



ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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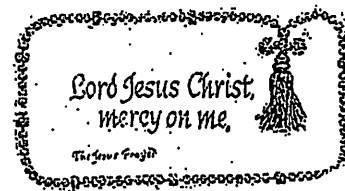
November 13, 2016

**St. John Chrysostom,
Archbishop of Constantinople (407)**

The Nativity Fast begins Tuesday, November 15

☒ **Wed. November 15 6:30pm Akathist (Confessions before & after)**

St. John Chrysostom exclaims,
"All depends indeed on God,
but not so that our free-will is
hindered. God does not
anticipate our choice, lest our
free-will be outraged. But when
we have chosen, then great is
the assistance He brings to us."



Next Year: October 8, 2017 – St. Symeon's 40th Anniversary and Temple Consecration
~ Metropolitan Tikhon and Bishop Alexander will be preside at the Consecration.

If the soul is not clothed with the teachings of the Church, it cannot have Jesus enthroned inside it. Someone who is well grounded in the testimonies of the Scriptures is a bulwark of the Church.
- St. Jerome of Stridonium (5th C)

Obedience for our Sakes...

For even though He (Christ) was God, yet He fulfilled obedience in the flesh and according to the flesh and prevailed over the will of the flesh by the will of the Godhead, as He had said beforehand, 'I have come down from heaven not to do My own will, but the will of the Father Who sent Me, calling that of the flesh His own will, since the flesh had become His own. It was necessary for the will of the flesh to be moved and yet subjected to the divine will, and so human disobedience is forgiven as a result of this extraordinary obedience, that of Christ for our sake. St. Athanasius the Great (373)

It is necessary for a Christian to fast, in order to clear his mind, to rouse and develop his feelings, and to stimulate his will to useful activity. These three human capabilities we darken and stifle above all by 'surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life' (Luke 21:34).

St. John of Kronstadt (+1908)

"God immediately forgives everything to those who ask forgiveness in a spirit of humility and contrition and who ceaselessly invoke His holy name. As the Psalmist says, 'Confess to the Lord and call upon His holy name' (cf. Ps. 105:1)."

St. Gregory of Sinai (The Philokalia Vol. 4)

As soon as our thoughts begin to oppress us, we must turn to God; and take to Him our cares and the cares of our neighbor. I always take my problems - and the problems of those who come to me for advice - to the Lord and His Most Holy Mother for them to resolve. And that is what they do. As for me, I cannot even help myself How then can I help anyone else?

+ Elder Thaddeus of Serbia (2003)

Too many thoughts running...

Even a healthy person will become useless with too many thoughts running through his mind. One who is sick and suffering can justifiably have worrisome thoughts. But one who is healthy and yet becomes confused and suffers from sinister thoughts, deserves a straightjacket! To be healthy and yet tormented by one's thoughts is a terrible sickness.

~ St. Paisios of Mount Athos (+1994)

Pearls of the Holy Fathers {14}

He who does not have attention in himself and does not guard his mind, cannot become pure in heart and so cannot see God. Therefore, you should try to gain this more than anything else, so as to learn what I tell you in your own experience.

~ St. Symeon the New Theologian

If I examine myself thoroughly, I cannot find a single good deed that I have done. I know that my sins are heavier and more numerous than all the grains of sand on the seashore; and all the sea's water is not sufficient to wash away my wicked and evil deeds. But I believe that God is merciful and will not look upon the multitude of my sins — just as He did not look upon the sin of that sinful woman in the Gospels, or that of the Canaanite woman or the one from Samaria: He did not shut His door in their faces but had pity and compassion upon them; He held them to be worthy of healing in their bodies and of forgiveness of their sins.

~ St. Pelagia of Tarsus

Many have studied all kinds of different confessions yet have not found the true faith. But to him who humbly prays to God for enlightenment, God will make known how greatly He loves man.

~ St. Silouan of Mt. Athos

As pleasurable as worldly life may be, it cannot give us the joy which the spiritual life gives and for which the soul thirsts. It is light, joy, peace, the life of Christ. Let us desire with greater longing to live in this manner.

~ Elder Ieronymos of Aegina

The Lord does indeed long to gather all into His arms. All; but particularly the worst sinners.

~ St. Macarius of Optina

Learning does not save, but obedience and humility do. ~ Father Archippus of Glinsk

This is the path of true spiritual wisdom. In great watchfulness and fervent desire travel along it with the Jesus Prayer, with humility and concentration, keeping the lips of both the senses and the intellect silent, self-controlled in food and drink and in all things of a seductive nature; travel along it with a mind trained in understanding, and with God's help it will teach you things you had not hoped for.

~ St. Hesychius the Presbyter

Work with prayer, with love, with fervor, and with full attention. Work as not before men, but entirely as before God and His angels, for you do not work for men, but labor for God Himself.

~ St. Hilarion of Optina

Let us endure, for patient endurance is victory. Unless a man striveth he will never be crowned. For there are in the world athletes who, though wounded, conquer nevertheless, and however many times one man may be wounded by two [others], if he can endure the blows he will be able to conquer those who smote him. Observe then what a degree of endurance is possessed by such men for the sake of the merchandise of this world! Do thou then endure, and God shall strive with thine enemies on thy behalf whilst thou mayest remain quiet.

~ Abba Copres

Falsehood! We see it and yet we do not. This world with all its deceptions will pass away never to return, for it is a lie. Christ's truth shall endure unto the ages of ages!

~ Elder Gabriel of Pskov and Kazan

This holy prayer, the invocation of our Savior: "Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me," is prayer and blessing. . . expeller of demons, indwelling of Jesus Christ, source of spiritual thoughts. . . In short, it is the only thing saving of itself, since it contains the saving name of our God, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, which is the only name we invoke, "there is no salvation for us in any other," as Paul says [Acts 4:12].

~ St. Symeon of Thessalonica

The Advent Season

Archimandrite Roman Braga

A season of six weeks opens the Christmas period. The season begins on November 15. It is said that this period originated in Gaul (today's France) in the fourth century and the duration of the season varied from four to seven weeks, until an Ecumenical Council established the season to be 40 days before Christmas as a fasting period — Advent.

Although as Orthodox Christians we do not call this period Advent, as it is called in the Roman Catholic Church, the name seems to be proper. It consists of two Latin words: "ad venire", meaning "to come to." Advent's message is that God is coming to the World in the person of Jesus Christ. This coming of Christ into the world can be understood as a past experience, a present experience or a future experience.

Past Experience

We may think of Christ Who came into the world 2000 years ago as the fulfillment of the promises of the Old Testament. This is a past experience and what we do every year at Christmas time is only a commemoration, an anniversary of that event. It is good to believe that God came to Earth on Christmas day, twenty one centuries ago. It is good to stress the divinity of Jesus at a time when many believe that Jesus was just a good guy, a revolutionist, a victim of the social condition of His time. Some call Him a genius, a superstar, but many do not even consider Him God.

Many Christians are not convinced of the necessity of God's Incarnation, which was not only for the salvation of the human race, because God could have saved the world in other ways too, but His Nativity is the crowning of God's act of creation. The entire Universe has been transfigured, sanctified, deified, for the entire Universe participated in His Incarnation. He Included in His body all the physical and chemical elements that constitute the bodies of men, plants, animals and of all the Universe. When the Bible talks about the creation of man out of dust It involves necessarily the idea that man is comprised out of all the elements of the universe — he is a synthesis of the Universe, a crowning of God's act of creation. That is why God became man, so He can transform and sanctify the entire Universe.

St Paul says that God did not want to become angel; He became man, making Himself like us in all aspects except sin. Sin was not given to us by God; sin is a fruit of our own choice.

The Bible also says that man was created in the image of God. It is a logical consequence of the act of creation. If man is like God, than God had to become man in order to demonstrate the truthfulness of His creation.

As a young man I rebelled against God. I loved Jesus Christ very much. I loved His personality, His sacrifice; I loved the theology of love, but I could not understand the "Ten Commandments": "do not do this, do not do that, you shall not, you shall not, you shall not." It was easy for me to see why the Jews did not keep the Commandments. It was easy for God to say: "do this, do that, do not do this, do not do that." But we are people, we live in the flesh, we fight temptations. There seemed to be an abyss between man and God that could not be bridged. Only later I understood that Christ, through His Incarnation bridged the gap between man and God. He became man to show us that the Ten Commandments can be fulfilled even in our human condition; they are not impossible for us. "I am the Truth, I am the Way, I am the Life" If man was created in the image of God then God must resemble man, He must have everything man has, except He does not have sin.

Present Experience

Most people do not understand that the coming of God is a present experience. They think that Christmas is just a commemoration like Lincoln's birthday or Washington's birthday. Christmas is not a birthday. God must be understood eternally. Past and future do not exist in God's Person. When Moses asked God "What is Thy name?" the answer was "I am that I am" - He Who lives eternally. And if God is infinite, His acts, His gestures, are like Himself—eternal.

For instance, when we say that God has created the world, we understand that His work continues. The world is not finished and will never be. God knows no rest. He works continuously, always creating new species of plants, animals, inspiring developments in science and so on.

When we say that God was Incarnate that means He Incarnates in each one of us, everyday, making us similar to Him. God may come to you this Christmas in the form of rebirth, either for the first time, if you did not believe in Him, or as a renewed birth, with a deeper understanding of His divinity.

Future Experience

As a future experience, Christmas means that Christ will return unpredictably at the end of the world. 'He will come again, in glory to judge the living and the dead.'

Since Advent promises the sure coming of the Lord, its message is 'prepare, be ready.' The Lord is coming whether the world is ready or not. Then how does Advent suggest that we be prepared? Through repentance, prayer and patience.

Advent is a time to become aware of one's sins; it is a penitential season, originally known as the "Winter Lent" During this season weddings are not allowed, not for the wedding itself, because marriage is a Sacrament, but because of the social aspect of the marriage.

In the Winter Lent period before Christmas, we must be filled with spiritual joy and hope. Advent stresses; not so much fulfillment, as anticipation of fulfillment: the Lord is coming! We must be like a bride, anticipating the wedding day. It is the quiet joy of anticipation and not the joy of celebrating a past event.

Of all the seasons, Advent is the most difficult to observe because of the competition with the commercial world. The secular world, in fact, celebrates Christmas during Advent, not on Christmas day. On Christmas day everything is over. Even the churches fall pray to this secularization by decorating the churches and singing Christmas carols weeks before Christmas.

The coming of Christ is a culmination of a historical process coming down through the history of Israel. This is the climax of the plan of salvation. The Old Testament is a record of God's preparing the world for the coming of His Son. So Advent is the Old Testament period of the Church year. The Child born in a manger in Bethlehem was none other than the Son of God, the promised "Messiah." Advent makes sense only as a time of preparation for the Messiah. This child is "very God of very God." In Him, God invaded the history of mankind.

Because it is possible for Him to be born again in our hearts at Christmas, it is important that we strictly observe this lent and be spiritually prepared for His coming.

Much Talk About Love (Conclusion)

~ Conclusion of a Conversation with Fr. Maximus (Metropolitan Athanasios of Cyprus) on love with author Kyriacos Markides and some friends in the book *Inner River* (pps. 262-277)

"How can one develop discernment?" Emily asked.

"It is not easy. It develops with time and after arduous spiritual labors and many experiences. That is why it is important to ask for advice from an experienced spiritual guide whenever we face serious dilemmas. When we grow up spiritually, discernment comes easily. But at least at the beginning of our spiritual work, it's important that we seek out advice."

"A common problem of people who become enthusiastic about spiritual work," Fr. Maximos continued, "is that they do things which are beyond their capacity to endure. As a result they burn themselves, or they get ruined. Trying to imitate the life of an Elder like Paisios, for example, could be disastrous for a neophyte. It is like giving a hard paximridi [*baked and extremely dry bread, rusk*] to a little baby who doesn't even have teeth. It will cause the baby's gums to bleed."

"The notion that love could be dangerous might appear strange to some people," I said.

"It is always so, even when you are advanced on the spiritual path."

"How so?"

"When a person becomes gradually liberated from the toxins of egotism, when he is freed from wickedness, hatred, or anger, and as he becomes more compassionate, tolerant, and loving, then he can fall in love with himself. This is a danger in the higher spheres of spiritual attainment."

"Strange."

"It happens because a human being in his essence is a very beautiful being. When we reach a point that we can become a witness to how we function with harmony, just like a classical symphony, then we run the risk of becoming enchanted with ourselves. That's where a lot of spiritually advanced people may suffer a great fall."

Our discussion was interrupted when a young novice, in charge of hospitality, arrived with tea and some baklava that pilgrims had brought to the monastery. We passed them around.

"Whenever I ask people what they suppose God's number one commandment is, their response always impresses me," Fr. Maximos said while munching on a piece of baklava. "Most of them answer: 'Love thy neighbor as thyself.'"

"In what way does that impress you?" Emily asked.

"Well, the first commandment is 'Love God thy Lord.' Love God with all your heart and with all 'of your power.' Loving your neighbor is a natural by-product, a consequence of loving God. He gave us this commandment precisely to show us that in order to avoid the various love distortions that we talked about, we must focus our attention first and foremost on God Himself. Whatever a human being does, such as getting married, having children, or being in love, must be baptized within the love of God. If you transform all these relationships into absolutes, they could become idols. You would then end up worshipping them instead of God."

"When you tell people that 'Love thy neighbor' is not the first commandment of God, they look at you with an enigmatic grimace," Fr. Maximos went on. "But if we subtract this primary commandment of first loving God, it is like cutting the Gospel in two. The Gospel then becomes a social manifesto for

the creation of an ideal society, a perfect society of good human relationships. But it is no longer a Gospel for the salvation of humanity."

"This is what happened to the Western understanding of the Christian Gospel. Focus on the world and try to make society more just," I said.

"This is fine and good. But the Gospel of salvation does not spring out of a vision for perfecting this world. Instead it is a blueprint for how to commune with God. If we don't understand this, we will not be able to understand the entire practice and life of the Ecclesia. We will not be able to understand the lives of saints and their struggles to become one with God." Fr. Maximos reflected for a few seconds."

"The Gospel tells us to be ready to sacrifice ourselves for our fellow human beings, all human beings. That means that God breaks down all boundaries between people. Okay, it is easier to understand how you can die for your child or even your friend, but to die for a stranger? And what about the request to die even for your enemy? Christ has done that. In a sense we are the enemies of God. He died not for His friends but for His enemies. It means that God does not allow us any fences between ourselves and anybody else. Authentic divine love has no boundaries. No restrictions. From the moment that love has boundaries, it's no longer love..."

"...Indiscriminate love is an inherent aspect of our nature as icons of God. We are created to love. It is our passions that distort love from being selfless and God-centered to becoming self-centered. From a passion-free love it is transformed into a passion-filled, pleasure-centered love."

"The kind of love that prevails between us, as ordinary human beings, is a form of exchange," I noted. "In essence we say, 'I love you and I expect equal love from you.'"

"During confessions I encounter such attitudes all the time. It is something like the 'I love him, why doesn't he love me?' syndrome. I hear this complaint all the time."

Fr. Maximos continued: "Real love is a perfect motion in the direction of the other person. If I do that and the other loves me in return, that's wonderful. But even if others do not love us, it is sufficient that we ourselves love them. I honestly think our fundamental existential need is not to be loved but to love."

"Of course," I added, "if people can love in that selfless way, the likelihood is that they will also be loved by others. I have never known a person who truly loves and is hated by others."

"But even if it does happen," Fr. Maximos went on, "our true being is to love everything and everybody like God does. We must make it a daily habit to remember that our supreme goal in life, the only goal in life in fact, as I never tire of repeating, must be our love for God."

"You mean of course to have a direct experience of God that fills our being with His love," I clarified, "not just belief but direct mystical experience."

"Naturally. But again, do keep in mind that such a state does not come automatically. We must work for it. If we achieve this goal, everything else will fall into its right place. A human being, then, will be able to cope with whatever problems come his or her way."

"Let us say I have a difficult marriage. My husband or wife is tormenting me. Or my mother-in-law creates problems for me. Or a thousand other things cause me grief, which leads to anger. More often than not, however, if I truly analyze myself and search for answers in the furthest recesses of

my being, I will discover that the real cause of my problems is my lack of love for God. If I loved God truly and absolutely, then the difficulties with my marriage, the problems with my health, the troubles at work, my economic woes, my discomfort with aging, and even the problems of my country would work themselves out in a positive direction. My frustration means that somewhere my love for God does not make a perfect contact."

"For example, I face problems in my marriage. I feel suffocated. I tell myself, 'Get a divorce.' Or 'How wonderful it would be if she dropped dead!' Sometimes such thoughts do enter people's minds. They may not accept them. But they do enter their minds. Or 'My mother-in-law has plenty of money and doesn't give us a penny. How long must I wait for her? Let the Good Lord take her with Him, the sooner the better!' " Fr. Maximos paused until our laughter died down.

"In reality, the difficulties, as I said earlier, be they our marital problems, economic woes, or whatever, are not our main underlying problem. All problems stem from our estrangement from God. We must elevate everything that happens to us, positive or negative, and transform it into a ladder upon which we can climb to reach God."

"It is so difficult to climb that ladder," Stephanos said, sighing.

"To be sure, it is. But when we manage to get into the habit of doing so, we will eventually realize that our greatest benefactors are these very people who we thought were the causes of our grief."

"Elder Paisios used to say that when we die and the eyes of our souls open up, the first thing we will do is glorify God with all our might for our previous tribulations on earth. Only then will we realize that it was those very difficulties that helped us grow spiritually."

"To tell somebody that our spiritual benefactors within eternity are not those who praise us but rather those who create problems for us, those who bad-mouth us, appears like a form of spiritual masochism," Lavros said with a chuckle.

"That's the worldly way of thinking. Those who create problems for us do so not because they want to benefit us. No. As far as they're concerned, they are responsible for the evil they cause. But if we transmute all that into a spiritual lesson, then all those difficulties that others cause us can become bridges upon which we can travel to the Kingdom of God."

Fr. Maximos leaned back, his posture suggesting that he was ready to conclude the discussion. "So the highest fruit of the Spirit is love, but the kind of love that does not become an idol in itself. Love for us is embodied in the love of God as a Person. We are not in love with love. This is the meaning of the Eucharist. The experience of the love of Christ is the greatest experience that a human being can have. It is infinite, and it has no boundaries or limits. Unlike worldly experiences, which always reach a saturation point, God's love has no end. We never reach the point when we say, 'We've had enough.' The path toward God's love is it never-ending, infinite, and eternal dynamic movement upward. It has no boundaries because God has no boundaries. We may be tired of things of this world, but we can never tire of the experience of God. The love of God is a state of perpetual enthusiasm. It is a state of continued enchantment and doxology in the infinite and absolute taste of God's eternal love. This love springs from the struggle to commit oneself to the commandments of God. That's the aim of the Ecclesia. The homilies and teachings of the saints are a therapeutic pedagogy offered to us to heal our sick and passion-filled hearts so that they may function naturally as pure and unadulterated love. When that happens, a human being becomes indeed an image of God, compassionate and just, like our Father in Heaven, who is compassionate and just."

None of us doubted that Fr. Maximos was speaking with the authority of one who had experienced what he was teaching. It was this quality that led to his increasing recognition within the Orthodox world.

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From the Holy Scriptures: On Faith and Works

James 2:14-26

14 What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? **15** If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, **16** and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? **17** Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

18 But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. **19** You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! **20** But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? **21** Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? **22** Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect? **23** And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God. **24** You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.

25 Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?

26 For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Ephesians 2:8-10

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, ⁹ not of works, lest anyone should boast.

¹⁰ For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Philippians 2:12-13

12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; **13** for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.