



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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✠ May 27, 2012 ✠

Holy Fathers

of the First Ecumenical Council

Postfeast of the Ascension

St. John the Russian, the Confessor (1730)

Hieromartyr Therapon of Sardis (259)

For there is One God,
and One Mediator
between God and Man,
the Man Christ Jesus.
For He still pleads
even now as Man
for my salvation ...

~ St. Gregory
the Theologian



⇒ **Many Years! *Newly-Illumined James, Mary, Michael, Child Mary and Maria!***

⇒ **PEPPER PLACE BOOTH – Thanks to all our cooks and workers!**

⇒ **Next Sunday is the Feast of Pentecost!**

⇒ **Yard Sale in 2 weeks: Friday and Saturday, June 8 & 9 7:00am to aprox. 3:00pm**
Jackie Eastman & Elaine Michaels are in heading this up. Bring the goods!

Life with God ...In those rare moments when through religion one manages to reach God, there are no problems, because God is not part of the world. In those moments the world itself becomes life in Him, meeting with Him, contact with Him. The world does not become God, but life with God, joyful and full. This is God's salvation of the world. It is fulfilled every time that we believe.

--from **The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann**

CONTEMPLATION ~

To contemplate God the Holy Spirit as the Inspirer of justice, peace and joy:

⇒ How He inspired with justice, peace and joy all the lovers of Christ's justice

⇒ How He inspired and, even today inspires, with justice, peace and joy all the sufferers for Christ's justice.

✠ **To progress in the spiritual life**, it is necessary to drive away the various evil thoughts as well as their evil fantasies that provoke us and defile our soul. We must not remain tepid in driving away evil thoughts and fantasies, because every sin originates from the imagination and thoughts. So if we uproot evil thoughts and fantasies by diligently driving them away, we should realize that we are undertaking a systematic struggle towards purity from passions, and thereafter one is freed from spiritual and mental disturbances. But when, on the contrary, we neglect to undertake this struggle to purify our nous from evil thoughts and fantasies, inevitably the vile passions will conquer us and henceforth the demons and sins will control us.

Elder Ephraim

✠ **"The misfortunes of Christians** arise from their not having Christian hope. A man feels the oppression of sin in his heart the weariness and anguish of sin: if he has not Christian hope in his heart, what does he do? He has recourse to artificial means to drive away the oppression and weariness, to culpable distractions, and not to Christ, Whose 'yoke is easy' for our heart and Whose 'burden is light' (Mt. 11:30), not to prayer, not to repentance for his sins, not to the Word of God, which 'is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, comfort' (II Tim. 3:16; Rom. 15:4). So it happens in most cases. Hence the necessity for worldly people to have theatres and a multitude of other amusements. Some have recourse to suicide. The experience of obtaining that which we pray for greatly strengthens Christian hope in our heart. And he who is attentive to himself will easily observe this experience."

St. John of Kronstadt

HOMILY ~ About the Holy Spirit the Comforter

"But the Comforter the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in My Name, He shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said to you." (St. John 14:26)

What practical meaning do these words have, if not that it is necessary that we pray daily that the Holy Spirit be sent to us just as we pray every day for our daily bread? God is willing to send us the Holy Spirit every day but He seeks that we pray daily for the Holy Spirit. For as, in regard to bread which is, at one time abundant and at another time scarce, so it is also in regard to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes to us and departs from us, according to our zealously and our slothfulness in prayer, according to our good deeds and our patience. That is the reason why the Church established that morning services begin with an invocation of the Holy Spirit: "O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, Come!", and after that comes the prayer: "give us our daily bread!" Why? Because, without the Holy Spirit, we do not even know how to use bread as it should be used for our salvation.

"He shall teach you all things." That is: every day and every night, according to the conditions and circumstances in which you will find yourself in, He will direct you, counsel you, teach you what you should think, what you should say and what you should do. For that reason, implore from God only the Holy Spirit and all else He Himself will bring with Him all that you will need at that particular moment. When the Holy Spirit shall descend upon you, you will know all, understand all and you will be capable of all that is necessary.

"And bring all things to your remembrance whatsoever I have said to you." That is: do not be afraid that you will forget my teaching and my words. The Holy Spirit also knows all that I know so when He will be present in you all My teaching will be present in you, together with Him.

O Lord, Holy Spirit deign to descend upon us not according to our merits but according to the merits of the Lord Jesus and according to Your infinite goodness.

Wisdom of Our Holy Father Ephraim the Syrian

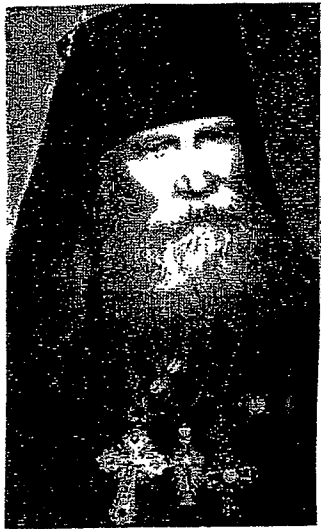
✠ "These few temporal things become a proof and a test of each man's faith in Christ. For he who believes that as long as we are not at all anxious about temporal things, but care only about the things of the future life, God will provide them in abundance, as He has promised --- such a man clearly has faith in eternal realities and genuinely seeks after these."

✠ "Do you believe that it is possible for you to become a son of God and a joint heir of Christ, and reign with Him throughout the ages? 'Yes,' you will assuredly say ... Then examine yourself closely, in case you have become occupied once again with earthly cares and concern over your bodily needs --- about which you were commanded not to be anxious. Should this be the case, you spoke falsely when you said that you believed in the future life."

✠ "Hence, he who wishes to be a true Christian man and who has come to believe, through hearing, in realities that surpass our understanding - to wit, the inheritance of the Heavenly City, the delight of the eternal Kingdom, sanctification of the heart, and complete purification through the Holy Spirit - ought to entrust all bodily cares to God. Moreover, he should regard: poverty as riches; hardship as respite; reproach as honor; and insult as glory. This is the hallmark of genuine servants of Christ, who truly have faith in His words."

✠ "The Lord says in the Gospels (Matt. 25:14-30) that one who is not faithful over a few things is not faithful over many either. By a few things the Lord means such worldly concerns as food, clothing and bodily needs, concerning which He bade us not to be anxious; but to let Him take care of them (Matt. 6:31-33). By many things He means the bounties of the age to come, which He promised to provide to those who believe in Him; and who are unremitting in their eagerness to obtain them, and forever ask for them."

St. Ephraim the Syrian



A Visit with Elder Tavrion

One of the few known Russian Elders during the later Soviet times, along with Elder Nikon (1963) and the longsuffering Mother Macaria (1990), was the Elder Tavrion, near Riga, Latvia. Below is an excerpt about him from an old "Orthodox Word:"

The first time I went to the little Hermitage was in May, 1972. A friend of mine told me that near Riga there was a women's monastery, and that she had a friend there, a nun who was the choir director. She invited me to go there for a rest. I agreed.

The Holy Transfiguration Hermitage is actually some distance from Riga. At first we took the train to the little town of Elgava, and then the bus to a small station called "Valgunda School." We got out on an empty road. If I had been alone, ofcourse, I would have been lost, but my friend confidently turned to the left. We walked for about ten minutes into an ever-thickening forest. It became darker and darker, and the forest ever thicker and already the thought occurred to me, "We are lost." And suddenly before us we saw – the holy gates of the Hermitage, decorated and with a small dome on top. We crossed ourselves and entered the convent.

In the Hermitage there are two churches: one large stone church, and another smaller one where services are held in winter. Despite the fact that it was spring, it was still cold, and they were still serving in the winter church. On the door there was hanging a neatly written sign: Holy Transfiguration Hermitage, Divine Services: 7:00am and 5:00pm. Spiritual father of the convent: Archimandrite Tavrion.

We stood through the service, and then we were conducted into the trapeza (refectory). The Elder had the following custom: all pilgrims, while they remained at the monastery, received Communion every day. Therefore, the food was strictly lenten: nothing but soup, kasha and tea. This was given three times a day. The monastics, on the other hand, did not receive communion so frequently, and therefore they ate separately. We were placed in a small room in a two story stone house. In general, there were many buildings in the Hermitage, the greater part of them built by Father Tavrion.

I remained in the monastery for several days and was intending to leave. According to the existing custom, all about to leave would come to Father Tavrion to receive his blessing for the journey. The Elder received people for a short time; he would say a few words, give a blessing, and let one go. When our turn came, he asked me kindly, "Well, what do you say?" I said, "Batiushka, I have seven children." He was radiant. "Seven children! What a wonderful thing! Your husband must love you very much." And he smiled such a joyful smile.

I said, "No, Batiushka, my husband has left me." He's left you! Well, that's nothing. The children are probably good." And he became yet more joyful. I sighed, "No, Batiushka. My children are disobedient." And the Elder said to me, even more joyfully, "Well, that's all right. Everything will be well with you. Seven children – how wonderful!"

I became encouraged. "Is it true, Batiushka, that everything will be all right?" He smiled and said, "Well, maybe it won't be." And somehow, at these words I became even more joyful than when he said that everything would be well with me. Then suddenly he looked at me (usually he spoke with people without looking at them) and said, "Do you wish to be saved? I see that you wish to be saved. Love children."

And he repeated again, **"Do you wish to be saved? Love children. In life, not everything seems to be just. That is because everyone has become used to looking at things from the point of view of this life, and people forget that this is only a small minute – no, just a fraction of a second, an instant in comparison with that eternal life."**

I remembered these words of his when at my last meeting with him (when we were about to go abroad), he told me, "Do not think that God is cruel or wishes to torture us. God is a loving Father; he does everything for our salvation. Do not forget that this temporal life is so small in comparison with eternal life."

And so these words crossed with his last instruction.

Then I remembered the money which I had prepared for him. It was five rubles which I had left over from my expenses. I thought for a long time over what to do with it: to buy the children some kind of treats, or to give it to the Elder. During our conversation, I held it in my hand and crumpled it, and so it ended up in the shape of a little accordion. Remembering the money, I handed it to the Elder. "Here, Batiushka, this is to commemorate my family at the Liturgy." The Elder, without looking, took it and ordered me to come the next day before my departure.

The next morning, in hopes of a spiritual talk, I went to the Elder. He said nothing to me, but only blessed me and handed me a sealed envelope with the words, "This is for the children." I thought that it was probably a letter. When I entered my room and opened the envelope, crisp new ten-ruble notes fell out, and on top of them was my poor little folded five-ruble note. I burst into tears and ran to the Elder.

"Batiushka, I do not wish to take money from you." He said nothing; he only began to outline on my forehead the sign of the Cross, which, as I later found out, he always did when he wished to make a person understand. However, I stuck to my opinion stubbornly and even got on my knees. Finally I said decisively, "Batiushka, I will not take any money from you, all the same. If you wish, you can give me my five rubles back, and I will buy the children some treats with it." He saw that I was stubborn and he agreed. When saying farewell I asked him, confused, "Batiushka, and what about the commemoration?" He only shrugged his shoulders and said, "Even without your five-ruble bill we will pray for you." This was my first trip to the Elder.

In the autumn, our family situation grew better, and during the vacation period, I went to the Hermitage with my husband and our four oldest children, 8 to 18 years old. Even then we had all begun to feel the effectiveness of the prayers of Father Tavrion for us. When we arrived it was already evening, but we did make it in time for services. In the morning we all received Communion, and when we came up to the cross, people began to push the children (there were many people – not less than two or three hundred in the small wooden church). The children also pushed and made noise, so that I was afraid that they would overturn the analogion and the candlestand and would knock Batiushka himself off his feet. With a heavy feeling of shame, and without looking at the Elder, I kissed the cross, and when I was already departing I heard the kind words, "Grace is trying to enter us, and we oppose it." I became a little encouraged by this; after all, grace does not leave us. ✙ ✙ ✙

✱ An Elder said: What condemns us is not that thoughts enter into us, but that we use them badly; indeed, through our thoughts we can be shipwrecked, and through our thoughts we can be crowned.

Anonymous Sayings (Apophthegmata Patrum) of the Fathers

The Doors of Hell Are Locked on the Inside

By Fr. James Bernstein, from *Surprised by Christ*, Chapter 19

BEHOLD WHAT MANNER OF LOVE THE FATHER HAS bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him *purifies himself* just as He is pure. (1 John 3:1:3, *emphasis mine*)

This life is either a foretaste of heaven or a foretaste of hell. Those who go to hell do not *want* to go to heaven; “going to heaven” is not a change of location, but drawing ever closer to the God Who is repulsive and abhorrent to them. Some say that there are no doors in heaven—there is nothing preventing the lost from entering, other than their refusal. To “come in” means to commune with God forever. “Ultimately,” states C. S. Lewis, “there are only two kinds of people . . . those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self- choice there could be no Hell. . . . The doors of Hell are locked on the inside.”

Such is the nature of a loving God. God really *is* Love rather than merely *having* love. Thus, St. John Chrysostom (fourth century) challenges us to experience the healing and life-giving fire of God’s love and presence:

“Let us clothe ourselves with spiritual fire, let us gird ourselves with its flame. No man who beats flame fears those who meet him; be it wild beast, be it man, be it snares innumerable, so long as he is armed with fire, all things stand out of his way, all things retire. The flame is intolerable, the fire cannot be endured, it consumes all. With this fire, let us clothe ourselves, offering up glory to our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom the Father, together with the Holy Spirit, be glory might, honor, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.”

We are told that on Judgment Day, as we stand naked before God, the penetrating divine light of His presence will open the “books” of our hearts. His light will reveal what these books contain. They will show whether our hearts are drawn to God or repulsed by Him, either foretasting heaven or foretasting hell.

St. Symeon the New Theologian says that it is not so much what we believe or what we do, but what we *are* that will determine our future state. We have either a similitude with God or a dissimilitude with Him:

“In the future life the Christian is not examined if he renounced the whole world for Christ’s love, or if he has distributed his riches to the poor or if he fasted or kept vigil or prayed, or if he wept and lamented for his sins, or if he has done any other good in this life, but he is examined attentively if he has any similitude with Christ, as a son does with his father.”

St. Irenaeus of Lyons said: “For as those who see the light are within the light, and partake of its brilliancy; even so, those who see God are in God, and receive of His splendor.”

From Glory to Glory: Perfection that Grows

BECAUSE HEAVEN IS PRIMARILY A STATE OF BEING in which the redeemed are moving into an ever-deepening life in God, the experience of heaven is not static, but ever intensifying. Yet we are told that not all advance at the same rate. The greater our desire, love, and inclusion of God in

our life, the greater is our capacity to receive the divine light and the fuller is our experience of heaven. St. Gregory the Theologian (fourth century) wrote:

“Receive besides this the Resurrection, the Judgment and the Reward according to the righteous scales of God; and believe that this will be Light to those whose mind is purified (that is, God—seen and known) proportionate to their degree of purity, which we call the Kingdom of Heaven; but to those who suffer from blindness of their ruling faculty, darkness, that is estrangement from God, proportionate to their blindness here (emphasis mine).”

An everlasting rejection parallels an everlasting acceptance of God. Just as there exists the possibility of going from glory to glory; of drawing ever closer to God, going deeper and deeper into heaven, there exists the possibility of spiraling down into deeper degrees of hell. That is what the Scriptures mean when they speak of different levels of reward and punishment in the afterlife.

So the Orthodox understanding is that heaven is more than a place with an inside and an outside. Similarly, it is more than an achieved condition that is static, never deepening or changing. Rather, it is a dynamic, living condition, moving from one degree or level of bliss to a deeper degree or level of bliss. It is an everlasting journey in which the redeemed go, as the Scripture says, “from glory to glory” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

As we consider the heavenly inheritors, we might ask, will each experience maximum joy and fulfillment, though all differ? The Orthodox answer is that each will experience maximum joy, bliss, and fulfillment, yet it will not be the same for each person. The redeemed will have different capacities to experience bliss, based on the life they have lived and the extent to which they love and desire God. Each will have his cup filled to overflowing, filled beyond his capacity to experience. However, each person will have a different-sized cup. The experience of heaven varies because it is not merely based on forgiveness, but on our degree of sanctity and desire for and love of God.

Another example I like to give is that of a light bulb. One light bulb is fifteen watts and shines to its maximum capacity. Does it shine perfectly? Yes, for it shines as much as a fifteen-watt bulb is able. On the other hand, a hundred-watt light bulb also shines perfectly, but gives off more light. Both bulbs shine perfectly, given their different capacities to shine. Here we have the concept of relative, different levels of perfection. In this view, as the transfigured advance in the life to come in heaven, they continue to change and progress from “glory to glory,” or from one state of perfection to a deeper state of perfection. How long does this process continue? Forever, because they are forever becoming like God without ever being God.

Of course, mere words are inadequate to describe judgment and salvation. Human language uses words based on our common understanding and experience. The saints and the prophets received glimpses or foretastes of being in God’s presence, then resorted to words and allegory to share these experiences in the Scriptures and their writings. St. Paul quotes from the Prophet Isaiah: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Within the Divine Fire of God's Love

Martyrius the Syrian (seventh century) wrote:

“Let us embrace the burning fire of God’s love within our hearts, for the heart’s purity is born from our closeness to him. It is only by unflinching and focused gazing that the spirit gravitates to God, but when the luminous ray of the simple eye of the soul

is flooded with those intense rays of light that flash down on us from on high, then it is that the fire of God flares up in a great blaze within our hearts."

Being "a living sacrifice," as St. Paul challenges us to be, is not seen as a desirable goal by many. Fewer still would want to be a holocaust, offered up in totality to God.

I think back to my childhood experience of that brick crashing through our window and am reminded of how I was raised in the shadow of the Holocaust. The Jews are a tormented people—not only from without, but also from within. As part of this people, I had to work through my own nightmares and confusion. How to make sense of it all—the centuries of suffering and persecution culminating in the Nazi attempt at genocide and the systematic slaughter of six million Jews during my parents' lifetime. Did these trials serve any purpose? Only through beginning to understand who God is, and in what sense Jesus Christ presents for us the ultimate victory of life over death, could I deal with my own misery. This is why it was crucial for me to understand what God's love looks like, both in a broken world and in the afterlife. Only in seeing how God loves could I come to understand how I should love, and discover in what way love triumphs over death.

We all to some degree suffer trial, disaster, tragedy, pain, sorrow, loneliness, abandonment, despair, confusion, and even dread, horror, and terror. Most view these as abhorrent, destructive, and ultimately of no redeeming value. Yet as human suffering becomes sanctified and illumined with divine light and love, we understand differently. In His Incarnation, God the Word sanctifies not only our fallen human nature, but suffering as well. When in faith we share in Christ's sufferings, we are closer to fulfillment and godlikeness than when we do not.

This is why early Christians considered that the highest calling was to be martyred for the Faith. Not the Islamic sort of "martyrdom" of death, in which the goal is to destroy others. Theirs was the true martyrdom of love, in which one is tortured and put to death because of one's unswerving love for God and others, including one's enemies. The true martyr seeks to save life, not destroy it. Power is popularly understood as gaining increased control and mastery over the world, over others, or even over death itself. In contrast, for the Orthodox Christian, ultimate power is to be godlike, to love as He does, to be humble, to serve, to suffer, even to be smashed, like Christ on the Cross, yet through it all to maintain love and faith as did the Incarnate God.

St. Macarios the Great of Egypt (fourth century) said:

"When a soul is full of expectant longing, and full of faith and love, God considers it worthy to receive "the power from on high," which is the heavenly love of the Spirit of God and the heavenly fire of immortal life; and when this happens, the soul truly enters into the beauty of all love and is liberated from its last bonds of evil."

Archimandrite Sophrony (+1991) said:

"Unless we go through this fire that consumes the decaying passions of our nature, we shall not see the fire transformed into light...in our fallen state burning precedes enlightenment. Let us, therefore, bless God for this consuming fire."

For the Christian, authentic ultimate power is to be a human burning bush, burning with divine love, light, and fire yet not being consumed or destroyed. It is to be a living holocaust—an offering to God—knowing that though we lose everything in this life, we are not defeated if we have God, Who is Life and Love. While burning with the fire of God's love, true power is to be thankful for all things at all times, yet simultaneously willing to relinquish all things at all times, except God.



May 27th

A Brief Life of St. John the Russian

St. John the Russian was born of pious parents in a small village of southern Russia around the year 1690. While serving in the Tsar's army during a war with Turkey in 1711, St. John was taken prisoner by the Tartars and sold as a slave to a Moslem cavalry officer from Procopion in Asia Minor near Caesarea of Cappadocia. During the first years of his enslavement, St. John's Moslem owner tried by every means of torment and cruelty to convert him from Christianity to Islam. St. John, having been nurtured in the Orthodox Faith by his pious parents, refused to submit to these persecutions and stood his ground, establishing himself as a confessor of the Orthodox faith.

As punishment for his holy stubbornness St. John's Moslem master required him to live in the stables with the animals. Rather than complain about his circumstances St. John rejoiced and saw living in the stable as a great honor. For him the stable was an icon of the Holy Nativity, the very place where his true Master, the Lord Jesus was born. Through constant remembrance of God, unceasing prayer, recitation of the Psalms from memory, fasting, alms giving and repentance, St. John drew near to God and became a powerful intercessor for all those around him. In time an unceasing stream of miracles came forth through the prayers of St. John benefiting all those who came into his presence.

On May 27th, 1730 St. John gave up his holy soul and passed from this temporal life of sorrows into the eternal life of unceasing joy in Christ our Lord. Since his death St. John has continued to perform unceasing miracles: God on high, revealing His love for His humble servant John here below, ordained that his holy relics be preserved from corruption. To this day they remain incorrupt, flesh and bones together, preserved for the faithful to venerate. Very quickly this new Russian confessor and wonder worker became known to the Greek Orthodox faithful of Cappadocia as St. John the Russian.

In 1924 when the Holy and God-fearing people of Russia were being oppressed in their own land by the cruel hand of the Communist yoke which drove many into diaspora, the Moslems of Turkey drove the Greek Orthodox faithful from their homelands in Cappadocia to be resettled in modern Greece. When the faithful left Procopion of Cappadocia for Greece they took their most prized treasure, the holy and incorrupt relics of St. John the Russian and settled on the Island of Euboea where they established the village of New Procopion and built a shrine for their Holy Patron, St. John the Russian. To this day the shrine of St. John the Russian is the most popular of all of the shrines in Greece and is visited by thousands of pilgrims annually.

In 1881 God ordained that the right hand of St. John the Russian be given to the monks of the Russian Orthodox Monastery of St. Panteleimon on Mount Athos. In the mid 1960's a large relic from the right hand of St. John the Russian was translated to America where it now resides in the Church of St. John the Russian in Ipswich, Massachusetts, under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. In venerating St. John the Russian, Orthodox faithful from Russia, Greece and America are uniquely bound together in the unity of the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Faith which is the common inheritance of all Orthodox Christians.

FROM THE WRITINGS OF THE HOLY FATHERS - ON JUDGING OTHERS.

Even if a person's sin is not only obvious, but very grievous and comes from a hardened and unrepentant heart, do not condemn him, but raise your eyes to the wondrous and incomprehensible judgments of God; then you will see that many people, formerly full of iniquity, later repented and reached a high degree of sanctity, and that, on the other hand, others, who were on a high level of perfection, fell into a deep abyss. Take care, lest you also suffer this calamity through judging others.

— Bishop Theophan the Recluse, *Unseen Warfare*