



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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✠ **December 4, 2011** ✠

25th Sunday after Pentecost

Holy Great-Martyr Barbara (306)



St. John of Damascus (760) Priest-Martyr Alexander Hotovitsky (1937)

- ✠ **Tomorrow - 6:30pm – Vespers with Litiya for St. Nicholas the Wonderworker
Archbishop of Myra in Lycia**
- ✠ **Tues Dec. 6 10:00am Divine Liturgy for St. Nicholas**
- ✠ **Inquirer's Class – Tuesday, December 6 ~ 6:30pm ⇒ No Wednesday service**
- ⇒ **Parish Council Meeting Today / Building Committee Next Sunday**

In the Steps of St. Nicholas

Among all the multitude of God's Saints, known and unknown, for each of us there are a special few who particularly attract our mind and heart — perhaps because they manifest virtues which we desire, or faced and overcame trials similar to those we bear, or perhaps simply because for us they show forth particularly clearly the love of God.

Of all the Saints, St. Nicholas is probably the most beloved, in east and west, throughout the ages. There is good reason for this, for he, showing forth not one virtue but a multitude of virtues, each complementing and building up the others, is not only a good friend and intercessor but also an excellent example for all who seriously desire to live in a Christian manner. Stories abound which illustrate his love for children, his care for the poor and downtrodden, his concern for those unjustly imprisoned, his zeal for the truth, Of these, let us consider only two of the best-known.

It is told of St. Nicholas that when he was still a priest serving in Patara, the city of his birth, he was particularly sensitive to the plight of the poor. The situation of one poor family, a father and his three daughters, came to his attention. Now this man, who had been rich and eminent, had fallen into poverty so desperate that, in despair and utter misery, he decided to turn his daughters to prostitution.

St. Nicholas, learning of this, did not judge the man or self-righteously preach morality to him; rather, he sought a way to offer him practical help. Moreover, so as to flee pride and not to wound the man further — for he knew that charity given in a condescending manner humiliates the recipient — he desired to help him secretly. He did not offer his alms before men (Matt. 6), but rather in the middle of the night he threw three bundles of gold into the window of the poor family's house. The man gave these to his daughters as dowries, so that they could enter into honorable marriages. The Saint, by his sensitive handling of the situation, enabled these four people to preserve their human dignity and their hope in God.

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But St. Nicholas was not always so sensitive and retiring — he could also act boldly when he was moved. When he was a bishop, St. Nicholas was called to participate in the First Ecumenical

Council, at which the heretic Arius was condemned for teaching that the Son was not of the same essence (being) as the Father. His Life relates that not only did the Saint reject Arius' doctrine that the Son as less than the Father, but also, angered by this denigration of the Son, he slapped Arius in the face. The Fathers of the Council, shocked, deprived him of his episcopal rank. They soon restored it again when some of them had a vision of Christ and His Mother returning to Nicholas his omophorion and Gospel book. This vision is illustrated in many icons of the Saint.

These two stories show why St. Nicholas has always been so highly honored and so deeply loved — for he combined in himself love for all God's people, without which zeal for the Truth can harden into Pharisaism, and love for God's Truth, without which human love can degenerate into sentimentality. It is fitting for us also to honor this great Saint, not only at this season but throughout our lives. But our words of praise will remain empty, or rather, they will turn into words of accusation against us, if we do not also put into practice what St. Nicholas lived by — if we also do not strive to combine love for God's people with love for the Truth.

Very well, we may think, we give charity. But do we do it, as St. Nicholas, in a way that least calls attention to us and best upholds the human dignity of those children of God whom we are helping, or do we do it in order to be praised and thanked, or in order to enjoy the feeling that we are above those to whom we give? And let us remind ourselves that it is not enough simply to do good, for, as we read in the Gospel: "On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then I will declare to them, I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers" (Mt. 7:22-23).

If we do not live in the truth, in Him Who said, I am...the Truth" (Jn. 14:6), how will He recognize us as His? And if we do not live in the truth, in Him Who is the Truth, how can we truly live?

On the other hand, we may think, "I confess the Orthodox Faith, I keep the fasts, I read all the most recent books on prayer and theology...." But do we abstain from meat, only to bite and devour our neighbor through criticism and gossip? Do we confess that all human beings are made in the image of God, only to scorn those around the corner or around the world who are in desperate need?

"What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill—clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?" (James 2:14-16)

Of what profit is our faith if it is in word only and not in deed? And of what profit are our hymns of praise to St. Nicholas and celebrations of his Feast day if we honor him only with words that remain empty? It is good and right to honor this great Saint of God — but the best way to honor him is to follow in his steps.

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From the Matericon

A certain sister came to blessed Sarah and said to her: "Pray for me, my lady." The blessed one said to her: "I will not have mercy on you, nor will God, unless you show mercy to yourself by bringing forth virtues as the Fathers have charged us to do."



Saint John of Damascus

Saint John of Damascus was born about the year 680 at Damascus, Syria into a Christian family. His father, Sergius Mansur, was a treasurer at the court of the caliph. John had also a foster brother, the orphaned child Cosmas (October 14), whom Sergius had taken into his own home. When the children were growing up, Sergius saw that they received a good education. At the Damascus slave market he ransomed the learned monk Cosmas of Calabria from captivity and entrusted to him the teaching of his children. The boys displayed uncommon ability and readily mastered their courses of the secular and spiritual sciences. After the death of his father, John occupied ministerial posts at court and became the city prefect.

In Constantinople at that time, the heresy of Iconoclasm had arisen and quickly spread, supported by the emperor Leo III the Isaurian (717-741). Rising up in defense of the Orthodox veneration of icons [Iconodoulia], St John wrote three treatises entitled, "Against Those who Revile the Holy Icons." The wise and God-inspired writings of St John enraged the emperor. But since the author was not a Byzantine subject, the emperor was unable to lock him up in prison, or to execute him. The emperor then resorted to slander. A forged letter to the emperor was produced, supposedly from John, in which the Damascus official was supposed to have offered his help to Leo in conquering the Syrian capital.

This letter and another hypocritically flattering note were sent to the Saracen caliph by Leo the Isaurian. The caliph immediately ordered that St John be removed from his post, that his right hand be cut off, and that he be led through the city in chains.

That same evening, they returned the severed hand to St John. The saint pressed it to his wrist and prayed to the Most Holy Theotokos to heal him so that he could defend the Orthodox Faith and write once again in praise of the Most Pure Virgin and Her Son. After a time, he fell asleep before the icon of the Mother of God. He heard Her voice telling him that he had been healed, and commanding him to toil unceasingly with his restored hand. Upon awakening, he found that his hand had been attached to his arm once more. Only a small red mark around his wrist remained as a sign of the miracle.

Later, in thanksgiving for being healed, St John had a silver model of his hand attached to the icon, which became known as "Of the Three Hands." Some unlearned painters have given the Mother of God three hands instead of depicting the silver model of St John's hand. The Icon "Of the Three Hands" is commemorated on June 28 and July 12.

When he learned of the miracle, which demonstrated John's innocence, the caliph asked his forgiveness and wanted to restore him to his former office, but the saint refused. He gave away his riches to the poor, and went to Jerusalem with his stepbrother and fellow-student, Cosmas. There he entered the monastery of St Sava the Sanctified as a simple novice.

It was not easy for him to find a spiritual guide, because all the monks were daunted by his great learning and by his former rank. Only one very experienced Elder, who had the skill to foster the spirit of obedience and humility in a student, would consent to do this. The Elder forbade John to do anything at all according to his own will. He also instructed him to offer to God all his labors and supplications as a perfect sacrifice, and to shed tears which would wash away the sins of his former life.

Once, he sent the novice to Damascus to sell baskets made at the monastery, and commanded him to sell them at a certain inflated price, far above their actual value. He undertook the long journey under the searing sun, dressed in rags. No one in the city recognized the former official of Damascus, for his appearance had been changed by prolonged fasting and ascetic labors. However, St John was recognized by his former house steward, who bought all the baskets at the asking price, showing compassion on him for his apparent poverty.

One of the monks happened to die, and his brother begged St John to compose something consoling for the burial service. St John refused for a long time, but out of pity he yielded to the petition of the grief-stricken monk, and wrote his renowned funeral troparia ("What earthly delight," "All human vanity," and others). For this disobedience the Elder banished him from his cell. John fell at his feet and asked to be forgiven, but the Elder remained unyielding. All the monks began to plead for him to allow John to return, but he refused. Then one of the monks asked the Elder to impose a penance on John, and to forgive him if he fulfilled it. The Elder said, "If John wishes to be forgiven, let him wash out all the chamber pots in the lavra, and clean the monastery latrines with his bare hands."

John rejoiced and eagerly ran to accomplish his shameful task. After a certain while, the Elder was commanded in a vision by the All-Pure and Most Holy Theotokos to allow St John to write again. When the Patriarch of Jerusalem heard of St John, he ordained him priest and made him a preacher at his cathedral. But St. John soon returned to the Lavra of St Sava, where he spent the rest of his life writing spiritual books and church hymns. He left the monastery only to denounce the iconoclasts at the Constantinople Council of 754. They subjected him to imprisonment and torture, but he endured everything, and through the mercy of God he remained alive. He died in about the year 780, more than 100 years old.

St John of Damascus was a theologian and a zealous defender of Orthodoxy. His most important book is the Fount of Knowledge. The third section of this work, "On the Orthodox Faith," is a summary of Orthodox doctrine and a refutation of heresy. Since he was known as a hymnographer, we pray to St John for help in the study of church singing.

From the Matericon

Blessed Synkletike used to say: "As we draw near to Christ the true Bridegroom, we should adorn ourselves most excellently in order to please Him. Instead of precious stones, let us place on our heads the triple crown of faith, hope, and love. Let us weave the costly necklace of humility's wisdom for our necks. Let us gird our loins about with chastity. In place of brightly-woven garments, may we display rank lowliness. For a banquet, let us offer the incorruptible food of prayer and hymns."

Blessed Theodora used to say: "Stillness, silence, and prayer quickly restore the mind to its proper state. Just as it is impossible to see one's face reflected in murky waters, though it be a very beautiful face, so it is that without stillness, silence, and much abstinence the soul cannot see its sins and be saved."

Father Isaiah wrote to his spiritual daughter: "Thirst for Christ, my good sister, that He might give you to drink of His love; close your life to the comforts and vanities of this life, that the Lord's peace might reign in your heart; abstain from worldly things, that you might be worthy to receive the Joy that is spiritual.

"The soul that is mindful of Confession is restrained by it as by a bridle and cannot fall into sin; for sin loves the darkness that exists when Confession is lacking.

"Blessed is the man who loves nothing transient or corruptible; whose only preoccupation is to present his soul pure before God."

From the Rule of St. Benedict

Chapter 4:

1. In the first place, to love the Lord God with the whole heart, the whole soul, the whole strength.
2. Then, one's neighbor as oneself.
3. Then, not to kill.
4. Not to commit adultery.
5. Not to steal.
6. Not to covet.
7. Not to bear false witness.
8. To honor all men.
9. And what one would not have done to himself, not to do to another.
10. To deny oneself in order to follow Christ.
11. To chastise the body.
12. Not to seek after pleasures.
13. To love fasting.
14. To relieve the poor.
15. To clothe the naked.
16. To visit the sick.
17. To bury the dead.
18. To help in trouble.
19. To console the sorrowing.
20. To separate oneself from worldly ways.
21. To prefer nothing to the love of Christ.
22. Not to give way to anger.
23. Not to foster a desire for revenge.
24. Not to entertain deceit in the heart.
25. Not to make a false peace.
26. Not to abandon charity.
27. Not to swear, lest one perchance swear falsely.
28. To speak the truth with heart and tongue.
29. Not to return evil for evil.
30. To do no injury, yea, even patiently to bear injury done to us.
31. To love one's enemies.
32. Not to curse them that curse us, but rather to bless them.
33. To bear persecution for justice's sake.
34. Not to be proud.
35. Not to be given to wine.
36. Not to be a great eater.
37. Not to be drowsy. [somnolentum - i.e., constantly sleeping; the opposite of vigilance]
38. Not to be slothful.
39. Not to be a murmurer.
40. Not to be a detractor. [constantly adding negativity to a discussion]
41. To put one's trust in God.
42. To refer what good one sees in himself, not to oneself, but to God.
43. But as to any evil in himself, let him be convinced that it is his own and charge it to himself.
44. To fear the Day of Judgment.
45. To be in dread of hell.

46. To desire eternal life with all spiritual longing.
47. To keep death before one's eyes daily.
48. To keep a constant watch over the actions of our life.
49. To hold as certain that God sees us everywhere.
50. To dash at once against Christ the evil thoughts which rise in one's heart.
51. And to disclose them to our spiritual father.
52. To guard one's tongue against bad and wicked speech.
53. Not to love much speaking.
54. Not to speak useless words and such as provoke laughter.
55. Not to love much or boisterous laughter.
56. To listen willingly to holy reading.
57. To apply oneself often to prayer.
58. To confess our past sins to God daily in prayer with sighs and tears, and to amend them for the future.
59. Not to fulfill the desires of the flesh.
60. To hate one's own will.
61. To obey the commandments of the abbot in all things, even though he himself (which heaven forbid) act otherwise, mindful of that precept of the Lord: "What they say, do ye; what they do, do ye not."
62. Not to desire to be called holy before one is; but to be holy first, that one may be truly so called.

63. To fulfill daily the commandments of God by works.
64. To love chastity.
65. To hate no one.
66. Not to be jealous; not to entertain envy.
67. Not to love strife.
68. Not to love pride.
69. To honor the elders.
70. To love the juniors.
71. To pray for one's enemies in the love of Christ.
72. To make peace with an adversary before the setting of the sun.
73. And never to despair of God's mercy.

Behold, these are the instruments of the spiritual art, which, if they have been plied unceasingly day and night and been turned in on judgment day, will merit for us from the Lord that reward which He Himself hath promised: "The eye hath not seen, nor the ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man, what things God hath prepared for those that love Him." But the workshop in which we are to execute all these things with diligence is the enclosure of the monastery, and stability in community.

**From Fr. Benedict Crawford's Blog:
*Seeking the Kingdom***

Cited from Chapter 4 of The Holy Rule of our Most Holy Father Benedict.
Translated by Boniface Verheyen, O.S.B.
Atchison, Kansas, Abbey Student Press,
1906.

“Behold, from henceforth All Generations Shall Call Me Blessed” - Questions Often Asked About the Mother of God

Q.: Why do you pray to the Mother of God?

A.: Since Jesus Christ died on the Cross and rose from the dead, conquering death for us, there is no reason why we cannot ask those in heaven to pray for us just as we ask those still living on earth for their prayers. After all, in Christ all are alive. Therefore we ask the Ever-Virgin Mary to pray to her Son for us, just as we also ask the angels, the saints, and all faithful believers here on earth to pray on our behalf, as Scripture Commands us to do: "I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men... I will therefore, that men pray everywhere (I Tim. 2:1,8). We turn readily to our friends and neighbors to ask for their prayers in our time of need; are not those in heaven even more our friends than those on earth? Why should they not intercede for us also before the throne of God?

Q.: Why do Orthodox Christians call the Virgin Mary "Mother of God"? This term seems to imply that God is not the creator and origin of all things.

A. We call the Holy Virgin Mary the Mother of God (from the Greek, Theotokos: literally, the "Birthgiver of God") because it is Scriptural: the righteous Elizabeth addressed the Virgin with these words: "*And whence is this to me, that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?*" (Luke 1:43). Who is this "Lord" of which Elizabeth speaks? It is Christ, the Lord God. For this reason we say, correctly, that the Virgin Mary is the Mother of God. She is not the Mother of God the Father, but the Mother of God the Son, who was begotten by the Father before all ages, and took flesh from the Virgin Mary.

Q.: Why do Orthodox Christians give so much honor to the Mother of God?

A.: We honor her because Jesus Christ Himself honored her on several occasions recorded in Scripture. He fulfilled her requests and also gave her special thought even while He was dying on the Cross (Luke 2:51; John 2:3-9; John 19:26-27). Even before Christ was born, she was honored by heaven when the Archangel Gabriel appeared and said to her: "*Hail, thou that art highly favored, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women*" (Luke 1:28). Holy Scripture further proclaims of her that "*henceforth all generations shall call me blessed*" (Luke 1:48), because from her womb came forth God in the flesh. This means that all who believe in Christ and in the Bible must give special honor and veneration to the one that is "blessed among women." It is not enough to merely give attention to her at Christmas time, when she appears in the Manger scenes of western Christian churches. No, this "highly favored one" must occupy a very special place in the hearts of those that follow her Son, just as she did among the first Christians.

Q.: Didn't our Lord, during His earthly life, sometimes place His mother (and His other kinsmen) in a decidedly secondary position, emphasizing spiritual virtues over kinship according to the flesh?

A.: No one who accepts the Gospel can believe that our Lord was in any way lacking respect for His mother. Any seeming disrespect on His part can only be due to a faulty, superficial interpretation of Scripture, due sometimes to 'understandably imperfect translations into modern languages.

When, for example, at the marriage of Cana, His mother tells Him: "They have no wine," and our Lord replies: "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" (John 2:1) -one must understand that although the word "woman" might sound disrespectful in modern English, it was not so in the ancient East; it is the very word our Lord used to address His mother as He was dying on the Cross and entrusted her to His beloved disciple (John 19:26). His words to her at the marriage feast in no way indicate disrespect, but only emphasize the importance of the miracle which was to follow (the changing of water into wine) --a miracle which He indeed performed at her request.

When our Lord extends the concept of spiritual kinship to all those who "do the will of God." (Mark 3:34-5) He does not deny such a higher kinship to His own family. We know of several of His kinsmen who were Apostles (James, Jude, Simon - sons of St. Joseph from his first wife - St. Joseph was a widower), and especially "blessed" in this spiritual kinship, of course, was His own mother, of whom alone does the Scripture say that "all generations shall call me blessed" (Luke 1:48). Again, when a certain woman praises His mother for being the one who bore Him, and our Lord says, "Yea, rather, blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it" (Luke 11:28), He is a higher degree of veneration for His mother: she is blessed not Only for bearing Him in the flesh, but even more for being one who "hears the word of God and keeps it."

Q.' Yet in your church services I have heard Orthodox Christians call on the Mother of God to "save" them. How can she "save" anyone, since Christ is the only Savior?

A.: We believe that there is only one Lord God and Savior of mankind, Jesus Christ, No one is equal to Him, and no one but Him can save mankind. We do not turn to Mary, the Mother of Christ our God as to a savior, and we certainly do not put her on the same level as her Son, but we turn to her as to one who helps us by her prayers, just as St. Paul himself said that he had become all things to all men, "*that I might by all means and in any way save them*" (I Cor. 9:22). St. Paul was not claiming to usurp Christ as the savior; he merely wanted to help and strengthen others on the path to salvation. It is in this sense that we Orthodox Christians say, "Most Holy Theotokos save us"--that is, "Please help us toward salvation by your prayers."

Based upon the Missionary Handbook Series, "On Questions of the Orthodox Christian Faith Disputed by Protestants", by Fr. Deacon J. Smolin, serialized in *Orthodox Life*, Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, N.Y.)