

SOBORNOST

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American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese

*ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE
OF CONSTANTINOPLE*

SERVICES

Wed: Reader Vespers 6:30 PM

Saturday: Confession 4:30 PM

Vespers 5 PM

Sunday: Matins 8:45 AM | Sunday School 9:30 AM

~ Divine Liturgy 10 AM ~

**December 22, 2024 – Sunday Before Nativity
(Sunday of the Fathers) | Forefeast of the Nativity**

Great-martyr Anastasia, Deliverer from Potions

The Sunday before Christmas is dedicated by the Holy Church to the commemoration of the Holy Ancestors, and on the previous Sunday it honors the commemoration of the Holy Forefathers.

Who are the ancestors and forefathers and why is their memory celebrated so solemnly before the greatest feast day, the Nativity of Christ? The forefathers are the great righteous people of the Old Testament, and first of all, these are the holy prophets.

Why is the memory of these forefathers, the memory of the holy prophets, so important for us? Every great human undertaking, even personal one, if it sets itself great tasks, requires long, many years, of deep preparation, and all the great events in the life of the human race, the greatest historical events, were prepared by history for many years, sometimes even hundreds of years.

If this is so in human events and personal events, if this is so in the historical life of all mankind, then even more so it should have been in the preparation of the



greatest event in the history of all mankind - the preparation of the appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ to the world. This should have been the preparation of the human race for the perception of Christ's greatest teaching.

Worship of the true God, knowledge of Him was in ancient and olden times the property of only the one chosen people of Israel, and all other peoples followed the natural path in the matter of religious knowledge. They did not have the revelation that was given to the people of Israel, and the ancient pagans knew God only in natural phenomena. Their religions were naturalistic: they deified the material principles of the world, worshiped the heavenly bodies, all the elemental forces of nature, deified animals and birds and worshiped idols they themselves sculpted.

In ancient times there was a religion of the Indian people - Buddhism, but it was infinitely far from the knowledge of God, it knew only the vanity of human life, rejected life and was a religion of deep pessimism, in essence, it did not know God - it is a religion without God.

And the great people of antiquity - the Greeks - knew God only in part, only on one side: they knew Him only in harmony and beauty. They were very far from the knowledge of God as the self-existent One, as the center and focus, the source of all cosmic life, all human life. The knowledge of God as the self-existent One, as eternally existing in Himself, was the property of only the chosen people of Israel, for this people honored Jehovah, and the word "Jehovah" in the Hebrew language means "the self-existent One."

But this knowledge of God, and this worship of the true God, was far from the knowledge that was given to people in Christianity. For the people of Israel understood God as a terrible autocrat, the Creator of the world, a punisher and Judge. They were almost as far away as the ancient Greeks and pagans from understanding that God is love.

And the essence of Christ's teaching comes down precisely to preaching about love, teaching about it. The people of Israel, the whole world, all of humanity had to be prepared to understand this great truth. And the Lord God led this great preparation for thousands of years.

The Lord God in the most ancient times made promises to the human race about the Savior of the world. Even to Adam, the first man, before his expulsion from paradise, the Lord gave a great promise: "The seed of the woman will trample on the head of the serpent." The seed of the woman is our Lord Jesus Christ, and the woman is the Most Holy Virgin Mary, the Mother of God.

Our ancient forefather Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, gave us a great prophecy about the Savior of the world. When before his death he blessed his twelve sons, he

said to his son Judah, the one from whose family the Lord Jesus Christ was to appear to the world: "A ruler shall not fail from Judah, nor a prince from his loins, until the Reconciler will come; and he is the expectation of nations" (Gen.49:10). He spoke of the Reconciler. This is the same as the Savior, for the Savior was the Reconciler of the people with God. He spoke about the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, almost two millennia before the birth of Christ.

The Holy Prophet Isaiah also foretold the coming of Christ: "And the Redeemer of Zion and the sons of Jacob who turned from wickedness will come, says the Lord" (Isa. 59:20). The Redeemer of Zion is the Redeemer of the people of Israel, for Zion was the name of the mountain on which Solomon's temple was erected, and the name Zion often means the Jewish people. And more than once the prophet Isaiah foreshadowed the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ to the world.

This is what the holy prophet Malachi says: "Behold, I send My angel, and he will prepare the way before Me, and suddenly the Lord, whom you seek, and the Angel of the covenant, whom you desire, will come to His temple" (Mal.3:1). And so it was. The prophet Malachi prophesied with these words about John the Baptist, who straightened the path before the Lord Jesus Christ. Then the Lord came, He came, for whom the Jewish people were looking, the Angel of the covenant, for whom they were waiting.

But the most important prophecy about the Lord Jesus Christ was given by the great prophet Daniel many years before the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ, for this is what this wondrous prophet says: "Seventy weeks have been determined upon thy people, and upon the holy city, for sin to be ended, and to seal up transgressions, and to blot out the iniquities, and to make atonement for iniquities, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal the vision and the prophet, and to anoint the Most Holy. Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince (he even calls Christ by name), there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublesome times. And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself; and the people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end of it shall be with a flood, and till the end of the war desolations are determined" (Daniel 9:24-26).

The prophet says that sixty-seven weeks will pass from the time when the people of Israel will be returned from the captivity of Babylon and will again build the walls of Jerusalem and their temple. He says that from this time until the death of the Lord Jesus Christ there will be seventy weeks. What is the week? A week is seven years, for the ancient Israelites calculated time in weeks, or seven years.

Every seventh year was called a Sabbath year, and in this year all slaves were set free. So, a week is seven years, and seventy weeks are 490 years.

Look how wonderful it is. The Lord Jesus Christ, according to the word of the prophet Daniel, was crucified 490 years after the return of the people of Israel from captivity in Babylon. The prophet Daniel says that after Christ is put to death, the Jerusalem temple will be destroyed. And this is what happened, as you know, 70 years after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The Roman commander Titus, after Jerusalem was conquered by the commander Vespasian, destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem to the ground. All this was predicted by the prophet Daniel 490 years before the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And here are the other words of this amazing prophet: "I saw in the visions of the night, behold, one like the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was brought to him" (Dan.7:13). The Ancient of Days is what God the Father is called. "And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom" (Dan. 7:14). Are these not direct prophecies about the Lord Jesus Christ?

The holy prophet Zechariah said this: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; proclaim aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem; behold, the King is coming to you, righteous, and a Savior; he is meek and riding on an donkey, and a young foal" (Zech.9:9). He prophesied about this King, about our Lord Jesus Christ, Who, as you know, solemnly entered Jerusalem, shortly before His crucifixion, sitting on a donkey. In this prophecy, not only the very fact of the appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ was predicted, but also the fact of His triumphal entry into Jerusalem was predicted with extraordinary accuracy.

Of all the prophets, the greatest prophet is Isaiah; he is called the Old Testament Evangelist, for no one, like him, with such completeness and clarity predicted the most important things concerning the appearance and life of the Lord Jesus Christ and the whole work of Christ. Chapter 53 of the great book of the prophet Isaiah begins with these words: "Who has believed our report? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For He shall grow up before Him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground. He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him. He is despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And we hid, as it were, our faces from Him; He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own

way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth... And men appointed his grave with the wicked, but he was with the rich in his death, because He had done no violence, nor was any deceit in His mouth" (Isa.53:1-7, 9).

Don't you see in these words the true image of the Lord Jesus Christ, Who throughout His human life, from His birth in a manger in Bethlehem, was the simplest, most insignificant-looking person, according to the people around Him, He was the son of unknown people, for His father Joseph the carpenter was falsely considered. There was no external greatness in Him, He was extremely simple, His whole earthly life was very simple. Who could believe this prophecy? The Jews could not believe it, because they were waiting for the Messiah as a great, glorious king who would conquer all nations, who would become a world ruler, who would come in power and strength. They could not believe that He would be humiliated before people, that He would end his life as a villain on the Cross of Golgotha. They thought that He was tortured because He was guilty before God, but He suffered voluntarily, He suffered for us, He nailed our sins to the Cross. He, like a lamb before its shearers, was silent and did not open His mouth.

The same prophet Isaiah spoke about Christ in these words: "Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, My Elect One in whom My soul delights! I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the Gentiles. He will not cry out, nor raise His voice, nor cause His voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench; He will bring forth justice for truth" (Isa. 42:1-3). These words accurately describe the meek and humble image of the Lord Jesus Christ, Who never raised His voice to the unfortunate, perishing, people already ready to perish, sinners, He saved, forgave, just as He forgave that sinner who was captured in adultery and they wanted to stone him. In these words the gentle Lamb rises before you. Further, Isaiah defines the purpose and meaning of the coming of the Lord, the purpose of His life and activity, says that the Lord will come in order "to open the eyes of the blind, to bring prisoners out of the dungeon and those sitting in darkness out from the prison house" (Isaiah 42:7). He will come to lead the blind along a path they do not know, along unknown paths. The human race was blind, it did not know the true path, and when Christ appeared, Who said about Himself: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life", then only the true light shone to the people of Israel, their blind eyes were opened, they saw this light and knew the ways of the Lord.

It is amazing that the prophets not only spoke in general terms about the Lord Jesus Christ, but they also predicted individual events in His life, for example, death on the Cross. Death on the Cross, death for the human race, was predicted by the prophet Zechariah: "And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants

of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and comfort; then they will look on Me whom they pierced. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn" (Zech. 12:10).

The prophet David predicted in his Psalms: "Dogs surrounded Me, a crowd of evil ones surrounded Me; they pierced My hands and My feet. One could count all My bones, but they look and make a spectacle out of Me; they divide My garments among themselves and cast lots for My clothing" (Ps. 21:7-19). All this was predicted by the prophet David 1000 years before the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. And this is what else he predicted: "And they gave me gall for food." Do you know that the Lord Jesus Christ was given gall mixed with vinegar to drink during His crucifixion. And the holy prophet David saw this with his spiritual eyes a thousand years in advance.

The Prophet Isaiah also predicted that the Lord Jesus Christ, numbered among the villains, would be buried not with the robbers, but with a rich man. And you know that He was buried in the garden of Joseph of Arimathea.

Much could be said about what wonderful words we read in the books of the prophets about the Lord Jesus Christ. But this is enough. From what I have read to you now, majestic, grandiose, amazing pictures of the predictions of the prophets about the Lord Jesus Christ rise before you. Should we not honor these great men chosen by God, should we not honor their memory now - before we celebrate the Nativity of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Should we not honor them for the fact that they were subjected to severe persecution, torment, torture and cruel death for these prophecies? For you heard in the apostolic reading how much these great people suffered, how they were expelled and wandered in the mountains, how the greatest prophet Isaiah was sawn apart with a wooden saw, how almost all the holy prophets were killed and severely persecuted. Should we not honor our forefathers, who were the greatest righteous people? Should we not honor our forefather Abraham, who showed such amazing obedience to the will of God: at the first word of the Lord, he left his father, his homeland and went to God knows where, to the land of Canaan, as the Lord commanded him. He did not hesitate to sacrifice his only son Isaac, but was stopped by an Angel!

Should we not honor Joseph, the great-grandson of Abraham, in whom Saint Ephraim the Syrian finds many traits that make him similar to the Lord Jesus Christ Himself?

Should we not honor the greatest prophet Moses, with whom God Himself spoke; who received from God the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament? Should we not honor the one who in Holy Scripture is called the meekest of all people?

Should we not honor all those who led all humanity to open our hearts and minds to the great preaching of Christ? Let us honor their memory not only in words, not only with the sermon that you hear from me, not only with the divine service that we now perform in their memory. Let us honor their memory by opening our hearts to the Coming Lord Jesus Christ. – St. Luke, bishop of Simferopol (*Trans. John Sanidopoulos*)

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*Anastasia had as medicine great faith; with all this medicine she was bound and burned. * Anastasia was violently burned in the fire on the twenty-second.*

This glorious heroine of the Christian Faith was born in Rome into a wealthy senatorial family of a pagan father and a Christian mother. From her early youth, she clung in love to the Lord Jesus, guided in the teaching of Christ by a devout teacher, Chrysogonus.

Anastasia was forced by her father to enter into marriage with a pagan landowner, Publius. Excusing herself on the basis of a female illness, she in no way wished to enter into physical relations with him. For this, her husband tortured her harshly by confinement and starvation. He inflicted even more tortures upon her when he learned of her secret visits to the prisons of the Christian martyrs: bringing them provisions, ministering to them, bathing their wounds and loosening their bonds. But by God's providence she was freed from her wicked husband. Publius was sent to Persia by the emperor, and while sailing on the sea he was drowned. St. Anastasia then began to minister freely to the tortured Christian martyrs and to comfort the poor, giving them alms from her great inheritance.

At one time the Emperor Diocletian was in the town of Aquileia and ordered that Chrysogonus, the confessor of Christ, be brought to him. St. Anastasia accompanied him on the way. Holy Chrysogonus was beheaded by order of the emperor, and then three sisters - Agape, Chionia and Irene - also suffered (April 16): the first two were cast into fire and the third was shot through with arrows. St. Anastasia took their bodies, wrapped them in white linen, anointed them with many aromatic spices, and honorably buried them. St. Zoilus of Córdoba (also commemorated today), was martyred by having his kidneys removed through his back for retrieving the body of St. Chrysogonus for burial.

Following this, Anastasia went to Macedonia, where she helped the sufferers for Christ. There she became well known as a Christian, for which she was seized and brought before various judges for interrogation and torture. Desiring to die for her beloved Christ, Anastasia constantly longed for Him in her heart. A certain chief of the pagan priests, Ulpianus, lustfully tried to touch St. Anastasia's body, but he was suddenly blinded and breathed his last.

Condemned to death by starvation, St. Anastasia lingered in prison for thirty days without food, nourishing herself only on tears and prayer. Then she was placed in a boat with several other Christians to be drowned, but God delivered her even from this death. She was finally tied by the feet and hands to four wheels over a fire, and she gave up her holy soul to God. She suffered and took up her habitation in the Kingdom of Christ in the year 304 [or 290].

A Reflection From Her Life

The merciful God often sends comfort to those pleasing to Him on earth from the other world through his saints. St. Theodota suffered for Christ before St. Anastasia. Anastasia was then cast into a confined and dark prison to die of hunger, according to the judgment of the torturers. During the thirty days of her imprisonment, St. Theodota appeared to Anastasia every night from the other world and strengthened her in her suffering.

Anastasia spoke of many things with St. Theodota and asked numerous questions. One night she asked her how she was able to come to her after her death. Theodota replied that the souls of the martyrs are given special grace from God, so that after departing this world they may return to speak to whomever they desire for the imparting of instruction and comfort.

When thirty days had passed, the torturer brought St. Anastasia out of prison and was amazed to see her still alive. He then condemned her, along with several others, to be drowned in the sea. The Christians were put into a small boat by the soldiers, who set sail in another. When the Christians were brought out into the deep, the soldiers upset the boat, so that the water would enter and drown the condemned. Then a miraculous vision took place: St. Theodota appeared on the water and guided the boat to shore. Thus, all who were condemned to death were saved with Anastasia. Seeing this miracle of God, one hundred and twenty pagans immediately believed in Christ and were baptized. (*adapted from The Prologue of Ohrid by St. Nikolai Velimirovich*)

Today's Epistle Lesson – St. Paul's Letter to the Hebrews 11:9-10,17-23,32-40 EOB

Brethren, by faith, Abraham lived as an alien in the land of the promise, as in a land that was not his own, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob who were heirs with him of the same promise. Indeed, he looked for the city which has foundations and whose architect and builder is God. By faith, Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac in sacrifice. Yes, he who had joyfully received the promises was now offering up his uniquely loved son, the very one of whom it was said, "In Isaac will your seed be called." Abraham concluded that God was even able to raise up the dead and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from the dead. By faith, Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding future events. By

faith, Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each one of Joseph's sons and bowed down, leaning on the top of his staff. By faith, Joseph, when his end was near, made mention of the exodus of the children of Israel and gave instructions concerning his bones. By faith, Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents because they saw that he was a beautiful child and they were not afraid of the king's commandment. 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, I 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.

Today's Gospel Lesson – Saint Matthew 1:1-25 EOB

The book of the origins of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham became the father of Isaac. Isaac became the father of Jacob. Jacob became the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah became the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar. Perez became the father of Hezron. Hezron became the father of Ram. Ram became the father of Amminadab. Amminadab became the father of Nahshon. Nahshon became the father of Salmon. Salmon became the father of Boaz by Rahab. Boaz became the father of Obed by Ruth. Obed became the father of Jesse. Jesse became the father of King David. David became the father of Solomon by her who had been the wife of Uriah. Solomon became the father of Rehoboam. Rehoboam became the father of Abijah. Abijah became the father of Asa. Asa became the father of Jehoshaphat. Jehoshaphat became the father of Joram. Joram became the father of Uzziah. Uzziah became the father of Jotham. Jotham became the father of Ahaz. Ahaz became the father of Hezekiah. Hezekiah became the father of Manasseh. Manasseh became the father of Amon. Amon became the father of Josiah. Josiah became the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the exile to Babylon. After the exile to Babylon, Jechoniah became the father of Shealtiel. Shealtiel became the father of Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel became the father of Abiud. Abiud became the father of Eliakim.

Eliakim became the father of Azor. Azor became the father of Sadoc. Sadoc became the father of Achim. Achim became the father of Eliud. Eliud became the father of Eleazar. Eleazar became the father of Matthan. Matthan became the father of Jacob. Jacob became the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus who is called Christ. And so, all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; from David to the exile to Babylon fourteen generations; and from the exile to Babylon until the Christ, fourteen generations. Now, the birth of Jesus Christ happened like this: after his mother, Mary, was promised in marriage to Joseph but before they came together, she was found pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her betrothed, who was a righteous man did not want to make her a public spectacle and so intended to put her away quietly. But as he was thinking about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife home, for what is conceived in her is by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son and you shall give him the name Jesus because he will be the one to save his people from their sins.” Now, all this happened so that what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled: Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bring forth a son. They shall call his name Emmanuel; which means, ‘with us [is] God.’ Joseph arose from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him: he took his wife to [live with] him, and had no relations with her before she had brought forth her firstborn son; and he named him Jesus.

A Word From the Holy Fathers

Prooimion I – You have not worshiped an image made with hands but have taken as armor the living God; thrice-blessed ones, you have been glorified in the arena of fire. Standing upright in the midst of the intolerable fire, you called upon God: “Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.”

Prooimion II – O three holy youths, in serving the Three in One you put to shame the will of the king and his inhuman command, and you left for us a model when you became defenders of the faith. Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.”

Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will. Stretch out Your hand, put to test long ago by the Egyptians when they made war and by the Hebrews when they were attacked. Do not desert us; indeed, Death thirsts for us and would swallow us, and Satan hates us; but draw near to us and spare our spirits, as You once appeared to the youths in Babylon who praised You unceasingly and, when they were cast into the furnace

by You, cried out to You from it, “Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.”

When in Babylon an image had been made, and everyone unwillingly worshiped the lifeless thing as though it were alive, then, as the Scripture tells, three youths, having received in their hearts divine guidance, did not leave the straight path, for they considered the madness of many as a path that leads astray; and so the steadfast young men did not follow it, but, always advancing on the straight road toward the truth, they mocked the trickery of the Persians – or, rather, the sainted young men mourned and lamented, for a righteous man does not rejoice over the destruction of another, but with groans prays, “Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.”

They offered the Master a hymn of supplication for all and from all, as a perfume blended of three essences: “O Benefactor in every way, and blameless in all respects, do not be provoked by this sewer of idolatry when You behold Your earth full of pagan sacrifices and giving off an evil smell of transgressions everywhere; for we are like incense in the midst of slime; if it is Your will, breathe on us, Your servants, O Savior, and on Your true friend Daniel, who gives off a pleasing odor and whom You love, for he cries out to You, “Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.”

That is what the three youths cried out when they saw the impiety that the impious one had committed. What was this impiety and who had decreed it? Let us go to the Bible and learn about it. It says that Nebuchadnezzar first made an image of gold and then had it erected. It remained standing; but he who had been upright fell. He who raised up evil was himself broken to pieces. He was not satisfied with his own fall, but he dragged with him the multitude of people. For them the three holy youths sang hymns and cried out, “Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.”

While the abomination was being lifted high in the air, down below matters were in turmoil, disturbed by the impiety, for it was indeed lawless to worship a lifeless object, and honoring it as a god made all creation tremble; but when all of Babylon was thrown into confusion, the three-storied structure of the children remained irrefragable, for its foundations were well laid upon a rock, and though the crowds were pushing, it was not cast down; for there were many, the Scripture says, who mocked the holy youths, but it was in vain, for they were overcome by these youths who cried out, “Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.”

The Chaldeans were quite irritated and impatient when they saw the Hebrews ignoring what was decreed; so they went to the one who was ruling at that time and

accused the saints, saying in anger, “O Nebuchadnezzar, lord of earth and sea and of all who together tremble before you, three lads mock you. The gods whom you worship they utterly despise; and the image of gold that you had erected, the symbol of power of your right hand, they disparage and they await its ruin as they pray daily, “Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.”

When the king learned this, he was angered, and he commanded his chief officers to bring the youths to him. As soon as the command was given, action followed close on its heels, and they brought the lambs to the supremely fierce wolf. While some hurried them along and others pushed them, the virtuous youths could be seen as swifter than those who drove them, for they were quick in every way due to their piety and always zealous toward God. On Him they cast the glance of their spirits, constantly yearning for His gifts and imploring Him, “Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.”

The youths, then, stood in the presence of the wily one, sturdy in their resolution like a three-sided tower; and so, when they saw them, those who made war against them undeservedly shot at them words like sharpened darts, saying to the tyrant, “You see these fellows before you; know from their very appearance what their purpose is; these are the very ones who are overturning all Babylon and your decrees; they are the ones who are eager to sow seed of a new worship throughout all the land of Persia, in order that all will cry, 'Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.'”

“Now see what is to be done, and consider what must be accomplished, for your enemies are here with you and they are making war on you; they eat the bread from your table, and they raise their heels against you, who feed them. If you take it lightly, you will be brought to ruin and destruction – you and your kingdom. Here is a matter not without danger. Troubles from the outside are easily remedied, but a plague within remains a plague. Cut them away like a hardened callus lest they bring infection on many people because of what they sing: 'Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.'”

When they said this, they inflamed the king, and like a fire in brambles his wrath was kindled so that, roaring suddenly like a wild beast, he cried out to the saints, “Hear me, wretched fellows; if you really are talking about daring such things, in vain do you hope to live, in vain do you have faith in existing, for there has been no man, and there will be no man who has strength to destroy what is mine, nor again is there anyone who can have released from my hands one who has fallen

into them – not even the One to whom you cry out, 'Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.'”

“Then, since I suspect and consider everything that has happened until now as dream and idle fancy, I should like to question you about the future. Show me, then, young men, that the words of those who just now accused you are babbling nonsense. When the trumpet and the musical instruments are heard, fall down and worship the image that I have set up. Do honor to its power, as you should, along with all of the principal people of the country. Do not give me cause for having you destroyed; do not be given over to the fire to be burned and there cry out, 'Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.'”

When they heard these words, the young people laughed at the great vanity of the king. However, lest he consider himself to be very wise, the wise youths raised their eyes to heaven and said, “O Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, we have no need to talk this over with our accusers, for no one answers you if you say foolish things – for thus it is written in the Scripture, 'Do not give a reply to a fool that is of similar kind.' Therefore, we have chosen to keep silent, and we pray in silence: 'Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.'”

“And so, do not hope to hear anything about this, for it is our aim not to consider you worthy of a word; for what do we have to say to a madman who stupidly cried out, 'Adore my image'? And, what is worse, who threatens to punish anyone who does not obey him and kneel before a lifeless image? There is no need of words, but of deeds, of powers. It is the time not for speeches but for action. You have prepared the flame and lighted the furnace; now you will see that we are not afraid of it, but sing out in faith, 'Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.'”

“We have a great love for the God of the Hebrews, warmer than your fire, more consuming than your furnace; for you probably think, since you are without God and utterly senseless, that, deprived of our native land, we are bereft of hope; but you will not laugh at us as though we were stupid (for we do not rely on false hopes); for we have the God whom we possess, carrying Him with us everywhere. We behold our Creator face to face, and on every occasion we worship Him; for He is not like the image that you set up, but He is above all creation, ceaselessly praised in song. Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.”

When he heard this, the wretched and depraved man, like red-hot iron emitting flaming sparks, yelling, frothing at the mouth, breathing hard, said to the

attendants, “Heat up the furnace seven times what it was before. With naphtha, pitch, and plenty of twigs, increase that fire until it equals my anger; for I am boiling with anger and highly inflamed because they scorned me; perhaps I shall be consumed with rage before the youths are with fire when I see those whom I had pitied shaming me, crying out, 'Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.'”

With naphtha, tow, vine branches and sulfur and many kinds of material they kept up the furnace and increased its heat to the point that by its mere name it could terrify, frighten, and strike dead with fear those who heard of it. To all it was a source of fear, but to the holy youths it was a cause for laughter, and the boasted image was an object of scorn. The flame mounted up on high for about forty-nine cubits, but when all others trembled, the youths were dauntless; for, holding fast their strength and will power, with love of God they sang a psalm: “Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.”

When the furnace of the Chaldeans was burning brightly, and when the anger of the king burned even hotter, then certain of the chiefs approached the youths, ostensibly to advise them, but actually to lay a snare for them, saying, “Splendid, brilliant, and fine men, who planted an idea like this in your minds? You were friends a while ago; how is it that you are shown to be enemies? Initiates, why are you traitors? How is it that you, strong champions of the king, are eager to destroy him through saying, 'Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.'?”

“What insult from the king's subjects have you received that suddenly caused you to turn against all people? This thing you contemplate is truly the ruin of all – of our tribe and race and even of the king himself. Do not, at this point, let fly your weapons; spare your youth, and have pity on yourselves. It is not possible to buy life after death, for there is no one to sell it. The fire of the Chaldeans does not fear nor shrink back from the worship of the Hebrews that you mention, nor from your psalm: 'Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.'”

When they had spoken in this way to the young men, the chiefs thought that they had entirely accomplished what they wished; but the strong youths, as though they were being tested, seeing the error of these men cried out still more strongly, “What is this, men?” they said. “Do you think that by words or threats you can bend our firm purpose? You do not destroy the force that our faith strengthened. This furnace is not [of concern to us]. It is God above who is able to deliver us; and if He does not wish us to be saved, we shall die singing our psalm, 'Hasten,

Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.”

“There is no blame, then, in our dying thus for an immortal God, who indeed gives immortality to mortals; for Nebuchadnezzar we have often been in danger of being hard pressed and even killed; how much more [would we undergo] for our God! Why, then, O Chaldeans, and why, king of these people, do you stop us? It will not be as you desire.” As he heard this, the king was uncontrollably angry, and storming with fury he cried out, “Bind them, and give them over to the furnace so that they become fuel for the furnace's fire and, reduced to ashes, they will not cry out, 'Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.'”

The men appointed for this duty seized the youths, bound their hands and feet, and let them fall into the furnace. It received their three-branched root; but it did not burn them, fearing the One who planted them. In fact, the flame changed into a divine breath of dew, and thus it refreshed the holy branches; and it was strange to see, for the fire had forgotten its own nature and became a spring, refreshing rather than burning those whom it received and guarding them as a three-branched vine in order that it might bear fruit, as they called, “Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.”

The power of the furnace was instantly destroyed, for an angel suddenly descended from Heaven, moved into the middle of the furnace, completely appeased the fire and made it into a paradise for the holy youths. They walked on the coals as though they were roses, and the luxuriated in the sparks as though they were flowers. The place that was a crematorium became an oratory; it seemed like a rose-strewn inner chamber. The furnace, which breathed death to those near and far, did not disturb the life of those in its midst, for it feared what the sang: “Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.”

The angel descended from Heaven to join with those near Azariah and assembled the group to sing the psalm, saying, “Holy youths, hear my words: I am about to do what has been ordered; do what you were taught as I restrain the fire. Hone your voices as I weaken the blazing fire; making your singing precise. Fear not, the fire will not harm you; for it will be strong against your enemies. I have given orders that it fast as you do and that it greedily devour the greedy ones who do not sing with you, 'Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.'”

“As you put your whole heart into the singing of hymns, compose a melody for the Creator of hearts. Win all creation to the praise of the Creator, and all the works of

the Lord will bless the Lord; for the fire becomes a spring of water and the furnace is refreshed with dew for those who believe in Him and flee sin. All things serve those who serve the Lord as their Creator and God. Elijah rules over those in Heaven and on earth because as he stood in the midst of the godless he prayed to God, 'Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.'

Forming a heavenly chorus in the midst of the furnace, the children made the boundaries of the furnace a celestial church as they sang with the angel a psalm to the Creator of angels, imitating all the liturgy of the immortals. Then, when they were quite filled with the Holy Spirit from the service, they saw another thing that was more marvelous: He whom they had just beheld as human instantly changed in appearance and appeared now as divine, now as a man; at times He commanded, and at times He sang the psalm with them, "Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will."

And so, struck with amazement, their hearts ecstatic, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego said to one another, "What is this? It is not an angel there, but the God of angels. He appears in the form of an angel, who is going to come into the world to extinguish the hellish fire of idols, as He does now the furnace. He has just appeared to us, and He has shown us the image of things to come. Just as He has now freshly bedewed the furnace, as rain on the Virgin, He besprinkles praise those who sing, 'Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.'"

"A hymn to the Merciful one, praise to the Lover of man, since He has deemed us worthy of His future grace. Come, all creation; let us entreat the One who governs creation and conserves nature, and let us cry out to Him, 'You are in us and on high and everywhere present; You are ineffable and yet can be addressed; You contain space and yet cannot be contained; You are borne on the wings of the winds; You do not reveal Your footsteps to mortals; You control the foundation of sky, earth and sea; You control the universe according to Your will; accept our prayers: Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.'"

While they were singing and praying in this way, the king heard them as he came to the furnace. He came at daybreak, as the Scripture teaches, when he hoped to find the ashes of those whom he had given over to the furnace; but his expectation was all in vain, and his hope was suddenly dissipated like smoke, for when the wretched man looked down into the furnace, he saw an awesome and marvelous sight: the fire was chained, and those whom he had had bound were released,

singing Hallelujah, dancing, frolicking, and singing, “Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.”

He was completely altered and his mind was confused. Not knowing what to do, he called to his satraps, “We threw three men in there, and now I see four, and the aspect of the fourth troubles my heart, for I do not know to what I can compare such a being. Am I to say that he is mortal? No; he is a son of God.” The fire was worsted justly by Him, for the flame could not resist the fiery being. The furnace was quenched in befitting manner, for it was unable to sustain the brilliance of the one whose glance was like lightning, who sang along with the youths, “Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.”

“In spite of myself, then, I revere the God of the Hebrews, and I command all the people in my land to join in praising Him. Come, then, holy youths, come forth from the furnace, for I am convinced that your God is in truth God.” These things happened in Babylon as the Scripture says, at a time when those who had provoked God's anger were in captivity. Therefore, my brothers, see to it that you do not grieve the Master and be given over to the enemy; for we make Him sad if we deny Him, and if we do not hasten to His temples, and if we do not sing to Him everywhere, “Hasten, Merciful One; in compassion come quickly to our aid, since You are able to do whatever You will.”

– St. Romanos the Melodist, *Kontakion O.46 On the Three Youths*

Martyr Flavian, Former Prefect of Rome

In the year 363, Emperor Julian the Apostate made Apronianus the Prefect of Rome, replacing Flavian. Flavian, was discovered to be a Christian, so he was removed from his office, branded on the forehead as a slave and exiled to the village of Acquapendente in Tuscany of Italy. There Flavian was tortured and died of his wounds while in prayer.

Flavian was married to a woman named Dafrosa, and he had two daughters named Bibiana and Demetria. Dafrosa was sent to the house of a certain Faustus, who desired to have her in marriage, but she refused to marry him, and instead converted him to faith in Christ. After his baptism he was executed and his body was thrown to the dogs to be devoured; but Dafrosa saved his body and secretly buried it at night. Then, in a dream, her husband Flavian appeared to her, and called her to join him in heaven. After five days, whilst engaged in prayer, she departed for the heavenly mansions. However, another account says Saint Dafrosa, a few days after the exile of her husband, was taken outside the city of Rome and beheaded.

Meanwhile, Bibiana and Demetria were stripped of their possessions and left to suffer in poverty. However, they remained in their house, spending their time in fasting and prayer. Apronianus, seeing that hunger and want had no effect upon them, summoned them. Demetria, after confessing her faith, fell dead at the feet of the tyrant. Bibiana was reserved for greater sufferings. She was placed in the hands of a wicked woman called Rufina, who in vain endeavored to seduce her to reject Christ. She used blows as well as persuasion, but the Christian virgin remained faithful. Enraged at the constancy of this saintly virgin, Apronianus ordered her to be tied to a pillar and beaten with scourges, laden with lead plummets, until she died. The Saint endured the torments with joy, and died under the blows inflicted by the hands of the executioner. Her body was then put in the open air to be torn apart by wild animals, yet none would touch it. After two days she was buried. Pope Simplicius in 465 built a church in her honor over the place of her martyrdom, where her body rested and was venerated by the faithful. The Basilica of Santa Bibiana still exists.

Saint Flavian is celebrated on December 22, Saint Daforsa is celebrated on January 4, Saint Demetria is celebrated on June 21, and Saint Bibiana is celebrated on December 2.. *(from johnsanidopoulos.com)*

Also Commemorated Today

New Hieromartyr [Lazarus](#) (Lyubimov), bishop in Moscow (1937)

New Hieromartyrs [Demetrius](#) (Kiranov) and [Theodore](#) (Poroykov) priests (1938).

Martyr [Flavian](#), former prefect of Rome (363)

Martyr [Zoilus](#) of Cordoba (c. 304)

[St. Ernan of Donegal](#) (c. 640)(Ireland)

[St. Ernan of Hinba](#) (6th c.)(Ireland)

[St. Amaethlu of Llanfaethlu](#)

[St. Athernaise of Fife](#)

St. [Amaswinthus](#), abbot of Silva de Málaga (982)

Martyrs [Demetrius](#), Honoratus, and Florus of Ostia (unk)

St. [Hunger](#), bishop of Utrecht (866)

30 [Martyrs](#) of Rome (c. 303)

Nativity Vigil on Christmas Eve

On Tuesday morning at 8:00, Royal Hours will be celebrated. On Tuesday evening at 6:00, a Nativity Vigil followed by the Liturgy will be held at St. Thomas. Traditionally, Christmas Eve is a day of strict fasting where nothing is eaten until the first star appears. Please observe at least a 3-hour fast if you wish to receive Communion at Liturgy.

Kontakion of the Nativity of Christ, in Tone 3:

The Virgin today gives birth to the highest Being, * and the earth provides the inaccessible One with a cave. * The angels with the shepherds glorify Him; * the Wise Men journey with the star, * because for our sake is born a little Child, the Pre-Eternal God.

Social Team for December 29

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 & Ia, Mother Virginia Marie & the Carmelite Nuns of Port Tobacco, the suffering people of Ukraine & the Holy Land, and those in need of our prayers. (Please advise Fr. Joseph of changes.)