transformative!

The Divine Liturgy isn't just mechanical movements. It isn't just entertainment, either!

The Divine Liturgy is true worship that is given to the living God!

It's when we are transported to heaven!

It's us worshipping with all the saints around us!

It's us being transformed into saints!

As one priest said: I've never regretted attending the Liturgy. Even though some Sundays I may not feel like attending church, after I've gone, I've never regretted it!

=====

St. Ambrose of Milan:

"... These three witnesses are one, as John said: 'The water, the blood, and the Spirit' (I Jn. 5:8). One in the mystery, not in nature. The water, then, is a witness of burial, the blood is a witness of death, the Spirit is a witness of life. If, then, there be any grace in the water, it is not from the nature of water, but from the presence of the Holy Spirit."

ON MAN'S MIGHTIEST WEAPON

This place of ours has its own heaven. It is this holy Church. For every Orthodox temple is also a piece of heaven on earth. And whenever you are in a church, behold, you are already in heaven. When the world torments you with its hell, hasten into a church; enter it, and behold, you have entered paradise. If people persecute you with their evil, take refuge in church, fall down before God, and He will take you under His gentle and almighty protection. Should it happen that entire legions of demons attack you, flee into church - among the angels; for a church is always full of angels, and the angels of God will defend you from all demons of this world. And nothing will be able to harm you.

Do not forget, brethren, that we Christians are strong in God. Who then can be stronger than us? No one, no one at all. No one among men, no one among demons! And without God - what are we, as human beings in this world? A plaything of sin, a plaything of evil, a plaything in the hands of the demons. O my brother, my fellow man, the devil is laughing at you behind each sin into which he causes you to stumble. And if he causes you to stumble into many sins, the giggling of many demons echoes around you on all sides. When a man is not with God, he is always a plaything of the devil, and the devil plays with him: one moment he fills his soul with impure thoughts, another moment he kindles his tongue with cursing, another moment he leads him into slandering, into calumny, into thievery, into debauchery, and into every other evil deed. And it continues this way until a man remembers God, takes refuge in the temple of God, and falls down before God. Then - he is entirely in heaven, and neither the human evils of the world, nor sins, nor demons can touch him. At that moment he is in a fortress defended by the angels, defended by God's saints, and with the fiery ardor of their prayers they consume every evil that is assailing them from men, from the world, from demons, from hell.

Do you know, brethren, what man's mightiest weapon on earth is, an invincible and all-victorious weapon - do you know? Prayer! Yes, prayer! That's right, prayer! Because by means of prayer a man commits his whole soul, his whole heart, and his whole life to God: and God becomes his defender and protector. What can people, what can demons do to him then? Nothing? Absolutely nothing! Therefore, the Lord commands us in His Gospel: "Pray without ceasing."

Why is there such much evil in the world today? Because people have thrown away their most reliable weapon, the all-victorious weapon with which every evil, every sin, and every demon are assuredly vanquished on all battlefields. And this weapon is prayer - prayer and fasting. It is the most reliable weaponry, because it is God's weaponry; the most reliable, all-victorious weaponry, because it is Christ's weaponry - the weaponry of the only true God in all realms. And He? He gave this weaponry to us Christians; it is preserved in the Church, and is bestowed in the Church. The Divine mouth of the Savior revealed to all the inhabitants of the earth this truth, this absolute truth: through prayer and fasting every impurity, every sin, every evil, and every demon are cast out by men.

St. Nikolai of Zicha (+1956)

* Prayer attunes us for converse with God and, through long practice, leads us to friendship with Him; with Him, Whose love accepts even worthless men and is not ashamed to enter into friendship with them, so long as the love that lives in them gives them daring.

* Psalmody puts passions to sleep and curbs the impulses of bodily intemperance; and prayer incites the mind to the doing which is its property. Prayer is an activity becoming to the dignity of the mind, or rather, is its real use. If you have not yet received the gift of prayer or psalmody, ask persistently, and you will receive. During temptations, practice unceasingly, a short, but intense prayer.

St. Nilos of Sinai (6th C)

St. Paisios of Mt. Athos (+1994)

On Prayer:

“And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; ...for your father knows what you need before you ask him” (Mi 6:7-8)

“We should constantly and unceasingly repeat the Jesus prayer. Only the name of Christ must remain inside our heart and mind; when we neglect our prayer, that is our communication with God, then the devil finds the chance to confuse us with negative thoughts. Thus, we end up not knowing what we want, do, or say.”

“The soul must be constantly ready and alert and always in contact with the spiritual headquarters, that is, God. Only then, it will feel secure, full of hope and joy.

When I was in the army, during the war, I was a radio operator. I noticed, that we felt secure only when we communicated with the Army Division on an hourly basis. When our communication was limited to every two hours, we felt a little bit insecure; sometimes, when we could only be in touch with them twice a day, we felt uncomfortable, lonely and lost. The same thing applies to our prayer. The more we pray, the more secure we feel, on a spiritual basis, of course.

“When someone is involved in manual labor, it helps him a lot to say the Jesus Prayer and at the same time perform his task.

On God’s Providence:

“God’s providence will take care of everything in our lives, if we reject everything and become wholly and undistractingly devoted to His love. Then, God will justly serve us through His divine providence (as he always does for his genuine servants) and will see that we lack nothing; as He Himself said: “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and then all these things shall be yours as well” (Mt 6:33). When someone has as his sole purpose in life the pursuit of God’s Kingdom and the acquirement of Divine justice, then God, Who is not unjust and does not lie, will abundantly reward us.

Some people have the wrong impression, however; they think they can be involved in worldly matters and be attached to material possessions, and at the same time, expect the help of God’s providence. God’s help to people who think this way can be destructive, for it prolongs their attachment to worldly things. God helps them by letting them be exposed to temptations and difficulties; this will eventually make them loath worldly matters and totally devote their hearts to God.

God looks after everyone, both the righteous and sinful: “for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good” (Mt 5:45). There is a difference, however. The providence of God is always and constantly present and visible in the lives of righteous people, whereas in the lives of sinful people, it is circumstantial and sometimes even non-existent. God occasionally abandons the sinful ones, in order to make their soul humble through the hardships of life and the temporary and seeming absence of His providence, and thus awaken their faith and love for Him.

This is fair because the person who believes in divine justice wants God to rule his life; whereas the person, who depends upon human justice, wants to guide his own life based on his knowledge, and ignores his weakness; that is, that he can do nothing without God. “For apart from me, you can do nothing” (Jn. 15:5) and “if then you are not able to do as small a thing as that, why are you anxious about the rest?” (Luke 12:26).

Ikons of the Saints by Lazar Puhalo

The ikon of the saint proclaims the saving Incarnation of Christ and His redeeming cosuffering with man, for it reveals what these acts have made possible for man; it proclaims the reconciliation with God made possible by the God-man, for it clearly shows that man can now participate in God's perfection and immortality. The ikon of the saint proclaims the resurrection and ascension, for it shows that by grace man can become divine, because Jesus Christ Himself united God and man, and invited the faithful to have the Holy Trinity dwelling in them spiritually.

Let us look at some examples of saints in proper ikons and those in post-Orthodox Western paintings, and we shall see how the ikon proclaims that profound Gospel truth that the very nature of mankind has been redeemed by Jesus Christ. The ikon reveals to us that man can attain a part in this redemption through moral/spiritual struggle to assimilate the inner qualities of life revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. The Western painting reveals a pietistic doctrine of salvation by a philosophical acceptance of Christ as a saviour who has paid off our criminal debt to a juridical justice of a far too human god, indeed, a god who is only an idol of fallen humanity. The Western humanistic conception also depicts the saint with a halo that has become a "merit ring" around the head. This theology is also based in juridical legalism. Rather than the transformation of the inner person, reflected in the whole person of the saint (the Orthodox concept), the Western depiction shows a person who, because of good works and some external worth, has built up not only sufficient merits for salvation, but excess merits, so that he or she has become a saint (because of the number of "supererogatory merits. ").



Plate 52: *Ikon of the Holy Great Martyr Christopher* (courtesy Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston).

In the ikon, the saint has become fully a participant in that redeemed and transfigured human nature manifested in Christ. The form of his body is recognizably human, but though it is really a human body, it is not bound by the "flesh." The carnal aspects, those elements of sensual beauty, have vanished and been replaced by a spiritual beauty which must be seen



Plate 53: *Western style picture of St Christopher.*

with spiritual eyes to be fully recognized. In the picture, on the other hand, we see an ordinary person, still bound in the world of the fallen nature, with only a ring around the head to indicate that he has obtained enough merits for good works to

be considered a saint. A certain strained pietistic expression attempts, vainly, to indicate holiness, a purely subjective, emotional concept of holiness.

The ikon shows us a life transfigured, the actual *person* (body and soul) transformed. The spiritual transfiguration of the person involves the actual person, that is, soul and body together as one complete being, though this transfiguration will be most completely realized only in the resurrection. There is a special genius in the ikon to testify to the Orthodox Christian dogma that neither the soul alone nor the body alone constitutes the *person*. Only the one form of the soul and body together is the *person*, and thus the spiritual transformation and transfiguration encompass the body and the soul as one. Both together have been delivered from the power and bondage of Satan. The principle upon which this aspect of the ikon of the saint is based is summarized in the words of St Methodios: "*With respect to his nature, man is truly said to be neither soul without body nor, on the other hand, body without soul; but is composed of the union of body and soul into one form of the beautiful.*"²⁹

Aspects of Form and Features in Ikons of Saints

You will notice that saints are never shown in profile in ikons. The principle upon which this is based was defined by St Makarios the Great:

*"A soul which has been illumined by divine glory becomes all light and countenance, and no part of it is behind, but it stands wholly facing forward."*³⁰

The ikonographic use, not only of such conventions as the absence of profiles, but of exaggerated features must also be understood. We mentioned it briefly in connection with the ikons from the catacombs, seen earlier in this text. We often notice in ikons that they seem to distort or exaggerate certain parts of the anatomy. Eyes, ears, nose and hands are often oversized or accentuated, and no particular attention is given to physical accuracy in anatomy.

None of the theme figures in ikons are ordinary people. They have all been transformed by divine grace, all have become filled with the Holy Spirit, all have become partakers of the Immortality of God. Thus, to render them as natural people would be a lie. It may be the highest view to which the carnal, unspiritual mind of the fallen man can ascend, but it is not reality. It is not fact. Reality abides only in Christ, and reality can only be seen in the spiritual eye. That is why the truth and beauty of correct ikonography becomes clearer, more beautiful and more beloved to the person who fasts and prays, and struggles to purify the heart and grow spiritually. On the other hand, to those who are non-spiritual and carnal-minded, the correct ikon is often considered ugly and threatening. The reason for this is that the ikon touches the conscience, and touching the conscience usually results in either gratitude and a desire for correction, or in disdain and malice.

In the ikon, the spiritual ears have been enlarged to the hearing of the Gospel and

29. "On the Resurrection," *Against Origen*, 1:5.

30. *50 Spiritual Homilies*, 1.2.

the Divine Mysteries. The eyes are enlarged by grace to the seeing of Divine Mysteries, to the vision of the glory of God and the holy beauty of the Saviour. The nose is enlarged to the receiving of the fragrance of immortality, the scent of the heavenly incense of incorruptibility. And the mouth? It is usually diminished in size. For the saint, as Apostle Paul observes, has heard words which cannot be uttered (2Cor.12:4). The saint speaks little and learns much. When the saint preaches the Gospel it is in deeds more than in words. His or her life is a living sermon of the Gospel and a demonstration of its truth. For the saint, having seen and heard things which the human tongue cannot even express, preaches not so much with "*excellency of speech ... but in demonstration of the Spirit*" (1Cor.2:4).

Thus, the exaggeration of the features is but another aspect of the revelation of transfiguration and regeneration. For, the senses which, in the fallen man, have become dedicated to the passions, are, in the saint, reconsecrated to God and thus, serve not for carnality, but for salvation. All seeming distortions of the anatomy bear just such a spiritual meaning.

There is one final aspect of the ikon which I feel is most important. The eyes of the body, our Saviour said, are the windows of the inner man: "*The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are without defect, your whole body will be filled with radiance, but if your eyes are wicked, your whole body will be full of darkness...*" (Mt.6:22-23).

A spiritual ikon painter is able to paint truly ikonographic eyes: eyes which reflect the mystery of cosuffering love, eyes which proclaim the inner radiance of meekness, humility and a godly love of mankind. Such is the great ikon of Prophet Elijah in the church of Moracha Monastery in Montenegro. This ikon belongs to the hesychastic period of Serbian ikon painting. Study the eyes of this ikon, and recall that St Elijah is depicted here having taken refuge in the cave of Sapsas. He has been betrayed by the people to whom he was sent, despised, reviled, driven out, and they are pursuing him to kill him. Moreover, the leaders of the nation have betrayed God, given themselves over to idolatry and wickedness. Notice the expression in the eyes. There is not a hint of contempt, of condemnation, of hatred or of judgment. There is only the serene look of one who loves his people despite all their sins and all the evil they have done or wish to do to him. His countenance is not angry, rather he is grieved over the loss of their souls. Like Moses, he would "*place himself in the breach*" (Ps.106:23) if he could, and like Paul after him, he would make himself anathema [cut off] from Christ for the sake of his people (Rm.9:3).

Thus, there is no sign of bitterness or anger in the eyes of Prophet Elijah, nor is he full of judgment and condemnation: he is filled with cosuffering love for his erring people, and desires, not their punishment, but that they should "*turn from their sinfulness and live.*" It is this mystery of cosuffering love that makes an ikon the truest ikon, the truest presentation of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, that demonstrates the restoration in human nature of the "image and likeness of God" Who "*so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that all who believe in Him might not perish, but have everlasting life*" (Jn.3:16).



AS IT IS WRITTEN . . .

by PATRICK HENRY REARDON

His Gift of Life

OF THE STANDARD Greek nouns commonly translated as “life” in the New Testament, John’s Gospel uses only two: *psyche* and *zoe*. *Psyche*, often translated as “soul,” indicates the life or being of an individual. For example, in the sustained pastoral parable in John, this is the term used when the “Good Shepherd gives his *psyche* for the sake of the sheep” (John 10:11; cf. 10:15,17). This is also the word used by Simon Peter when he rashly boasts, “I will give my *psyche* for your sake” (13:37–38). A person’s *psyche* is what he is prepared to lay down for the love of his friends (15:13).

The second term, *zoe*, is used far more commonly in the Fourth Gospel, where it appears 36 times. Its cognate verb *zo* appears 17 times. This *zoe* is, first of all, proper to the Word: “in him was life” (John 1:4). This is the “life in himself” that the Son receives from the Father: “For just as the Father has life in himself, so he gave the Son also to have life in himself” (5:26).

This life, derived from the Father, the Son reveals to believers through the proclamation and communion of the gospel:

What was from the beginning (*ap’ arches*)—what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have gazed upon and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of life (*peri tou Logou tes zoes*)—and the life (*he zoe*) was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and declare to you, the eternal life (*ten zoen ten aionion*) which was with the Father (*pros ton Patera*) and has been manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we declare also to you. (1 John 1:1–3)

Those who believe in God’s Son “have the testimony (*martyria*) of God in their hearts” (5:10). Believers, because of their faith in this testimony of the Father, share in the *zoe* of the Son: “And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (5:11–12). The life given in Christ is the very life of God. Such is the sum message of John:

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true (*ton alethinon*) and we are in him

who is true (*en toi alethinoi*), in his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life (*Houtos estin ho alethinon Theos kai zoe aionios*). (5:20)

The Good Shepherd, even as he forfeits his individual human life (*psyche*) for the sheep (John 10:11,15,17), never loses the essential life (*zoe*) he receives from the Father: “In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live (*zo*), you also will live (*zesete*)” (14:19). The *life* of which John speaks is Christ himself.

This truth is conveyed in a series of “I AM” declarations: “I am the resurrection and the life (*zoe*)” (11:25). “I am the way, the truth, and the life (*zoe*)” (14:6). “I am the bread of life (*ho artos tes zoes*)” (6:35,48). “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life (*to phos tes zoes*)” (8:12).

As God’s revelation in the world, the Son gives “the living water (*hydor zon*)” (4:10–11; 7:38) and “the living bread (*artos zon*)” (6:51). His words are “spirit and life” (*pneuma kai zoe*) (6:63); they are “words of eternal life” (6:68). In short, he came to give *zoe* to the world (6:33; 10:10; 1 John 4:9).

A PRESENT REALITY

Although, in his treatment of this new life, John does maintain the basic future/eschatological perspective common in the other New Testament sources (for instance, John 6:40,44,51,54), he lays an arguably greater emphasis on the promised *zoe* as a *present* reality. The faithful in Christ, by reason of their faith, *already* have eternal life. The life is not delayed; believers begin to live when they begin to believe.

John sounds this theme repeatedly. “The hour is coming,” says the Lord, “and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live (*zesousin*)” (5:25). When Martha professes her faith that Lazarus “will rise again in the resurrection on the last day,” Jesus declares that the future *is now*: “I AM the resurrection and the *zoe*” (11:24–25). The one who hears and believes has eternal life already (5:24). Even now “we have passed from death to life” (1 John 3:14). ♦

Senior editor Patrick Henry Reardon is pastor of All Saints Antiochian Orthodox Church in Chicago, Illinois. His most recent books are *The Jesus We Missed: The Surprising Truth About the Humanity of Christ* (Thomas Nelson) and *Reclaiming the Atonement, Volume 1: The Incarnation* (Ancient Faith Publishing).