



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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November 20, 2016

Advent Season

**Prefeast of the Entrance
of the Theotokos into the Temple**

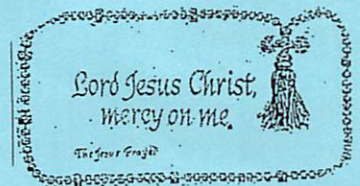
St. Gregory of Decapolis (816)

St. Proclus, Archbishop of Constantinople (447)

Martyr Edmund, King of England (869)

Come, let all the faithful praise
the only immaculate one,
foretold by the Prophets and
now offered in the Temple!
The Mother fore-ordained
before the ages, made manifest
as the Theotokos in the last
days! By her prayers, O Lord,
grant us your peace and great
mercy!

Apostikha of the Prefeast



Tomorrow: 10:00am Divine Liturgy ~ Feast of the Presentation of the Theotokos

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

Happy Thanksgiving !!!

Note: No Vespers next Saturday, November 26

The Meaning of Thanksgiving

The Apostle orders thanksgiving when we pray: *Persevere in prayer*, he says, and **keep wakeful in it with thanksgiving**. The Apostle says that thanksgiving is ordered by God Himself: *Pray without ceasing; give thanks for everything, for this is Gods will for you in Christ Jesus.*’^o

What is the meaning of thanksgiving? It means praising God for His countless blessings, poured out on all mankind and on everyone. By such thanksgiving the soul is filled with a wonderful peace: and she is filled with joy in spite of the fact that sorrows beset her on all sides. By thanksgiving one acquires a living faith so that he rejects all worry about himself, tramples on fear of men and devils, and surrenders himself wholly to the will of God.

Such a disposition of the soul is an excellent preparatory disposition for prayer. “*Therefore since you have received Christ Jesus as Lord*, says the Apostle, *so walk in Him (live in Him), rooted and built up in Him, and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in it by thanksgiving*, that is, by means of thanksgiving obtaining an abundance of faith.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, Rejoice! ... The Lord is near. Be anxious about nothing, but in every circumstance, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. ~ from *Spiritual Counsels* (author uncertain)

On the Incarnation and Synergy by St. Nicholas Cabasilas (1323-1391)

“The Incarnation was not only the work of the Father, of His power and His Spirit...but it was also the work of the will and faith of the Virgin...Just as God became incarnate voluntarily, so He wished that His Mother should bear Him freely and with her full consent.”

Pearls of the Holy Fathers {14.2}

They say that there was a certain monk who, whenever he found a man reviling and cursing him, used to run towards him with all his power, saying, "These [words] are the causes of spiritual excellence in those who are strenuous, for those who ascribe blessing to a man disturb the soul, as it is written, 'Those who ascribe blessing to you lead astray your soul.' "

~ Paradise of the Fathers

He [Saint Anthony] was also mindful of the words spoken by the Prophet Elias, "the Lord liveth before Whose presence I stand today." For he observed that in saying "today" the Prophet did not compute the time that had gone by: but daily as though ever commencing he eagerly endeavored to make himself fit to appear before God, being pure in heart and ever ready to submit to His counsel, and to Him alone.

~ Life of Saint Anthony, by St. Athanasius, 7

The young novices Timothy and Jonah [the future Elder Moses of Optina and his brother] profited from the instruction of the ascetic elders of Sarov. Once Timothy heard the following wonderful exhortation from Father Seraphim, "While you are standing in church, you must say the Jesus Prayer. Then you will also hear the church service distinctly."

~ St. Moses of Optina

Abba Sisoës, the Theban, said to his disciple, "Tell me what you see in me and then I will tell you what I see in you." His disciple said to him, "You are a good man, but a little hard." The old man said to him, "You are good, too, but you are not tough enough."

~ The Desert Christian, p. 221

If, as Scripture teaches, everything involuntary has its cause in what is voluntary, man has no greater enemy than himself.

~ St. Mark the Ascetic, Philokalia Vol. I

All well-pleasing and all service are in the thoughts. Therefore endeavor to please the Lord, always looking for Him within, seeking Him in your thoughts, and forcing and constraining your own will and purpose to stretch upwards continually towards Him. Then see how He comes to you and makes His abode with you. In proportion as you gather up your mind to seek Him, He is far more constrained by His own tender compassion and kindness to come to you and give you rest. He stands contemplating your mind, your thoughts, your intentions, observing how you seek Him, whether with your whole soul, not indolently, not carelessly.

~ St. Macarius the Great

An elder asked Abba Poemen, saying, "From whence have you gotten such humility that whenever it happens that there be trouble in the coenobium (community) you do not speak, and do not interfere to put an end to contention?" And the elder, having pressed the brother, Abba Poemen answered and said unto him, "Forgive me, father. When I first entered the coenobium I said unto my mind, I and the ass are one. As the ass is beaten and speaketh not, and is cursed and maketh no answer, so also act thou, according to what the blessed David said, 'I was a beast with Thee'."

~ Paradise of the Holy Fathers, Vol. II

Ye are not as yet come to the rest and to the inheritance, which the Lord your God giveth you.

~ Deuteronomy 12:9.

Grace has been given mystically to those who have been baptized into Christ; and it becomes active within them to the extent that they actively observe the commandments. Grace never ceases to help us secretly; but to do good - as far as lies in our power - depends on us.

~ St. Mark the Ascetic

Do not trouble yourself with another's honor, but use your tongue only for praising God and for another's benefit and edification. When you are tempted to say something bad, recall those sins you committed from your youth and reproach yourself.

~ Advice from an Elder to Those Living in the World

The Feast of the Entrance into the Temple

On the great Feast of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple, Mary is taken as a child by her parents, Sts. Joachim and Anna to be raised in the Jerusalem temple. From her earliest years, she gave herself completely to God, to searching out and following His will. She reached the highest level of perfection, becoming the standard of what humanity is capable of becoming. **In the words of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, she is not the great exception but the great example.** There is an infinite wealth of learning for us in the contemplation of her life, particularly in this season when we celebrate her entrance into the temple.

The temple of the Old Testament was a place, a temple of stone. But when God chose to dwell on earth, He did not come to a place but to a person—Mary became the living temple that held Christ. In the Feast of the Entrance, the Church is inviting us to enter into the mystery of Mary's life there. Let us look at the Old Testament temple itself to see what it can teach us about our own life with God. The temple was both the dwelling place of God and the place where man worshipped Him. It had a wall of enclosure and three parts: the outer court or porch; the Holy Place; and the Holy of Holies. The wall protected and concealed the temple. From the outside, the treasures within it were not immediately apparent. Our protection is the Church—not so much its physical walls but the spiritual enclosure holding the treasure of the Commandments, the Holy Scripture, and all its teachings.

The outer court, where anyone could go, was a very busy place, with many rooms where the sacrifices were prepared. This corresponds to our outward lives and daily activities; it is here that we strive to keep the commandments of God. When our daily lives are shaped by this effort, we are not only sanctifying all those activities, we are also doing something that is absolutely essential to being permitted to go deeper into the temple.

Further into the Temple was the Holy Place where only priests were allowed to enter to offer the prepared sacrifice on behalf of the people. Among these sacrifices were thank offerings and sin offerings. We are called to this same priestly activity in our own hearts—to offer prayers of repentance and gratitude, to intercede for those whom we love and for the world, and to offer praise and adoration, contemplating the God Who created us.

The innermost room was called the Holy of Holies, which held the mercy seat guarded by Cherubim, and the Ark of the Covenant. Here the high priest entered once a year to make reparation for the people. There was no formal prayer service; he did his work in the silence of his heart, in the very presence of God. In the New Covenant, the high priest is Jesus Himself and when He ascended in glory into the heavenly Holy of Holies, the very presence of His Father—He not only performed reparation, but literally took us with Him. This action on the part of Christ enables us to have union with God Himself, a communion of love so deep that not even words of prayer are necessary.

In Everything Give Thanks

"We should give thanks to God, as it is said: 'In everything give thanks' (I Thess. 5:18). Closely linked to this phrase is another of St. Paul's injunctions: 'Pray without ceasing' (I Thess. 5:17), that is, be mindful of God at all times, in all places, and in every circumstance. For no matter what you do, you should keep in mind the Creator of all things. When you see the light, do not forget Him who gave it to you; when you see the sky, the earth, the sea and all that is in them, marvel at these things and glorify their Creator; when you put on clothing, acknowledge whose gift it is and praise Him who in His providence has given you life. In short, if everything you do becomes for you an occasion for glorifying God, you will be praying unceasingly. And in this way your soul will always rejoice, as St. Paul commends (cf. I Thess. 5:16)."

St. Peter of Damascus (The Philokalia Vol. 3)

Patience ~ Mother Alexandra of Holy Transfiguration Monastery

There is a little verse that says:

Patience is a virtue, and virtue is a grace. Put them both together, and you'll have a pretty face.

It sounds rather silly yet like all sayings coming out of old folk wisdom, it really is not silly at all. Patience is indeed a great virtue, one not so easily come by. It is one of the Christian characteristics which we have to acquire by long efforts of self-discipline and charity of word and deed— it is an attribute of God, for we know Him to be long-suffering as well as just. Therefore for us to obtain this virtue, we must look Godwards and pray that this grace be vouchsafed us.

Can we, sinful as we are, aspire to one of God's attributes? Yes—for God created us in His image and likeness, so not only can we but we must make every spiritual effort to find again our likeness to God. For this purpose God sent His only-begotten Son to be one of us to live and die for us, and overcome death itself in His glorious Resurrection.

In our search to find once more our likeness to God, there are many virtues we have to acquire or develop in ourselves: love, compassion, faith, hope, steadfastness and many others that constitute the perfect man such as Jesus was, and we never can be. But we can touch the hem of His robe and be cured of our unlikeness by obeying His commandment. "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (Jn. 14:15). "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life" (Jn. 14:6).

Patience with others and with ourselves is an implicit part of love. "Love is long-suffering," says St. Paul. Who has not known moments of exasperation with a person dearly loved? Sometimes we are sorely tried by our friends and neighbors and the people we try to help. But were we not patient we would be lacking in love and our charity would become mainly a social obligation. We are often impatient with ourselves with our lack of perfection and our sinfulness. Sometimes we give up on ourselves and others because we have not the patience required for betterment. We are impatient with events that do not develop to our liking in spite of all our well-meant efforts. We are not content to leave to God an increase we may one day ourselves reap. We give up all too easily.

In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus compares the good earth with the good hearts of men. Every gardener knows how long it takes to make the soil ready for the seed. Would we be less caring of our souls? Nature teaches us a lesson on how it can revive itself. The seasons follow each other, trees and flowers bloom and fade, and start again, paying little heed to our struggles and man-made disasters. Winter is followed by spring. Is there not a great lesson for us in this, of grit and serene persistence and fulfillment? Jesus said, "In patience possess ye your soul" (Lk. 21:19).

We are not all made alike. We are individuals, children of God, all equally loved by Him, each having his or her own calling and capacities, all valuable if different, as St. Paul says at length in I Corinthians 12.

We may not be responsible for what we are born with but we are responsible for what we become. To become a fully responsible human being, a true follower of Christ, we need infinite unending patience and faith, and perhaps the two are one. *(From a handwritten note in her papers) † † †*

Persevere with patience in your prayer, and repulse the cares and doubts that arise within you. Try to make your intellect deaf and dumb during prayer, you will then be able to pray. If, then, you wish to behold and commune with Him who is beyond sense-perception and beyond concept, you must free yourself from every impassioned thought.

~ Evagrius the Solitary

On the Holy Eucharist ~ An Answer to a recent Parish Website Inquirer

What does Orthodox Christianity teach about the Eucharist? What are some of the ways in which the Eucharist is described?

The Orthodox Church believes the Eucharist is the center of the Church's life, since it is communion with our Lord Jesus Christ. God took flesh in order to give us His flesh. In fact it is said, "The Church is the Eucharist; the Eucharist is the Church." The Church is communion (common-union) with God and the Eucharist, as the Sacrament of Sacraments is the very reality of that communion. The Gospel of John 6 (and I Corinthians 10) is at the heart of the Church's understanding:

John 6:53-58

53 Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.

54 Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.

55 For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.

56 He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.

57 As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me.

58 This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live forever.

We claim that the Christian Church has always been centered in the Eucharist. Yes, the Orthodox Faith teaches the "real presence" of Christ in the Eucharist. It is a mystery which we experience, but do not dare to pretend to understand or define. As St. John of Damascus said in the 7th century:

"If you enquire how this happens, it is enough for you to learn that it was through the Holy Spirit...and we know nothing further except that the Word of God is true and energizes and is omnipotent, but the manner of this cannot be searched out."

The word Eucharist is from the Greek, meaning "thanksgiving." The Eucharist includes the entire service of the Orthodox "Divine Liturgy" (equivalent to the "Mass" in the West). Thanksgiving is at the heart of the Christian life. All food is to be received with thanksgiving, as from the hand of God. All major celebrations of the Church, such as Christmas and Easter (Pascha) are celebrated with their fulfillment in the Divine Liturgy with the reception of the Holy Eucharist. The Liturgy is the gathering of God's people around His table in His Kingdom, already experienced in the Church on earth through the Holy Eucharist.

How Does the Eucharist make us God's people?

An Orthodox Christian lives in a rhythm of life from Eucharist to Eucharist.

I Corinthians 10: 16-17

16 The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?

17 For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.

The Church is called the Body of Christ because it partakes of the Body of Christ. An early first century Church document, called the "Didache," ("The Teaching of the Apostles") describes an understanding of the Eucharist as the gathering of God's people into Christ's eternal Kingdom:

"Even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy Kingdom."

The Church is gathered as wheat into the one Bread and Body of Christ.

An Orthodox Christian also lives in awareness of the need for self-examination and for personal spiritual preparation before receiving Communion each time, in light of I Corinthians 11.

I Corinthians 11:23-30

23 For I have received of the Lord that which also I delivered unto you, that the Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread:

24 And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.

25 After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, this cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as often as ye drink it, in remembrance of me.

26 For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till he come.

27 Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.

28 But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.

29 For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh condemnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.

30 For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.

The Eucharist is not to be taken lightly or carelessly. It can be taken to one's judgment and condemnation, if one is not humbly attentive. Orthodox Christians go to Confession regularly and fast and pray before each reception of the Eucharist. There is an abstaining from food and drink from midnight the night before a morning Divine Liturgy. There are certain prayers of preparation we pray which remind us that we are not worthy to receive this great gift of the "holy mysteries," of union with Christ in Holy Communion.

The Lord desires this deepest possible communion with His people and the Eucharist is the ultimate way of union and communion and the very foundation of the Church, the Body of Christ. As Christ said to the Father, "that they may be one, as we are" (John 17:11).

Christ gives us Himself as the "living bread" and "for the life of the world." The very life of Christians is in the Eucharist - the gift of Christ, the gift of Himself, the gift of His Divine Life.

⁵⁰ **This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die.**

⁵¹ **I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.**

We believe it to be God's plan to have our ultimate connection with Him centered in the Church and in the Eucharist. Christian groups which have denied the apostolic Church and the necessity of Eucharistic Communion have (mostly unintentionally and unawares) been deprived of God's great Gift and this great grace.

Preaching is important. Preaching prepares us and reminds Who Christ is, as our Lord and Savior. That's the first half of the Divine Liturgy – the proclamation of Scripture and then the sermon. Christ is preached and then we receive Him in the Eucharist! Glory to God!

The Silence in Which We Dwell - Fr. Stephen Freeman

There is a strange noisiness to our culture. Most of us live very busy lives in which time itself is noisy. My phones (there always seem to be two) are primed to go off at any moment and the very details that surround us carry a kind of noise about them. It is rare that the world would offer us silence.

And yet, the Fathers teach us about Hesychia (silence) in which we encounter God and see ourselves for who we are. I am a noisy person. I am likely to be bothered by the quiet when it surrounds me, and reach for a knob to fill the empty space with the sound of something. And if there is no knob, then the sound of my own brain chattering away fills the space with everything but God. I do not think I am unique in this.

There is a fullness that is an emptiness and there is an emptiness that is a fullness. It all depends on the character of what fills us. If it is life apart from God – then its very fullness leaves us empty. If it is a life live towards God then our emptiness becomes the bowl which He can fill with Himself. I need only look at the fullness within me to know where my heart has turned.

It is the paradox of our Christian life that we find ourselves in losing ourselves – that the fullness of life is only found as we empty ourselves towards the Other around us. This, too, is found in very small actions. It is rare for most of us that the profound act of martyrdom, of the complete self-emptying that comes in giving our life for God, occurs in a single moment. Mostly it comes in thousands of small moments – the daily and momentary martyrdom in which we empty some small part of ourselves on behalf of the other around us. I make space to hear the sound of your voice instead of the sound of my mind. I make space to pay attention to your needs and not my own. I make space to simply be with you, present and not absent. And in such spaces, such moments of emptiness, we find a fullness that does not destroy us but feeds us and fills us with a Life that cannot die. To dwell in such emptiness is to know the Fullness. To dwell in such silence is to hear the voice of God.

On Prayer: Whatever we do without prayer and without hope in God turns out afterwards to be harmful and defective. ~ *St. Mark the Ascetic* (4th C)

GENERAL THANKSGIVING

By the PRESIDENT of the United States Of America

A PROCLAMATION

WHEREAS it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favour; and Whereas both Houses of Congress have, by their joint committee, requested me "to recommend to the people of the United States a DAY OF PUBLICK THANKSGIVING and PRAYER, to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness:"

NOW THEREFORE, I do recommend and assign THURSDAY, the TWENTY-SIXTH DAY of NOVEMBER next, to be devoted by the people of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being who is the beneficent author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be; that we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the people of this country previous to their becoming a nation; for the signal and manifold mercies and the favorable interpositions of His providence in the course and conclusion of the late war; for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty which we have since enjoyed; – for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been able to establish Constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national one now lately instituted; – for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed, and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge; – and, in general, for all the great and various favours which He has been pleased to confer upon us.

And also, that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech Him to pardon our national and other transgressions; – to enable us all, whether in publick or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually; to render our National Government a blessing to all the people by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed; to protect and guide all sovereigns and nations (especially such as have shewn kindness unto us); and to bless them with good governments, peace, and concord; to promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the increase of science among them and us; and, generally to grant unto all mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as He alone knows to be best.

GIVEN under my hand, at the city of New-York, the third day of October, in the year of our Lord, one thousand seven hundred and eighty-nine.

(signed) G. Washington