



## *Fire & Light*

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

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✠ August 14, 2011 ✠

**Forefeast of the Dormition**

Holy Prophet Micah (8<sup>th</sup> B.C.) St. Fachanon of Cork (! – 600)

✠ **Tomorrow - 10:00am Divine Liturgy - Feast of Dormition**

## **THE LOVE AND JOY OF THE THEOTOKOS**

Fr. Robert O'Loughlin, Holy Dormition Church Tallahassee, FL

We are soon to celebrate the Feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos, the Holy Mother of God. She became the example for the rest of us of how to live the Christian life, and to gain eternal life. She did not obtain eternal life just because she gave birth to Christ but also that she heard the Word of God, and kept it. The Apostle Luke tells us that she kept and trusted God's Word her whole life. Her life was a life of obedience and loving service to God. It was her selfless love with no strings attached that we can look towards her example and her strength in doing God's will. Ultimately, we have to be pleasing to God and that is how the Theotokos lived her life.

She is an example about how to live our lives in hope. She understood in her heart what God was directing her to do, and she did it. This is perhaps the most important lesson all of us need to continue to learn and remember as we are trying to live a Christian life. The Orthodox way is not always the way of the world. Our way is not to be or try to be greatly praised. Our way should be to serve, and do the will of God, whatever that may be. We often in our prayers ask the Theotokos to pray for us, to protect us, and pray for those in need. We can ask her to encourage us on our path following Christ. In our preparation for this feast, for two weeks we fasted and have had the Paraklysis services to the Most Holy Theotokos. Those of you who know this service, know the beauty of the hymns that are chanted. It is during this service and

certainly at other times, we ask the Mother of God to intercede for us, to pray for us and others to share with us in her love for her Son. It is with preparation that we can fully enjoy the feast in coming and worshipping God in the services leading up to it.

We pray that our lives become strong, joyful and peaceful like hers. One of the things that we can remember about the Theotokos is to understand that she is our example of the Church. If we are going to be Christians, if we are going to be pleasing to God, and if we are going to be hoping to have life in the Kingdom with Him, then our life has to be about hearing the Word of God, and keeping it. It means doing something about it, living our lives in accordance with the Gospel. This would be following the example of the life of the Mother of God. Because of her humility, she has been exalted into heaven. In honoring her we honor her obedience.

Every time we come to the liturgy, every time we pray and read Scriptures there are going to be opportunities to open ourselves to hear and listen to God and His will for us. We are to surrender ourselves to God and fill any emptiness that we have with Christ. We are to be active in experiencing this through the traditions of the Church and through the intercessory prayers of the Theotokos, she can assist us in our efforts.

Let us look to her for strength and love and ask the Theotokos to pray for us, to protect us, and support us, in our efforts to grow in faith and love in Christ our Lord. ✠

“Therefore, the body which gave birth (of the Theotokos) is glorified together with the One Who is born, with glory befitting God, and it is raised together.”

~ St. Gregory Palamas

*Most-Holy Theotokos  
save us!*



## Pearls of the Holy Fathers (1:3)

No matter how little you love God, He still loves you. Elder Makary of Optina

Tend to yourself and it is enough. ~ Elder Joseph of Optina

A brother questioned an elder 'Tell me something which I can do, so that I may live by it', and the old man said, 'If you can bear to be despised, that is a great thing, more than all the other virtues.

Apophthegmata Patrum (Anonymous Sayings of the Fathers)

This then should be our main effort: and this steadfast purpose of heart we should constantly aspire after, viz., that the soul may ever cleave to God and to heavenly things. Whatever is alien to this, however great it may be, should be given the second place or even treated as of no consequence, or perhaps as hurtful.

St. John Cassian

Our heart is like the darkened earth; the Gospel is like the sun; enlightening and giving life to our hearts. May the true sun of Thy righteousness shine in our hearts, O Lord! St. John of Kronstadt

The Christian receives great benefit from the Divine Mysteries, both in his soul and in his body. . . . Before he communes, he must make the necessary preparation, that is, he must confess to his spiritual father, correct himself, feel compunction, acquire inner attention, guard himself from passionate thoughts as far as possible, and also from every other vice. Similarly, he must exercise self-restraint, pray, be inwardly awake, become more devout, and do every other kind of good deed, reflecting what awesome King he is about to receive within himself; especially if he considers that the grace which is given to him from Communion is proportionate to his preparation. It is evident that the more one makes such preparation, the more benefit he receives. St. Macarius of Corinth

Of all evil suggestions, the most terrible is that of following one's own heart, that is to say, one's own thought, and not the law of God. A man who does this will be afflicted later on, because he has not recognized the mystery, and he has not found the way of the saints in order to work in it.

Abba Isidore the Priest

What shall we say of the belly, the queen of passions? If you can slay it or half kill it, keep a tight hold. It has mastered me, beloved, and I serve it as a slave and a vassal. It is the colleague of the demons and the home of passions. Through it we fall, and through it we rise again, when it behaves itself.

St. Gregory of Sinai

He who esteemeth himself as nothing, whithersoever he goeth, or wheresoever he dwelleth, he shall find rest.

Abba Paphnutius

Take care. Thy death is at hand.

Fr. Alexei of Bortsumany

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✘ **It is good...to pray always and not to lose heart**, as the Lord says, And again the Apostle says, 'Pray without ceasing', (Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!) that is by night and by day and at every hour, and not only when coming into the church, and not bothering at other times. But whether you are working, lying down to sleep, traveling, eating, drinking, sitting at table, do not interrupt your prayer, for you do not know when he who demands your soul is coming... Don't wait for Sunday or a feast day, or a different place, but, as the Prophet David says, 'in every place of his dominion'.

Whether you are in church, or in your house, or in the country; whether you are guarding sheep, or constructing buildings, or present at drinking parties, do not stop praying. When you are able, bend your knees, when you cannot, make intercession in your mind, 'at evening and at morning and at midday'. If prayer precedes your work and if, when you rise from your bed, your first movements are accompanied by prayer, sin can find no entrance to attack your soul. ~St. Ephraim the Syrian

## **His Eminence, Metropolitan Alexios of Atlanta – On the Feastday of the Dormition of the Most-Holy Theotokos**

On Monday, we will celebrate the culmination of all our prayer, fasting and works of charity - the Dormition of our Most Holy and Blessed Lady Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary.

The Feast of the Dormition is one of the Twelve Great Feasts of our Orthodox Church, probably dating from the late fifth century (though it may be earlier), and was always celebrated in Jerusalem on the same date as now.

In the history of the Church there are many wonderful stories and traditions about the death of the Theotokos. Tradition tells us that she prepared herself through prayer and fasting and that the 12 Apostles, though preaching the Gospel all over the earth, learned of her imminent death and were all able to be at her bedside to pray with her, except for Thomas, who arrived a few days later and asked to see the body of the mother of our Lord. Imagine their astonishment when her tomb was opened, and her body was not there! In this way, they understood that our Lord took His mother up to Heaven. Of course there are people who will tell you that none of this is written in the Bible. But for us Orthodox the Holy Scriptures are only part of the ongoing Revelation of the Holy Spirit, which we call Holy Tradition.

For us Orthodox Christians the Dormition of the Mother of God is what we are pray that we ourselves may experience: "a Christian ending to our lives, painless, unashamed and peaceful, and a good answer before the dread Judgment seat of Christ." Because she is the Mother of Christ, the Mother of God, we honor her and celebrate her birth into the resurrection, praying that, by the grace of God, and through her intercessions, we may one day be with her and her Son in heaven.

With this Feast Day, we realize that we are coming to the end of the Ecclesiastical Year. As we look forward to the beginning of our spiritual journey through the new Ecclesiastical and academic year, I pray we will all be inspired by the life and example of our Lord's Most Pure Mother.

### **HOMILY ~ About the Remembrance of the Imminent Separation of the Body**

**"Yes, I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle (body) to stir you up by putting you in remembrance; knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ had showed me" (2 Peter 1: 13-14).**

Here is a good reminder to lovers of the body who, because of the body, forgot their souls. The body must be put off. No matter how costly we hold it to be, no matter how much worth we attach to it, no matter how much we caress and pamper it, we must put it off one day. O how powerful and truthful are these words "to put it off!" When the soul is separated from the body, the soul puts off the body as no longer necessary. Those who suffer shipwreck reach the shore on a plank. They come to the shore and discard the plank. When spring blossoms, the serpent sheds its skin and puts it off. When a butterfly wings its way out of the cocoon, the cocoon is put off. In the same manner the body is put off when the soul departs from it. No longer of use and without benefit, even harmful to other men, it is put off from the house, put off from the city, put off from the sun and is buried deep into the ground. Think about this, you who live in luxury and are adorned, you who are haughty and gluttonous!

As long as the soul is in the body, it should utilize the body for its salvation submitting to the law of God and performing the works of God. Do you see how the apostolic soul is a lover of labor! "As long as I am in this tabernacle (body) to stir you up." That task was given to him by God. He wants to conscientiously complete it to the end because he must put off his body. Brethren, let us labor first to embrace the apostolic warning and secondly, to remind others, all others, for whom we wish good. In haste we are approaching the shore of the other old world, as the hour hastily approaches when we must put off the bodies and, with a naked soul, appear before the judgment of God. What will we say at the Dread Judgment Seat of God? To what goals have we, in this earthly life, used the device from the earth, which is called the body?

O Lord Jesus, Righteous Judge, direct our mind to think of death and judgment. – **St. Nikolai of Serbia**

## **HIS EMINENCE METROPOLITAN ALEXIOS` REFLECTIONS ON THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR** *August 3, 2011*

The weather is telling us that it is still summer, yet in many places in our Metropolis, students and teachers are back in the classroom. Of course, we pray for them, that Almighty God, "the Father of Lights," will enlighten and inspire them to become teachers and apostles of our faith: "Christ, the true light, who enlightens and sanctifies every person coming into the world, let the light of Your countenance shine upon them that they may see Your unapproachable light; and guide their steps in the way of Your commandments, through the intercessions of Your all-holy Mother and of all the Saints. Amen."

When I think of our children and youth, and the many temptations and trials that can overwhelm them in the world today, I am more than ever aware of the amount of work and attention required from their parents, their family and their Church family. Unbelief and harmful secular values seem to pervade today's society and even our educational system – which seems to have little--if anything--to recommend itself to an Orthodox family. Naturally it is the parents' primary responsibility to provide their children with a Christian education, building character and teaching them to respect others and fear God. But it is also important that parents understand and are aware of the ideas and values that students are exposed to, so that they will be able to counteract negative influences.

Of course, we remember St. Macrina, who devoted herself to teaching her younger brothers St. Basil, Bishop of Neocaesarea, and St. Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, who became two of the greatest teachers of our Church. St. Basil and St. Gregory both write that they owed everything to their elder sister's devotion and care of their education and spiritual growth. Of their student years, St. Gregory later wrote; "We knew but two walks: the first and dearest, that which led to the Church and its teachers; the other, less exalted, which led to the school and its master." Yet even St. Macrina faced the same dilemma as we do today: how to protect our children from pagan knowledge – her brother St. Gregory advised her to receive honey even from the flowers that have thorns and to "reap what advantage we can from them for our life and enjoyment, while we avoid their dangers." St. Gregory also tells us that "even these have aided us in our religion, by our perception of the contrast between what is worse and what is better, and by gaining strength for our doctrine from the weakness of theirs" and not to dishonor education.

Even though our lives may be busy and consumed by many responsibilities and cares, it is critical to pay attention to our children and what they are being taught – not just their homework, or athletic activities, but the values and attitudes that are being taught along with English and math. We must ensure that the first and greatest lessons they learn are from their parents and their Church, enabling them to be healthy, productive members of society and faithful Orthodox Christians.

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### **Daily Life Problems ~ Papa Dimitri Gagastathis (1965)**

✘ "I never worried anxiously about anything. I cared for my children without weariness and anxiety. God Who gave them to me also took care of everything."

✘ "The one who runs to magicians and fortune-tellers is called a rascal and loses protection even from God."

**Self appraisal:** "I don't remember anything from this life; only the heavy load of my sins."

# Christianity Should Not Change With The Times

*“Lord, save us from this broad way!”*

Letter by St. Theophan the Recluse

December 29, 1863, Sunday after Christ's Birth



It reached my ears that, as it seems, you consider my sermons very strict and believe that today no one should think this way, no one should be living this way and therefore, no one should be teaching this way. “Times have changed!”

How glad I was to hear this. This means that you listen carefully to what I say, and not only do you listen, but you are also willing to abide by it. What more could we hope for, we who preach as we were ordered and as much we were ordered?

Despite all this, in no way can I agree with your opinion. I even consider it my duty to comment on it and to correct it, since – even though it perhaps goes against your desire and conviction – it comes from something sinful, as though Christianity could alter its doctrines, its canons, its sanctifying ceremonies to answer to the spirit of each age and adjust itself to the changing tastes of the sons of this century, as though it could add or subtract something.

Yet, it is not so. Christianity must remain eternally unchanging, in no way being dependent on or guided by the spirit of each age. Instead, Christianity is meant to govern and direct the spirit of the age for anyone who obeys its teachings. To convince you of this, I will put forward some thoughts for you to consider:

Some said that my teaching is strict. First of all, my teaching is not my own, nor should it be. In this sacred office nobody should, nor even can, preach his own teaching. If I or someone else ever dare to do so, you can put us outside the Church.

We preach the teachings of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ, of the Holy Apostles, and the Holy Church, which is guided by the Holy Spirit. At the same time, we make sure to do everything possible to keep these teachings whole and inviolate in your minds and hearts. Every thought we present and every word we use, we do so very carefully, so as not to overshadow this brilliant and divine teaching in any way. Nobody can act differently.

Such a law that calls for each man's preaching in the Church to be "God-sent," was established at the creation of the world, and should thus remain valid until the end of the world. The Prophet Moses, after the delivery of the Commandments from God Himself to the people of Israel, concluded: "You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you" (Deut. 4:2).

This law of constancy is so unalterable that the Lord and Savior Himself, when He was teaching the people on the mountain, said: "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished" (Math. 5:17-18).

Then He gave the same validity to his teaching, before interpreting the commandments in the spirit of the gospel, by adding: "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Math. 5:19).

This means that anyone who wrongly interprets the commandments of God and lessens their validity, will be an outcast in the future life. This is what He said at the beginning of His preaching. He assured the same thing to Saint John the Theologian, the beholder of ineffable revelations, to whom He described the final judgment of the world and the Church, indicating in the Apocalypse (Book of Revelation): "I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues which are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book" (Apoc. 22:18-19).

From the time of His first appearance in the world until the Second Coming, Christ has given the Holy Apostles and their successors the following law: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (Math. 28:19-20).

That means "for you to teach, not what anyone else could possibly imagine, but what I ordered, and this to the end of the world." And He adds: "And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen" (Math. 28:20).

The Apostles received this law and sacrificed their lives in order to keep it. And to those who wanted to keep them from preaching what it was they preached under the threat of punishment and death, they replied: "Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20).

This clear law was delivered by the apostles to their successors, was accepted by them, and has timeless effect in the Church of God. Because of this law, the Church is the pillar and the ground of truth. Can you see then what an inviolable steadfastness it has? After that, who would be so bold as to stubbornly disturb or move anything in Christian doctrine and law?

Next listen to what is said of the Prophet Ezekiel who for seven days was in the ecstasy of prayer and after seven days heard the word of the Lord: "Son of man, I have made you a watchman to the house of Israel: therefore hear the word at my mouth" (Ezek. 3:17), and he declared to the people: Here is the law for you! If you see a wicked person committing iniquity and you do not tell him: leave your iniquity and change your way, "that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand" (Ezek. 3:18). Conversely, "if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die for his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. Again, if a righteous person turns from his righteousness and commits injustice, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die. Because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds that he has done shall not be remembered, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the righteous person not to sin, and he does not sin, he shall surely live, because he took warning, and you will have delivered your soul" (Ezek. 3:19-21).

What a strict law! And though it sounds in the consciences of all pastors during their election and consecration, when a heavy yoke is put on them, namely the instruction of the flock of Christ that He entrusted to them, big or small, not only to guide it but also to preserve it. How could anyone be so bold, to pervert everything in the law of Christ, when this involves the destruction of both pastors and flock?

If the saving power of this teaching depended on our opinion of it and our consent to it, it would make sense for someone to imagine rebuilding Christianity according to human weaknesses or the claims of the age and adapt it according to the sinful desires of his heart. But the saving power of Christian law does not at all depend on us, but on the will of God, by the fact that God Himself

established precisely the exact path of salvation. Beyond this there is no other way, nor could it exist. Therefore, anyone who teaches in any other way, is deviating from the true path and is destroying himself and you. What logic is there in that?

Notice how strict judgment was mentioned when something similar happened to the nation of Israel during the difficult years of their captivity. Some prophets out of pity for the suffering and sick talked to the people, not as the Lord had ordered, but as their heart dictated. Concerning them the Lord gave the following commands to Ezekiel: "And you, son of man, set your face against the daughters of your people, who prophesy out of their own minds. Prophesy against them and say, 'Thus says the Lord God: Woe to the women who sew magic bands upon all wrists, and make veils for the heads of persons of every stature, in the hunt for souls'" (Ezek. 13:17-18).

This means: Woe to those who order any kind of special treatment and suggest such leniency, so no one feels the slightest displeasure, either from those on top or those at the bottom, not caring whether this is for their salvation or destruction, whether it is pleasing to God, or repulsive. Woe to them, because "thus says the Lord God...your pillows and veils," namely your candied and comforting teaching, "upon which there you are perverting souls, I will tear from your arms and I will let their souls that you are perverting, go away..." (Ezek. 13:20-21) from this teaching of yours and I will destroy you corrupters.

This is the benefit of this special treatment and leniency, such as you want to hear from preachers! When you put all this deep in your heart, it is not right for you to want us to make any concessions in Christian doctrine, having the wrong desire to be pleased by us. On the contrary, you are obliged to persistently demand from us to remain true to doctrine, as strictly and firmly as possible.

Have you ever heard of the indulgences of the Pope of Rome? Here is what they are: special treatment and leniency, which he gives defying the law of Christ. And what is the result? From all of this, the West is corrupt in faith and in their way of life, and is now getting lost in its disbelief and in the unrestrained life with its indulgences.

The Pope changed many doctrines, spoiled all the sacraments, nullified the canons concerning the regulation of the Church and the correction of morals. Everything has begun going contrary to the will of the Lord, and has become worse and worse.

Then came along Luther, a smart man, but stubborn. He said, "The Pope changed everything as he wanted, why shouldn't I do the same?" He started to modify and re-modify everything in his own way, and in this way established the new Lutheran faith, which only slightly resembles what the Lord had commanded and the Holy Apostles delivered to us.

After Luther came the philosophers. And they in turn said, "Luther has established himself a new faith, supposedly based on the Gospel, though in reality based on his own way of thinking. Why, then, don't we also compose doctrines based on our own way of thinking, completely ignoring the Gospel?" They then started rationalizing, and speculating about God, the world, and man, each in his own way. And they mixed up so many doctrines, that one gets dizzy just counting them.

Now the Westerners have the following views: Believe what you think best, live as you like, satisfy whatever captivates your soul. This is why they do not recognize any law or restriction and they do not abide by God's word. Their road is wide, all obstacles displaced. Their way is broad, all the obstacles taken out. But the broad road leads to perdition, according to what the Lord says. This is where leniency in teaching has led!

Lord, save us from this broad way! But it is better to love each difficulty that the Lord has appointed for our salvation. Let us love Christian doctrines and let us compel our mind with them, pushing it not to think otherwise. Let us love Christian morals and let us compel our will in them, forcing it to

lift the light yoke of the Lord humbly and patiently. Let us love all Christian rituals and services which guide us, correct us, and sanctify us. Let us compel our heart with them, encouraging it to convey its desires from the earthly and perishable, to the heavenly and imperishable.

Let us confine ourselves as though in a cage. Or better, let us drag ourselves, as if we were passing through a narrow passage. Let it be narrow, so no one can deviate neither to the right left, nor the left. Yet undoubtedly, through this narrow way we will obtain the kingdom of the heavens in return. For as you know, this kingdom is the kingdom of the Lord. The Lord laid this narrow way and said, "Follow exactly this route and you will obtain the kingdom of heaven."

Could anyone then doubt whether the traveler will get to his destination? And what mind would one have who starts wanting all kinds of annulment of the commandments, when by doing this he would immediately lose his way and be lost?

Once you have fully understood this assertion, do not worry if something in our teaching seems to be strict. The only thing you should strive for is to carefully make sure if it is from the Lord. And after you have made sure it is from the Lord, accept it with all your heart, no matter how strict or obliging it may be. And not only avoid wanting special treatment and leniency with doctrine and the ethics, but even flee from all these, as though fleeing from the fire of Gehenna. Those who cannot escape from this are those who think up such things and with them lure those who are spiritually weak to follow them. Amen.

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### **Turn the Steering Wheel**

"In order to carry out a proper struggle, we must turn the steering wheel opposite to the devil's direction: If he whispers that we are something, we should then cultivate self-reproach; if he whispers that we are nothing, we should tell him, 'God will have mercy on me.' If a man acts in this simple way, with trust and hope in God, his life will have repentance and humility, and he is able to achieve spiritual heights."

**Elder Paisios**

### **HOMILY ~ About how death and life depend on the tongue**

**"Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Proverbs 18:21).**

Did not our Lord Himself confirm this when He said that for every empty word men will give an answer before the Dread Judgment? Didn't He explicitly say: "But I tell you, that of every idle word men speak, they shall give account on the Day of Judgment. For by your words, you shall be justified and by your words, you shall be condemned" (St. Matthew 12: 36-37). Whoever is justified will receive life. Whoever is condemned will receive death. Therefore, do you see how life and death are in the power of the tongue? The Apostle James says: "For in many things we all offend. If anyone does not offend in word, he is a perfect man, able also to lead round by a bridle the whole body" (St. James 3:2).

Truly, great is the unexplored mystery of the word and the influence of the word cannot be measured nor estimated. Today the word of men can be carried by artificial instruments from one end of our planet to the other. A word spoken by the tongue in America can be heard by the ear in Europe. Is not this a picture of the All-hearing God? O my brethren, we cannot whisper anything here to the earth that the heavens are not going to hear. Our every word comes before the assembly of the angels of God. Hades receives our every evil word and retains it as a guarantee of our eternal death and Paradise receives every good word and retains it as a guarantee of our eternal life. Truly, does the Old Testament sage wisely speaks and promptly reminds us with the words that: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue."

~ **St.Nikolai, from the Prologue**