



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

3101 Clairmont Ave. Birmingham, AL 35205

Church Tel. 930-9681 / 854-4235

Visit stsymeon.com

& birminghamorthodox.com

✠ **October 16, 2011** ✠

18th Sunday after Pentecost

Holy Fathers of the 7th Ecumenical Council

Holy Martyr Longinus the Centurion,
who stood at the Cross of our Lord (1st C)

✠ **Wed. Oct. 19 6:30pm Akathist**

Happy is the one who
rejoices in the progress of
all men with the same great
joy he knows for his own.

Conversion and humility
direct the soul aright.
Compassion and
gentleness make
it strong.

--Evagrius of Pontus

Hold every person
as being superior
to yourself.

~ Sts. Barsanuphius
& John of Gaza

Sunday of the Fathers of the 7th Ecumenical Council

On the Sunday that falls on or immediately after the eleventh of October, we offer the Service to the 350 holy Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, which gathered in Nicaea in 787 under the holy Patriarch Tarasius and during the reign of the Empress Irene and her son, Constantine Porphyrogenitus, to refute the Iconoclast heresy, which had received imperial support beginning with the Edict issued in 726 by Emperor Leo the Isaurian. Many of the holy Fathers who condemned Iconoclasm at this holy Council later died as Confessors and Martyrs for the holy Icons during the second assault of Iconoclasm in the ninth century, especially during the reigns of Leo the Armenian and Theophilus.

About the Inexorable Justice of God

~ St. Nikolai of Serbia

"For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment; and spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly; and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an example unto those that after should live ungodly" (2 Peter 2: 4-6).

O how will the sinful man be spared? "And spared not the old world but saved Noah... Therefore O sinful man, how then can you be spared? Are you dearer and more precious to Him than millions of angels, from so many people drowned by the Flood [Deluge] and from densely populated cities? When the angels are cast into the darkness of Hades, people are drowned by the flood and cities are burned to ashes in what do you hope, sinning, continually sinning and not turning away from sin? You say, in the mercy of God! But, is God more merciful now that He was then? Does God change as man does? Do not hope without measure [limit] but according to the measure [limit] of your efforts as regards the improvement of your life, let that be your hope. Truly, great is the mercy of God, long is the patience of God and infinite is the love of God.

Behold, God loves you more and is more merciful to you than you are to yourself and He continually wishes you salvation even more than you yourself do. But he, who to the end mocks the mercy of God and he, who to the very end laughs at the patience of God and he, who to the end opposes the love of God, will God then take him by force into His Kingdom and make him a fellow citizen with the Angels and Saints?

Pearls of the Holy Fathers 3:1

The purpose of the Church is a constant battle; this is why it is called the 'militant Church', battling with the prince of this world— that is, with all those who by all possible means and ways press the spirit of man.

Holy New Hieromartyr Damascene

Pleasure has two aspects: one is effected in the soul by freedom from passion, and another by passion in the body. Of these two, the one which free will chooses has power over the other. If a person pays attention to the senses and is drawn by pleasure in the body, he will live his life without tasting the divine joy, since the good can be overshadowed by what is inferior.

St. Gregory of Nyssa

Let there be in us a love of light and an esteem of goodness, so that, as if walking in daylight, we may desire that our works shine in the presence of God.

St. Ambrose of Milan

How blessed and wonderful, beloved, are the gifts of God! Life in immortality, splendor in righteousness, truth in boldness, faith in confidence, continence in holiness: and all these things are submitted to our understanding.

St. Clement of Rome

It makes no difference what it is that has soiled the purity of the soul; the time comes and one must clean it and wash away the uncleanness with repentance.

Holy New Hieromartyr Archbishop Barlaam

The beginning of every action pleasing to God is calling with faith on the life-saving name of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . together with the peace and love which accompany this calling. These two, peace and love, not only make the prayer propitious, but are themselves reborn and shine forth from this prayer, like inseparable Divine rays, increasing and coming to perfection.

Sts. Ignatius and Callistus Xanthopoulos

A person does not become deified through words or visible actions moderated by foresight, for all this is earthly and human, but through maintaining silence, thanks to which we reject and free ourselves from the earthly and ascend to God. Abiding on the heights of a silent existence, laboring patiently, day and night in prayer and worship, somehow draw near to the unapproachable and blessed Essence.

St. Gregory Palamas

Efforts and endeavors should simply be regarded — for such they are in truth — as efforts and endeavors and no more, and the fruit as fruit. But if, because of insufficient knowledge, anyone comes to regard his effort and endeavour as the fruit of the Spirit, he deceives himself utterly; and by this false opinion deprives himself of the real fruits of the Spirit.

St. Theophan the Recluse

He who sufficiently knows and judges himself has no time to judge others. ~ St. Philaret of Moscow

If you say to someone, "Forgive me", in humiliating yourself, you are burning the demons.

Apophthegmata Patrum

The men of that [the last] generation will not accomplish any works at all and temptation will come upon them; and those who will be approved in that day will be greater than either us or our fathers.

Abba Ischyriou

Forgive Everyone for Everything

September 3, 2011 by Fr. Stephen Freeman, *Glory to God for All Things* blog

We do not forgive because it is the "correct" thing to do. We forgive because it is the true nature of the life in Christ.

In Dostoevsky's great last work, *The Brothers Karamazov*, the story is told of Markel, brother of the Elder Zossima. Diagnosed with tuberculosis, he is dying. In those last days he came to a renewed faith in God and a truly profound understanding of forgiveness. In a conversation with his mother she wonders how he can possibly be so joyful in so serious a stage of his illness. His response is illustrative of the heart of the Orthodox Christian life.

'Mama,' he replied to her, 'do not weep, life is paradise, and we are all in paradise, but we don't want to realize it, and if we did care to realize it, paradise would be established in all the world tomorrow.' And we all wondered at his words, so strangely and so resolutely did he say this; we felt tender emotion and we wept....'Dear mother, droplet of my blood,' he said (at that time he had begun to use endearments of this kind, unexpected ones), 'beloved droplet of my blood, joyful one, you must learn that of a truth each of us is guilty before all for everyone and everything. I do not know how to explain this to you, but I feel that it is so, to the point of torment. And how could we have lived all this time being angry with one another and knowing nothing of this?' [He spoke even of being guilty before the birds and all creation] ...'Yes, he said, 'all around me there has been such divine glory: birds, trees, meadows, sky, and I alone have lived in disgrace, I alone have

dishonored it all, completely ignoring its beauty and glory.' 'You take too many sins upon yourself,' dear mother would say, weeping. 'But dear mother, joy of my life. I am crying from joy, and not from grief; why, I myself want to be guilty before them, only I cannot explain it to you, for I do not know how to love them. Let me be culpable before all, and then all will forgive me, and that will be paradise. Am I not in paradise now?'

As difficult as it may sound, the reality described by Dostoevsky can be summed up very simply: forgive everyone for everything. Stated in such a blunt fashion, such a goal is overwhelming. How can I forgive everyone for everything? This life of forgiveness, which is nothing other than the life of Christ within us, is our inheritance in the faith. The life of blame, recrimination, bitterness, anger, revenge and the like are not the life of Christ, but simply the ragings of our own egos, the false self which we exalt over our true life which is "hid with Christ in God."

The rightness of a cause, or the correctness of our judgment do not justify nor change the nature of our ragings. For none of us can stand before God and be justified – except as we give ourselves to the life of Christ, who is our only righteousness.

The question of forgiveness is not a moral issue. We do not forgive because it is the "correct" thing to do. We forgive because it is the true nature of the life in Christ. As Dostoevsky describes it: it is Paradise. In the same manner, the refusal to forgive, the continuation of blame, recrimination, bitterness, etc., are not moral failings. They are existential crises – drawing us away

from the life of Christ and Paradise, and ever deeper into an abyss of non-being.

I have lately spent some of my prayer-time each day with a modified form of the 'Jesus Prayer.' It runs, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner, and forgive all those who hate me or do me harm. Forgive them freely without reproach and grant me true repentance." I offer no great authority for this prayer – indeed, as I pray it, I find that it changes from time to time. But it is a way of offering prayer for my enemies – of teaching my heart to "forgive everyone for everything."

There is a further thought that is of great importance. Forgiveness and unforgiveness are not private matters. As Christ taught the Apostles, "Whosoever sins you loose are loosed, and whosoever sins you retain are retained." This, of course, has a particular meaning for the Apostolic ministry given to the Church. But it also alludes to another reality. My refusal to forgive is a force for evil in this world – binding both myself and others around me. It may not be an intentional binding – but bind it will. In the same manner, forgiveness is the introduction of Paradise into this world – both for myself and for others around me. Whether I intend it or not, Paradise comes as a fruit of such love.

Forgive everyone for everything. Will we not be in Paradise?

This week I have been in Dallas, Texas, for the funeral of Archbishop Dmitri, beloved Apostle to the South. At the conclusion of the funeral vigil (as is normally the case for all Orthodox Christians) the primary celebrant of the service comes to the open coffin of the deceased. Placing his stole over the head of the body, he reads the words of the final absolution (this same prayer is used in the sacrament of Holy Unction):

May our Lord Jesus Christ, by His divine grace, and also by the gift and power given unto His holy Disciples and Apostles, that they should bind and loose the sins of men (For He said unto them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whosoever's sins you remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever's sins you retain, they are retained" (John 20:22-23). "And whatsoever you shall bind or loose on earth shall be bound or loosed in Heaven" (Matt. 18:18) and which also has been handed down to us from them as their successors, absolve this my spiritual child, N., through me who am unworthy, from all things wherein, as a human, he has sinned against God, whether by word or deed, whether by thought and with all his senses, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, whether by knowledge or in ignorance. And if he be under the ban or excommunication of a Bishop or of a Priest; or if he has brought upon himself the curse of his father or mother; or has fallen under his own curse; or has transgressed by any oath; or has been bound, as a human, by any sins whatsoever, but has repented of these with a contrite heart, may He absolve him also from all these faults and bonds. And may all those things that proceed from the infirmity of human nature be given over unto oblivion and may He forgive him everything, for the sake of His Love for Mankind, through the prayers of our most-holy and most-blessed Sovereign Lady, the Theotokos and ever-Virgin Mary, of the holy, glorious and all-praised Apostles, and of all the Saints. Amen

We who expect to receive such great mercy at the time of our own death – should we not extend the same mercy to all while we are yet among them?

It may be a good thing to forget and forgive, but it is altogether too easy a trick to forget and be forgiven.

—G. K Chesterton

Of Death and Dying

by Dr. George Kalousek

Orthodox literature is filled with references to death and dying. The Holy Fathers again and again stress the importance of the constant remembrance of death.

The image of death appears frequently in the prayer of the Church. In the evening prayer of St. John Damascene, we are enjoined to look at our bed as at a coffin, not knowing whether or not we shall rise on the morrow. According to the values of today's society, all this may appear to be a rather morbid and even unhealthy fascination with death. After all, death has been all but eliminated from the American way of life, or rather, it has been so hidden and disguised that it has come to be regarded as an anomaly and not one of life's natural processes. How does this affect the way people react when they are faced with the reality of death? How can the dying and their close ones be helped towards an acceptance of this reality? Finally, what is the Orthodox perspective of death and dying, and how can we be better prepared to face death ourselves? The following article is based on a lecture given at this year's St. Herman Winter Pilgrimage in Redding, California, by Dr. George Kalousek, a physician and an Orthodox Christian, who addressed these and other questions on death and dying.

Created for Life

In discussing death, we must first remember that we were created for life. God created man in His image, immortal. Through man's free will, he fell away from God and was banished from Paradise, he became blind, sinful; called to partake of the divine nature, man became subject to death and decay. In His love for mankind, God sent His Only-begotten Son, that through His death on the Cross, the dominion of death would be broken and man would once again have the possibility of eternal life in communion with his Creator.

We would not be amiss were we to generalize in saying that a society's view of death and the afterlife in many ways determines how it conducts its earthly affairs. In early Mesopotamian society, for example, it was believed that after death all mankind was consigned to a dark, fearsome underworld. It was natural, therefore, that their concern in this life was to seek pleasure, to "eat, drink and be merry." The ancient Egyptians, by contrast, understood that an individual's fate in the next

world was dependent upon his behavior on earth. Value judgments, however, were determined by man himself with the result that instead of repenting, man was constantly trying to justify his actions. Looking further, we see that the Puritans, who were Calvinists and believed in the doctrine of predestination, led very strict moral lives bound by many outward laws and regulations. But because they were blind to their eternal destiny and helpless to change it, they were possessed with an intense fear of death and feeling of uncertainty, and spent their lives vainly trying to "prove" their "chosenness."

The Building of a Lie

It was impossible to live long with such unresolvable uncertainties. In reaction to this harsh and rather unhealthy fear of death, man fell even further from the Truth, reaching for comfort in rationalizations. Death became romanticized; beauty and death were considered poetic sisters. This view of death was reflected in the changing design of tombstones which no longer depicted skulls or scythes, but were graced by cherubs, vases, willows and butterflies. Even the lessons in McDuffy's "4th Eclectic Reader" concentrated on themes of death, frequently of children and often characterized by a superficial sweetness. Death came to be thought of as a peaceful and beautiful deliverance. The more man came to rationalize away the fear of death, the more freedom he felt to lead a life of self-indulgence.

The 20th century has only seen this fantasy carried to its logical conclusion. When death is present at all, it is carefully camouflaged; embalming is the rule, coffins are called caskets - which are available in many styles; undertakers are called funeral directors; fake grass is carefully arranged around the burial site to cover the earth; funerals are being replaced by memorial services where not even the coffin is present; cremation is becoming more popular - the scattered ashes leave not so much as a headstone in remembrance of death's awesome reality. St. Ambrose of Milan:

The foolish are afraid of death as the greatest of evils, but wise men seek it as a rest after their toils and as the end of evils.

A few months ago, "Time" magazine had an article on a funeral in a Roman Catholic church in which the priest was dressed in festive, mod vestments and a clown skipped around tying balloons to the coffin. There is no reason to be shocked; this is merely the reflection of our self-centered, pleasure-seeking, American life-style.

The lack of seriousness which characterizes today's society penetrates even unto death.

How does all this affect our attitude toward the dying? Alas, our society is so consumed with its passion for youth, physical fitness, beauty, that even the proximity of death is uncomfortable and to be avoided. The aged and infirm are bothersome, inconvenient; they are moved out of their own environments and into nursing homes and hospitals where they are monitored by machines. Sometimes excessive sedation causes them to be socially non-functional. The dying patient, as an individual human being, can easily become unimportant, irrelevant and very lonely.

What can be done to help the dying? First, we must recognize that they are God's creation; they possess immortal souls and they should be important to us. We should talk to them with honesty and compassion, avoiding platitudes and fakery. Life has become very abnormal.

We ourselves partake of this immature, self-indulgent, pleasure-seeking society. If we could make more of an effort to regain even a small degree of normalcy, of truth, to calm and soften our hearts, this would be of great help in trying to minister to the dying.

It is also important that the dying be reassured that family and physician are committed to working with them through the entire course of their ordeal. The dying need companionship and, if at all possible, familiar surroundings. To die at home is ideal.

When Faced With Death

There are certain phases which are commonly encountered in those facing death.

When first confronted by the possibility of death, a patient often responds with denial: "It cannot be that bad"; they convince themselves that God or a famous doctor or new research will cure them. Serious discussion of their condition may be resisted. Conversation steers clear of the unpleasant reality and often centers on

meaningless trivia - the weather, hospital food, TV programs, etc. The family - and even the physician - will often support such denial, often because they themselves cannot accept it. At this stage one should try to discuss realistic plans for the future, decisions that need to be made. One must, however, be very sensitive and gentle. Speaking with the dying honestly, with patience and compassion is very important, especially at this initial stage. Unfortunately, many people persist in this state of denial until their very death, thus losing precious opportunities for loving closeness with their families as well as for spiritual growth.

A second phase is often characterized by anger: "Why did it have to happen to me?" "Why can so-and-so enjoy a good life and I have to die?" There is anger at having one's self-centered fantasy world suddenly and unpleasantly disrupted. The dying person sometimes feels anger toward God; he feels cheated; God obviously does not love him; he feels envy toward others. This phase can also be shared by the family which can become very demanding on the doctors and health-care professionals involved. At this stage, the family may begin to feel resentment toward the dying; they become irritated by his demands, by the interference which the ordeal has caused in their lives. They begin rationalizing: "After all, we must lead our own lives;" "Why can't the doctors do anything?" At the same time they feel guilty for having such feelings. It is clear that anyone wishing to help cannot get caught up in this kind of negative interaction. One must respond not in kind, but with persistent and consistent love.

Another common reaction found among the dying is one of bargaining - making promises to God in exchange for certain concessions or a reprieve. Such petitions can be of value if accompanied by heartfelt repentance. And God answers those prayers which are unto salvation. This is illustrated by the Old Testament account of King Hezekiah.

If it is God's will, however, that death take its course, the patient becomes very weak, thin, and a sense of loss may set in - loss of physical identity, loss of identity as the breadwinner of the family, perhaps; financial loss. This sense of loss is often accompanied by depression. The dying begin to grieve, preparing to meet their

death. At this stage one should allow them to do this and not make false reassurances. The dying must be allowed to communicate his feelings, and there should be someone willing to listen. Together with the acceptance of death often comes a review of one's life, a search for meaning, an occasion for repentance. It is a time for inward concentration and meaningful communication with family and friends. All those involved - patient, family, friends, health-care professionals - should have a certain synchronization - a oneness of mind. There is not peace if the dying accept their fate, the family is still angry and the doctor feeling that he still has to search for "cures."

The way in which a person responds to death is very individual and largely dependent on his philosophy of life, on what he values. Someone who puts his trust in financial security or physical health will be very depressed if faced with a terminal illness. Imagine the depression of those who put their trust in science, or those who believe that happiness can only be found in this temporal world, that death is a closed door rather than the threshold of another world.

As Orthodox Christians we have no reason to be depressed at the thought of death. This is not to say that we should have no fear of death - this feeling is natural since death introduces us to the unknown. Furthermore, a certain fear of death is very healthy spiritually, as the Holy Fathers teach us, and should lead to repentance and inward vigilance. In the Holy Scriptures we read: In all you do, remember the end of your life, and then you will never sin (Sirach 7:36).

The fear of death comes not only from the advent of the unknown, but also in knowing that death is a point when all opportunity for repentance and struggle is over; the time of reckoning is at hand. Even the ancient Desert Father, St. Sisoës, as he lay dying, prayed to live longer, saying that he needed more time to repent; that truly, he did not know whether he had yet begun to repent. If these were the thoughts of a holy man, how much more should we sinners struggle to prepare ourselves to meet the Just Judge Who, sooner or later, awaits us all?

Preparing to Die

The time before death is very much like the time before Holy Communion. We prepare for this Sacrament by increasing our prayers, by inward concentration and soul-searching repentance, by removing ourselves as much as possible from the ways of the world. In all of this we are guided by the prayers of the Church through which we call to God to give us the sense to weep bitterly over our sins; we recognize our hardheartedness, our lack of tears and our many passions; we acknowledge that we waste too much time thinking of our earthly welfare and that we are unworthy of Heaven, of earth, and even of this transient life; we ask forgiveness of one another and try to make peace with our conscience. Over and over we hear the refrain: "Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me."

When faced with the imminent possibility of death, a Christian is struck with a sense of urgency. He develops a sharper focus for what is of lasting value; he tries to make maximum use of the precious time left to him for repentance and amendment. Should we not live every day as though it were our last? The Holy Fathers consider the ability to do so a great virtue. We must remember that death comes not only to the old and infirm, but also to the young and robust. Death comes as a thief in the night.

If we view death soberly, with the understanding that at any time we may be called out of this world, we will be better able to fight our passions, to have a truer perspective on what is really important in life, and to conduct that intense struggle to change ourselves into the likeness of God - which is the focus of any Orthodox life. Thus, with God's grace, we will not be thrown into despair when our earthly sojourn comes to an end, but we will be able to depart this life in peace, anticipating with firm hope and faith that heavenly homeland for which we were created. St. Ignatius Brianchaninov:

"O ye who have been banished from Paradise! It is not for enjoyments, not for festivity, not for playing that we find ourselves on earth - but in order that by faith, repentance, and the Cross, we might kill the death which has killed us and restore to ourselves the lost Paradise!"

Elder Paisios – On Dreams

"When you have a bad dream: never examine what you saw, how you saw it, or whether you're guilty or how much you are at fault. The evil one, having failed to tempt you during the daytime, comes to you at night."

"Sometimes God permits the devil to tempt us in our sleep, so that we may see that the old self has not entirely died. Other times, the enemy approaches a person in his sleep; and presents various dreams, in order to upset him when he awakes. This is why you shouldn't pay any attention to them. Cross yourself and the pillow, place an ikon on your pillow, and say the Jesus Prayer until you fall asleep. The more importance you attach to such dreams, the more the enemy will come to disturb you."

"Don't pay any attention to dreams. Whether they are pleasant or unpleasant, you are not to pay any attention to them; because there is the danger of being deluded. Ninety five percent of dreams are deceptive. This is why the Holy Fathers say we should not pay any attention to them. Very few dreams are from God. But in order for someone to interpret even these, he must have purity and other prerequisites --- much like the Righteous Joseph [the Patriarch] and the Prophet Daniel in the Bible, who both had the gift from God."

Elder Paisios: That we must truly feel the pain of our sins, if we are ever to be healed of the passions which cause them

"There must be an inner contrition with sincere repentance, in order for a person to be corrected. This is why St. Mark the Ascetic says, 'If one does not feel contrition commensurate to his fault, he will easily fall into the same fault again.' In other words, if the mistake is minor, the repentance can also be less severe; but if the mistake is major, then more severe repentance is required. When people do not grasp the severity of their sins and do not experience grief 'commensurate to their fault', then they can easily fall into the same - or even greater - fault."

"One must realize that he is indeed at fault, and humbly seek the mercy of God: 'My God, I have made a terrible mistake. Forgive me. I am a worthless sinner. Have mercy on me. If you do not help me now, I will certainly become worse; not better. I will not be able to correct myself without your help.' And with such thoughts and prayers, one must struggle not to repeat it. Many people - who made terrible mistakes and felt profound pain because they had offended God, and not because they lost the prestige of others - have become Saints."

"Sometimes God guards us from seeing our faults; and allows our heart to be like a rock, in order to prevent the devil from plunging us into despair. A person must consider his sinfulness with discernment. Repentance that involves anxiety and despair is not from God: the little devil has put his tail into the mix. One must be very careful, because the devil can catch him while in repentance; and then hurl him into grief and disappointment, in order break him mentally and physically --- rendering him useless."

God blurs our vision...

"Out of love, God does not allow us to become fully aware of our sinfulness from the start of our spiritual life; so as to prevent us from being discouraged. There are souls with **philotimo** (*) and sensitivity who would not be able to endure this, and would suffer terribly. So God blurs out our vision, and we do not see the magnitude of our sinfulness. ... But as we gradually progress in our struggle, God allows us to begin seeing our faults, and - at the same time - gives us the strength to overcome and correct them."

(*) - **Philotimo**: According to Elder Paisios, it is "the reverent distillation of goodness, the love shown by humble people, from which every trace of self has been filtered out."