

SOBORNOST

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American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese

*ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE
OF CONSTANTINOPLE*

SERVICES

***Wednesdays in Great Lent: Liturgy
of Presanctified Gifts 6 PM***

Saturday: Confession 4:30 PM

Great Vespers 5:00 PM

Sunday: Matins (Orthros) 8:45 AM

Sunday School 9:30 AM | Divine Liturgy 10:00 AM

**March 24, 2024 – Sunday of Orthodoxy (1st Sunday in
Great Lent) | Forefeast of the Annunciation**

By St. Luke the Surgeon, Bishop of Simferopol

Sermon given on the First Sunday of Lent

On the first Sunday of Lent, our Holy Church celebrates the Triumph of Orthodoxy, of true faith, which trampled down all heresies and was established. For this reason this Sunday is called the Sunday of Orthodoxy. Heresies showed up even at the very beginning of Christianity. The Apostles of Christ themselves warned their contemporaries, and with them us too, about the danger of false teachers.

The Holy Apostle Peter writes the following in his Second General Epistle: “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed”(II Pet. 2:1-2).



St. Paul, returning to Palestine from Greece, made a stop in Ephesus. To the the Christian inhabitants of the town there he said: “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves” (Acts 20:29-30).

Many such false teachers and schismatics existed in the first centuries of Christianity. Some heresies troubled the Church for centuries, such as the heresies of Arius, of Macedonius, Eutyches, Dioscorus, of Nestorius and also the heresy of Iconoclasm. These heresies caused much disturbance in the Church and afflicted the Church greatly. There were many confessors and martyrs who shed their blood defending the true faith in the fight against false teachers and heretics.

There were also many great prelates, who also suffered under persecution and were often exiled. Saint Flavian, Patriarch of Constantinople, for example, in a council chaired by Dioscorus, called the Robber Synod and was “beaten so savagely that he died three days later.”

The last in the line-up of heresies, the heresy of Iconoclasm, was the one that tormented our Orthodox Church the most. This heresy first appeared during the reign of Emperor Leo the Isaurian, who came to the throne in 717. He ascended the throne with the help of the army, which had many opponents of those who venerate holy icons, within its ranks. Because he wanted to please the army he started a harsh persecution against Iconophiles.

This persecution continued on into the reign of Emperor Constantine Copronymus, who succeeded Leo to the throne. The name Copronymus (“dung-named”) comes from *coprus* meaning feces. He was called Copronymus because he defecated in his baptismal font. These two emperors were in power for many years and brought great affliction upon the Church. Following these, there were other Iconoclast emperors, who continued the work of their predecessors and tormented the Church for years.

We can not begin to describe the suffering endured by the Church during the years of Iconoclasm, and especially the monks who were in the frontline in the battle for holy icons. The Iconoclast emperors closed many monasteries and turned many churches which had icons into shells. The monks were savagely beaten: they took out their eyes, noses were cut off, icons were broken on their heads. They burnt the fingers of icon-painting hagiographers with burning irons.

The persecution only stopped when Empress Irene came to the throne of the Byzantine Empire, but this was not yet final. In 787 Irene convened the Seventh Ecumenical Council, which set down Orthodox teaching on the veneration of holy icons. But even after this Council Iconoclast emperors still existed, for example,

Michael and others. The heresy was crushed only under the God-fearing Augusta, Theodora, when a local council was convened in Constantinople in 842, which upheld the Orthodox teaching. The council pronounced an anathema on all those who dare to say that the veneration of holy icons is idolatry and that Orthodox Christians are idolaters.

And here various sects still tell us exactly this thing. They dare to call our icons idols and call us idolaters.... This shows that they have not understood correctly the second commandment of Mosaic Law: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image —any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth;”(Ex. 20.4).

What does this commandment mean? I think the meaning is clear. The commandment prohibits the building of idols for worship, instead of worshiping the One, Unique and True God - as did ancient peoples: the Assyrians, the Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans and others - instead of worshiping the One, Unique and True God. That is idolatry. But is our veneration of holy icons anything like idolatry? Certainly not. Idols represented something that does not really exist, something that is a product of imagination. Our own icons depict reality. Really, did the Lord Jesus Christ, who we glorify and who we venerate in icons, not living among us? Did the Virgin Mary, who was painted by the apostle and evangelist Saint Luke not live among us? This icon was blessed by the very Theotokos herself, saying that grace would always be with this icon. Do you know how many miracles happen from icons of the Virgin Mary? And the other icons, don't they show real saints of God who lived here on Earth? These icons are their portraits and in no way are idols....

Remember also, the word of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who told the apostles, and through them us, their successors: “He who hears you hears Me, he who rejects you rejects Me, and he who rejects Me rejects Him who sent Me” (Lk. 10:16). These words of the Lord are awesome. Remember them always. Do not forget this day, the day of the Triumph of the Orthodox faith. The faith that was set down by the Seventh Ecumenical Council which established Orthodoxy and trampled down all heresies and schisms.

Over a thousand years have passed since the time of the Seventh Ecumenical Council and no such Ecumenical Councils have been convened since. Why? The reasons are political. It was impossible to call them. But we should not be sorry that others did not take place and that there are no Ecumenical Councils today. These Seven that we have sorted out all questions and solved all the problems that the Church had with heresies and established the Orthodox faith.

You will say that there are many new heresies and schisms today. Yes, you are right. But we should know that the new heresies are not saying anything new but repeating what the old heretics have already said. All of these heresies were anathematized by the Seventh Ecumenical Council. So the decisions of seven Ecumenical Councils are enough for us, especially the Seventh Ecumenical Council. This is why we rejoice today and celebrate the Triumph of Orthodoxy, which was expressed and fixed by the Seventh Ecumenical Council.

It was precisely for this reason that it was appointed that a doxology should be chanted on this day, as a thanksgiving to God for securing the Orthodox faith.

Homily on the Annunciation of the Theotokos

“Today marks the crowning of our salvation and the revelation of the mystery before all ages. For the Son of God becomes the son of the Virgin, and Gabriel proclaims the grace.” Now the great mystery of our Christian faith has been fulfilled, what the holy prophet Isaiah predicted seven hundred years before the Nativity of the Lord Jesus Christ: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Emmanuel, which means: 'God is with us'” (Is. 7:14).

Why did this holy prophet say that the Lord would be called Emmanuel, while the Archangel Gabriel, who now greeted the Blessed Virgin Mary, said that She would call His name Jesus? What does this mean? This is explained by the meaning of the name Emmanuel: "God is with us."

All Christian nations, all those who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, call Him the Savior, the True God, Who lived with people on earth. This justified the name Emmanuel, "God with us", about which the prophet spoke. Emmanuel is the God-man, this is the God who is with us, God in the flesh. The greatest mystery of our salvation has been accomplished, what we read about in the holy apostle Paul: "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, Justified in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Preached among the Gentiles, Believed on in the world, Received up in glory" (I Tim. 3:16). He said that the holy angels would like to penetrate into this extraordinary mystery, but it was not given to them to know all its depths. Should we, weak and infirm, try to penetrate it?

But we know that the dogmas about the God-manhood of the Lord Jesus Christ and about His seedless incarnation from the Blessed Virgin Mary form the basis of our entire Christian faith. For if we did not believe that the Lord Jesus Christ is the true Son of God, incarnated from the Most Holy Virgin Mary, then our hope for salvation would be in vain. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself spoke of Himself that He is the Son of God, the Bread of Heaven, descended from Heaven. We accept this with all our hearts and do not try to comprehend the bottomless depths of the mystery of the appearance of God in the flesh.

But still, as far as it is possible for us, let us try to understand why the incarnation of the Son of God was necessary, why did He need to take on human flesh? Is it not because He saved us from eternal death and from the power of the devil with His Cross, His terrible sufferings and death on the Cross on Golgotha?

According to the inexpressible counsel of God, it was necessary that our Lord Jesus Christ “trample down death by death”, so that He would incarnate and take on a human Body, and die a true human death. The Lord Jesus Christ brought this terrible sacrifice in order to bring us closer to God, in order to make us from mortal people to eternally living God-men. He became the God-man and opened the way for us to God-manhood, so that in our renewed body we would partake of the eternal and infinite approach to the holiness of God. And if this is so, then, of course, He could not do this while remaining only God. He had to become a God-man, He had to be incarnated from the Blessed Virgin Mary.

This event - the incarnation of the Son of God - is immeasurably great, so it had to be foretold miraculously - the appearance of the Archangel Gabriel to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and his good news was the greatest of all the good news that the human race has ever heard. In Nazareth, in the modest dwelling of the Blessed Virgin Mary, amazing words were heard: “Rejoice, you who are full of grace! The Lord is with you. Blessed are You among women” (Luke 1:28), that is, blessed more than any woman.

The Blessed Virgin Mary was silent. Did She come to awe and horror, natural for an ordinary person at the sight of the Archangel? No, it was not horror that seized Her, but embarrassment because of the unusual greeting. The Virgin was not horrified by the extraordinary appearance, because she herself was the most holy of saints, and her holy soul was like an angel in her spiritual purity. She expressed only perfectly understandable bewilderment, asking: “How can this be when I don’t know my husband?” And she received a wondrous answer: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (Luke 1:34-35).

Has there ever been a Virgin among all those born, like the Blessed Mary in purity and holiness? Oh no! There never has been and never will be. Unspeakably and amazingly, the great mystery of the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ is covered with Divine glory. How can we not bow down with all our hearts before the Most Holy Virgin, Who has become the instrument of the great and incomprehensible mystery of God? How can we not call Her “more honorable than the Cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the Seraphim”? Shouldn't the Mother of the Heavenly King Himself be placed by us above all the Powers of Heaven, above all His servants? The archangels, seraphim and cherubim are also the servants of God.

Of course, we must honor Her with all our hearts and consider Her our Heavenly Mother, trying to imitate Her virtues and fulfill those words of Her that we sing at every matins and that she spoke to Elizabeth, the mother of the Forerunner of the Lord: "All generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48).

All of us, Orthodox Christians, bless the Blessed Virgin Mary in accordance with the teaching of Holy Scripture, but we must say with pain that [Protestants] do not participate in this praise of the Orthodox world. They completely reject the veneration of the Most Holy Theotokos, saying that the Mother of God was only a pious woman, like many others, and even condemn us for the fact that we lift up prayers to Her and, turning to Her, say: "Most Holy Theotokos, save us." They say: "How is it possible to seek salvation from a pious woman? We have one Savior - the Lord Jesus Christ, He alone saves us, and there are no other saviors."

What should we say to this? We turn to the Mother of God as our Intercessor. We know that She did not directly save the world, just as Her Divine Son saved us with His Cross. But she can work for our salvation by her prayers before her Son, and we ask for her prayers, which are so powerful before Him.

The holy Apostle Paul said of himself: "I have become everything to all, in order to save at least some" (I Cor. 9:22). He called on the Apostle Timothy: "Pay attention to yourself and to the doctrine, for by doing so you will save yourself and those who hear you" (see I Tim. 4:16).

As we see from the Holy Scriptures, the holy apostles also save us. How? The same as the Most Holy Theotokos - with her prayers, her teachings and her closeness both to us and to the Lord Jesus Christ. If the apostles can save us, then why can't the Mother of God? She is our Intercessor, the Blessed Mother of the whole Christian race. That is why we cry out to Her: "Most Holy Theotokos, save us."

We call Her the Lady, the Queen of Heaven. And the sectarians are outraged by this: "We have one King - God." Isn't it right for us to call Her the Queen if She is the Mother of the King? Does not even in the human race every mother of the King bear the title of Queen? In the same sense, we call Her the Queen of Heaven, for She is the Mother of our King, the Lord Jesus Christ. We call her the Lady because she has great power to protect us from the devil. ...Through the Most Holy Theotokos, whose greatest feast we celebrate today, may we all be saved from the devil and all his servants. Amen. (*abridged from johnsanidopoulos.com*)

Today's Epistle Lesson – St. Paul's Letter to the Hebrews 11:24-26, 30-12:2 EOB

Brethren, by faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing to share ill-treatment with God's people rather than

enjoy the pleasures of sin for a time. He considered the disgrace of the Anointed a greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt because he had his eyes fixed on the reward.

By faith, the walls of Jericho fell down, after the people [of the city] had been encircled for seven days. By faith, Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient because she had received the spies in peace. What more shall I say? Time would fail me if I mentioned Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. Through faith, they overpowered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, became strong in weakness, grew mighty in war and caused foreign armies to flee. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, not accepting their deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Others were tried by mocking and scourging, yes, by chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn apart, they were tempted and they were slain with the sword. They went around in sheep and goat skins, being destitute, afflicted and ill-treated. And yet the world was not worthy of them! They wandered in deserts, mountains, caves, and the holes of the earth.

All of them received a testimony through their faith but they did not receive the promise because God had made provision for us to have something better, and they were not to reach perfection apart from us. And so, seeing that we are surrounded by such a great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which so easily entangles us. Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross, despising its shame, and he has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Today's Gospel Lesson – Saint John 1:43-51 EOB

At that time, being determined to go out into Galilee, Jesus met Philip and said to him, "Follow me!" Now, Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathaniel and said to him, "We have found the one of whom Moses in the law and the prophets, have written: Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph!" Nathanael asked him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip replied, "Come and see!" As Jesus saw Nathaniel coming to him, he said about him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked Jesus, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are King of Israel!" Jesus said to him, "Because I told you, 'I saw you underneath the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these!" He said to Philip, "Amen, amen, I tell you; hereafter, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

A Word From the Holy Fathers

Prooimion – Prooimion – None is merciful like You. We know that, O Lord, from the time You were born and called the son of the woman whom You created. We proclaim her blessed as we pray each day, “Hail, unwedded bride.”

Come, let us accompany the archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary, and let us greet her as mother and nourisher of our life. For it is not only fitting for the general to salute the queen, but it is also possible for the humble to see her and address her. All generations call her blessed as Mother of god, and they pray, “Hail, virgin undefiled; hail, maiden called of God; hail, chaste, beautiful and delightful virgin; hail, virgin full of grace, who did not know intercourse, chaste; hail, mother who knew no man; hail, unwedded bride.”

When the archangel of the heavenly host received the command of the Lover of man he hastened to appear to the Virgin, as it is written; and as he came to Nazareth to the hut of Joseph, he was amazed as he considered how the Most High associated in live with the humble: “The entire heaven,” he said, “and the throne of fire cannot contain my Master; and this poor maiden, how can she receive Him? On high, He is awesome; how can He be visible on earth? In any event, be it as He wills. Why do I remain here and not fly to address the maiden, 'Hail, unwedded bride'?”

The inhabitant of the Heavens, speaking in this way, came to the shelter of the holy one and addressed the Virgin, saying, “Hail, the Lord is with you.” But the young girl, at the appearance of the shining angel, was not wholly reassured. At once she bowed her head toward the earth and was silent. Putting together one thought and another, on consideration with another, she examined them and said, “What is this which I see? What am I to consider? An appearance of fire, he has the voice of a man.; the one who stands near me both terrifies me and encourages me, for he says to me, 'Hail, unwedded bride.'”

While Mary was piling up in her heart the substance of such considerations, the fiery angel gave the nod to consume her fear like foliage, as he said, “O radiant maiden, do not be afraid, for you have found grace with the Lord. Do not fear the servant, for I come to bring you the Creator. You are going to give birth to a son; so why should my fiery appearance terrify you? You are to bring the Lord into the world; why fear a fellow subject? Why do you feel fear of me as I tremble before you because of what is going to happen? It was confided to me and I feel assured about it. I have come to say to you, 'Hail, unwedded bride.'”

When the all-holy maiden heard these things, she said to herself, “I heard what was said earlier and I did not understand. How am I to know what is to follow? The one standing here greeted me with a salutation, and I do not know what was accomplished. And, lo! Another terrible thing assailed my ears, for he said, “You will bear and give birth to a son’; and yet I do not know a man. Perhaps he did not know that my seal of virginity is unbroken? And is he ignorant of the fact that I am a virgin? Yet surely I do not believe that; unless he knew it and knew it well, he would not come saying to me, 'Hail, unwedded bride.'”

“How will what you were saying be possible? Tell me now what you are; shall I say angel or human? Heavenly or earthly? Explain both what you are and what you have said, for if I come to know who is speaking, surely I shall understand what has been said. For this reason, tell me – from whence are you? Do you come from on high or on earth? For now I have recovered courage; possessing real freedom, I shall raise questions with you. Concerning what you have said, do not conceal from me where it was said. Was this matter about me spoken of in Heaven? Why, then, do you not tell me that you are an angel and not human? You come here saying to me, 'Hail, unwedded bride.'”

“Lo, the priest is made dumb, the barren woman pregnant, and yet Mary does not believe me. She asks who I am and what I am saying; and against my will, I am held in check in order that He who is going to dwell in her may not be angry and destroy me, as He once cast the angels who offended from Heaven into Hell; and so, I am constrained to persevere, and I shall answer the one who is reasoning with me: 'O immaculate one, you ask how the thing I told you will come to pass? How did the sea appear as dry land to the people, and then again like the sea? Just so will it be with your womb, so that everyone will say to you, 'Hail, unwedded bride.'”

The holy woman, wishing to understand clearly what had been said, again replied to the angel: “As for the sea that you mentioned to me, the prophet cleft it with his rod. This miracle did not happen without some intermediary: at first it was Moses, then prayers and the rod were intermediaries; now there is nothing as go-between; how, then, will it happen, since I know no man? Am I, the unploughed, uncultivated land to produce fruit, when I have not received seed, nor yet a sower? Tell me that, and explain to me, as you stand here and say to me, 'Hail, unwedded bride.'”

He who was entrusted by the Most High with the salutation, not with the childbirth of the Virgin Mary, as he heard what the Virgin said, answered her, “Since you say, holy one, that the miracles of old had some mediator, the present miracle is

greater in that there is no need of a mediator. I am an angel, and it has not been entrusted to me to be the mediator for so great a mystery. How, then, can some miserable human be a mediator for you? Formerly the rod and Moses have prefigured these things; now the truth will shine forth in you. Hence I come to you saying, 'Hail, unwedded bride.'"

"Truly, you do come from on high; pardon me, now I recognize you; for a while ago I was restrained by fear of your beauty, your appearance, your voice. They frightened me terribly. For if you were not from on high, you would not have interpreted the words of the Scripture; but, as one coming from light, you have clarified all that was confused. May this thing which you have just told me come to pass, for you possess the truth. O angel, may your message be accomplished through me. I am a servant of the One who sent you. Explain to me what He wills, and He will dwell in me, and care for me, so that everyone may say to me, 'Hail, unwedded bride.'"

When Gabriel had spoken in due measure and had heard immediately the responses of the Virgin, he flew away and came to his bright and gleaming abode; then, it is probably that the young woman summoned Joseph to her and said, "Where were you, my wise husband? Why did you not guard my virginity? For a certain winged being has given me a bridegroom. He has hung his words like earrings of pearls on my ears. Look, see how he has beautified me, as he adorned me with what he said to me. Just so you will say to me in a short time, holy one, 'Hail, unwedded bride.'"

When Joseph saw the maiden whom God had blessed as highly favored, he was struck with fear and amazement, and he thought to himself, "Just what manner of woman is this?" He said, "For today she does not seem to me as she did yesterday. She appears both terrible and sweet to me now, and it gives me pause. I gaze upon burning heat in snow, Paradise in a furnace; I gaze upon a smoking hill, upon a divine flower with young freshness, upon an awesome throne, on a pitiable footstool of the All-Merciful One. I do not understand the woman whom I took. How then shall I say to her, 'Hail, unwedded bride'?"

"You are both great and humble, both queen and servant; explain to me now what you are. How shall I address you? What shall I call you? How shall I hymn you? How shall I praise your beauty?" This is truly what the Gospel has told us. Joseph for a time did not know the Mary with him, until the time when she clearly gave birth to the Word of God. What she was was indeed revealed at the time when she gave birth, but not after that, for she remained concealed; nor was the Son whom

she bore know, nor will He be known by her to whom we rightly say, “Hail, unwedded bride.”

So Joseph himself, who had never known the Virgin, stood in the presence of her glory, astonished; and as he looked upon the appearance of her form, he said, “O shining one, I see a flame and glowing brightness around you; and so, Mary, I am struck with amazement. Protect me and do not consume me! Your chaste womb has suddenly become a furnace full of fire; then do not, I beg of you, melt me, but spare me. You wish that I, too, like Moses long ago, take off my sandals and draw near you and listen to you, and learning from you, I shall say, 'Hail unwedded bride.'”

“Now you seek to draw near me and to be taught what I am,” said Mary to Joseph. “Draw near and learn what I am; indeed I am what you see. A certain winged being appeared before me, and his form filled the howle chamber and me as well; for when the doors were closed, he stood before me and he said this to me: 'Woman full of grace, the Lord is with you.' When I heard the name of the Lord, then I assumed a little courage; I saw the being whom I beheld, luminous, full of fire, saying these refreshing words to me: 'Hail, unwedded bride.'”

“Such a salutation, when it struck my ears, was sufficient; it made me a luminous one. It made me pregnant; yet I do not know about the conception of the child. Now see, I am great with child; and, as you know, my virginity is intact, for you have not known me. Who would be a witness of this, if not you who protect me? Then make a defense of me, that you may find peace of mind.” When Joseph heard this, he answered, “I am certainly a witness of this; but hear me: Who will believe me when I say that a being from on high came and gave you the salutation, 'Hail, unwedded bride'?”

“The priests of your people are wicked and pests, and you know well that before I speak they will not believe me when I say that you conceived without union. For me it is clear that the light of your virginity shines; but for those in shadows the light is extinguished; they are unworthy of knowing you. It will be wise, Virgin, I believe, to send you away secretly. In all justice I wish tat you be not put to shame, for I cherish you and I fear the people. He for whom I send you away has power to hold you guiltless if He wills it, and I shall say to you, 'Hail, unwedded bride.’” [the extant kontakion breaks off here]

– St. Romanos the Melodist, *Kontakion O.36*



Faith and Works: An Orthodox Philokalic Perspective

By Dr. George D. Panagopoulos

(continued from last week) **2. The Philokalic View Towards "External Justification" (Protestantism) and the Roman Catholic "Meritocracy"**

This is how we can understand why the *sola fide* of Protestants is lacking:

Faith does not save as a general idea, emotional state, acceptance of theoretical truths or even existential conviction. I remind you that the central Protestant idea, the justification of the sinner by faith alone (this "article" "stands or falls with the Church" according to Luther!) consists in the fact that God was "satisfied" by the death of His Son, thus the sinner by his faith alone (*sola gratia*) recognizes externally by grace alone (*sola gratia*) only Christ (*solus Christus*). Attention: God recognizes, not justifies the sinner. This means that the believer still remains in sin, but is now counted by God as righteous. It is a purely judicial action, so justification is understood as a judicial measure. Justice is an attribute of Christ and is not an action or attribute existing in the believer, however it somehow brings about the renewal of the believer. From there on, good works are devoid of any merit (in contrast to Roman Catholic teaching), and are only the fruit and sign of justification. The faith of justification is an absolute gift of God. However, by looking towards Christ, the believer finds the certainty of salvation. Here, in my opinion, the teaching of "merit" is replaced by the "certainty" of salvation.

Now according to the Philokalic testimony, which validates the prophetic apostolic identity of the ecclesiastical body, Christ saves, Who, according to the Father's good will, bestows through faith in the "by water and Spirit" birth from above the divinely uncreated purifying, justifying, sanctifying and theurgical grace in the human heart. It is about the involvement of the believer through "praxis" and "theoria" in the mystery of the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ in a specific place and time, within the limits of a local ecclesiastical assembly, which through the apostolic succession and teaching, the Eucharistic communion and of therapy ends in a relationship of mystical identity with all the local Churches throughout the world.

This charismatic gift is accepted, rekindled, initiated and perfected "imperfectly" through the free observance of the commandments of Christ as a contribution to the mystery of the Cross and the Resurrection of our Lord. Saint Gregory Palamas, creatively interpreting Paul, talks about the three aspects of the mystery of the Cross, which acted before the historical Cross on Golgotha, through the prophets' flight from sin, then "through the departure of sin from themselves" and finally "through the vision in God of this mystery of the Cross of divine glory," which unites man with God and shows him as His "friend" (J. Romanides, *Romaioi or Romeoi Fathers of the Church*, Thessaloniki 1984, 174-175).

However, justification and the life of holiness are not magically acquired, nor do they fall from the sky automatically. In Baptism, "the Cross" (Saint John Chrysostom) certainly "acts", but this does not mean that all the baptized are given new life and become temples of the Holy Spirit. There is no justification and salvation through the mechanical observance of ritual actions, nor through a judicial-type decision from God, which ensures by faith the certainty of salvation of a psychological type. This, everywhere, is understood to also apply to participation in the Eucharist. Neptic struggle is required for grace to bear fruit in perfect love. Basil the Great, with the precision of an experienced healer, explains that both the observance of the commandments and the perfect love for God and neighbor are impossible to achieve "when the intellect is in delusion" (PG 31, 920). The mystery of our salvation is "spontaneous and God-guided" (Saint John Climacus). And this is because justification, as we said, is the uncreated life-giving power of the Cross, which on the one hand cleanses and renews the image of God within us free of charge without any contribution from us, but on the other hand "accepts to work together with us", that is, expects to cooperate with us on the path towards the likeness of God (Diadochos of Photiki, *The One Hundred Gnostic Chapters*, 89; Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, pp. 150).

In fact, I emphatically emphasize that this situation becomes known "in a sense and with a lot of information" to the "guaranteed by theoria" believer in the life of the gifts of the Paraclete, especially in the "gift of prayer", that is, in spirit-moving prayer of the heart, "active in the higher thoughts of the heart" (Gregory of Sinai). Saint Theophylact of Ochrid interprets the relevant passages of Paul with this meaning: The Paraclete "bears witness" with the spiritual gift within the believer (not made that way) that by grace he was made a "son" of God and co-heir of Christ: "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs — heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:16-17) and again: "because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Gal. 4:6).

According to the Orthodox understanding, justification is connected with the illumination of the heart (cf. the Service of Baptism in the *Euchologion*: "You are justified, you are illumined", which refers to Paul) and leads to glorification - theosis (2 Cor. 3:18). Symeon the New Theologian affirms that those baptized who have truly passed through the door of repentance testify that "God is light" and those "receive Him as light received". However, those who did not "have this happen" are still under the slavery of the pre-grace Law, even if they are patriarchs, bishops, priests, laymen or monks! (*Sources Chrétiennes* 113, 137ff.)

According to this, good works supposedly worthy of the Kingdom are not accepted by God, but the living works through the work of the commandments of active faith, which is constantly increasing in the life of the Lord's Body. In this way, the Orthodox Philokalic Fathers are able to interpret the countless passages of the Old and New Testaments (eg. Psalm 61:13; 1 Cor. 3:8; 2 John 8; Mt 10:42) according to which the Lord will judge people "according to their works", without however relativizing the truth of our salvation from "justified faith".

Saint Mark the Ascetic is very clear in his assurance that even the most convinced Protestant would be jealous of, but without being able to understand its depth:

"When Scripture says 'He will reward every man according to his works' (Mt 16:27), do not imagine that works in themselves merit either gehenna or the kingdom. On the contrary, Christ rewards each man according to whether his works are done with faith or without faith in Himself; and He is not a dealer bound by contract, but God our Creator and Redeemer." (*Philokalia*, vol. 1; cf. Andrew of Crete, 'On the Publican and the Pharisee', *PG* 97, 1265)

There are no human works worthy of the Kingdom or the gehenna of fire! Saint Mark speaks of "works of faith" and understands in this way faith and virtue in a mystical unity due to grace. Therefore, the opinion that good works can be understood in an Orthodox way as merit (*merita*), and in fact with the meaning given to the term by Roman Catholic theology, is rejected. Observance of the commandments is our duty, not meritorious: This restricts human freedom without being "natural" (cf. 1 Cor. 8:1; also Andrew of Crete, 'On the Publican and the Pharisee', *PG* 97, 1265).

Thus, all the passages of the Bible that were used even by newer Orthodox theologians as testimonies for the "meritorious" character of good works should be understood based on the interpretive key of the Philokalic testimony summarized by Saint Mark. (*to be continued next week*)

Commemoration of the Miracle of the Theotokos in the Monastery of the Kiev Caves

By St. Nikolai Velimirovich

Two companions, John and Sergius, vowed to adopt each other as blood brothers before an icon of the Holy Mother of God in this monastery. John was a wealthy man, and he had a five year old son Zachariah. John became very ill. Before his death, John commended his son to the care of Sergius and bequeathed a large amount of gold and silver to him for safe keeping so that Sergius would hand it over to his son Zachariah when he reached maturity.

When Zachariah reached maturity, Sergius denied that he received anything from the deceased John. Then Zachariah said, "Let him swear before that very icon of the All-Holy Mother of God, before whom he entered into a blood-brother relationship with my deceased father; and if he swears that he did not receive anything from my father John, then I will not seek anything from him." Sergius agreed.

When Sergius swore this, he wanted to approach and venerate the icon, but a force held him back and would not allow it. Sergius then began to cry out in a crazed manner to the Holy Fathers Anthony and Theodosius; "Do not allow this unmerciful angel to destroy me!" That was the demon that attacked him by God's permission. After that, Sergius showed them all the money that John entrusted to him. When they opened the chest, they discovered that the amount had doubled. This amount was doubled by God's Providence. After receiving the money, Zachariah gave it to the monastery and was then tonsured a monk. Zachariah lived for a long time and was made worthy of the great gifts of God and was translated peacefully into eternity.

Holy New Hieromartyr Gregory, Metropolitan of New Patras

The Holy Hieromartyr Gregory was from Thebes in Boetia and later served as Metropolitan of New Patras. One day, as he serving the Divine Liturgy in the Metropolitan Cathedral Church of Saint Nicholas in Ypatis on the eve of the Akathis Hymn, certain Turks came in and slaughtered him before the Holy Altar as he held the Holy Chalice in his hands, in the presence of a number of Christians from the villages. This took place in 1711. Though he is not commemorated in the synaxaria of the Church and is virtually unknown, he is commemorated in the Metropolis of Fthiotida on the Sunday that falls between the 18th and the 24th of March, on which day all the saints of Fthiotida are celebrated. There is a chapel dedicated to the Holy Hieromartyr Gregory in the basement of the Church of Saint Paraskevi in Lamia, which was inaugurated by Metropolitan Nicholas on April 4, 2009. (*from johnsanidopoulos.com*)

Venerable Hildelitha, Abbess of Barking

Today (24 March) we commemorate St. Hildelitha (or Hildelid), abbess of Barking (ca. 712). Though she was an Anglo-Saxon princess, Saint Hildelitha was raised in France. She was one of the virst virgins of the English nation who consecrated herself a spouse to Christ. She took the veil there either at Chelles or Faremoutier, where she quickly became so perfect as to be fit to teach and direct many other virgins, as their mother and mistress, in the holy discipline of a religious life.

When, therefore, St. Earkonwald founded for himself the monastery of Chertsey, and for his sister, St. Ethelburga, that of Barking, not being able to find in England

(where there were at that time scarcely any nunneries) a religious woman fit to model this new establishment, he invited St. Hildelitha from France, and committed his sister to her care and teaching. When Ethelburga took the reins as abbess, Hildelitha remained there as one of her nuns.

A devout servant of God, Hildelitha succeeded Ethelberga in the office of abbess about 675, and presided over that monastery many years, till she was of an extreme old age, with exemplary conduct, in the observance of regular discipline, and in the care of providing all things for the public use. She enlarged the rather cramped monastic buildings. Ven. Bede writes, "The narrowness of the place where the monastery is built led her to think that the bones of the male and female servants of Christ, which had been there buried, should be taken up, and translated into the church of the blessed Mother of God, and interred in one place; whoever wishes to read it, may find in the book from which we have gathered these things, how often a brightness of heavenly light was seen there, and a fragrance of wonderful odor smelled, and what other miracles were wrought."

She lived to a great age, and reposed about 717; the exact date of her death is not known. St. Cuthberga, who in 713, founded the abbey of Wimborne, was one of her nuns and disciples. Saint Aldhelm dedicated his book "On Virginitie" to her and her sisters. The work presupposed advanced Latin reading skills and knowledge of scripture and patristic literature, which indicates the erudition of the nuns. Her memory was highly honored by St. Dunstan, St. Ethelwold, and St. Elphegius. St. Boniface, the apostle of Germany, is supposed to have meant this saint when he wrote, in his twenty-first Epistle, 'What he learned from the venerable Abbess Hildelitha.' He also mentions one of her visions that she described to him.

With her are commemorated the nuns of her convent who, about 150 years after her death, were all burnt by the Danes when they ravaged the eastern shores of England, in the time of St. Edmund, about 870. (*adapted from pyhiinvaeltaja.wordpress.com*)

Also Commemorated Today

[Icon](#) of the Mother of God of the Uncut Mountain

Venerable [Zacharias](#) the [Recluse](#) of Egypt (4th c.).

St. [Artemon](#) ([Menignus](#)), bishop of Seleucia (1st c.).

New Hieromartyr [Vladimir](#) priest (1920) (OC).

Venerable [Zachariah](#), faster of the Kiev Caves (13th c.).

[Martyrs Stephen](#) and [Peter](#) of Kazan (1552).

[Holy Hieromartyr Artemon, Presbyter of Laodicea in Syria](#)

Hieromartyr [Parthenius](#), patriarch of Constantinople (1657).

[Holy Martyr Agapios and 7 companions at Caesarea in Palestine](#) (304)

Venerable [Martin](#) of Thebes, monk (Greek).

St. [James](#) the Confessor, Monk of the Studion (c. 820)

St. Thomas, abbot of the monastery of St. Euthymius (542).

St. Severus of Catania (802-811).

Dunchad, Abbot of Iona

Sebba, King and Monk in England

[Macartin](#) (Aedh mac Carthin, Maccaeirthin), Bishop of Clogher, w/w (c. 505)

[Domangart](#) (Domangard, Donard), hermit, of Slieve Donarth, Ireland (c. 500)

Caimin ([Camin](#), Cammin) the Recluse, Abbot of Lough Derg (of Inniskeltra). (653)

St. [Cairlon](#) (Caorlan) of Cashel, Bishop (6th c.)

St. Theonas, Archbishop of Thessonlonika (Greek)

St. Kristel (Krestell), nun of Brittany (6th c.)

St. [Latinus](#), bishop of Brescia, confessor (115)

Martyrs [Mark](#) and Timothy of Rome (c. 150)

Hieromartyr [Pigmenius](#), priest in Rome (362)

Martyrs [Romulus](#) and Secundus (Secundulus) (unk)(North Africa)

St. Revert, hermit at Roz Couesnon (6th c.)(Brittany)

Social Team for March 31

Team 1 is up next week – Amelia Hanbury, Patty Blaydoe, Mickey Norfolk. Thank you!

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In Your Prayers – Please Remember... His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch BARTHOLOMEW, His Eminence Metropolitan GREGORY, Fr. Joseph & Family, His Grace Bishop Neofitos of Nyeri & Mt. Kenya, Bennett family, Tatyana & Slava Chumak & family, Luke & Marlena Cooper, Roberta Corson, Tina Crull, Marlene Doukas, Linda A. Georgiev, Sandi Hebel, Howl family, Helen P. Janowiak, John M. Janowiak, Johnson family, Andrew Kinn, Kopan family, Helen, Brian, Luke and Mia Mahony, Valentina Makowelski, Susan Matula, David & Kathryn Newman, Bobby Nutter & family, Nicholas Pavlik, Weston Perry & family, John Reece, Mary Reed, Marge Rusnak, Rose Song, Fr. Nectarios & la, Mother Virginia Marie & the Carmelite Nuns of Port Tobacco, the suffering people of Ukraine & the Holy Land, the newly reposed handmaiden of God Mary Diane David, and those in need of our prayers. (Please advise Fr. Joseph of changes.)