

SOBORNOST

**St. Thomas the Apostle
Orthodox Church**

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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 ~

January 5, 2025 – Sunday Before/Eve of Theophany

Hieromartyr Theopemptus and Martyr Theonas

"Today is the day of lights and illumination..." The Feast of Theophany (or Epiphany; or Feast of Lights), which essentially closes the holy Twelve Days of Christmas (and is followed by the honorary celebration of the Synaxis of the Forerunner, because St. John the Forerunner first met Christ at His Baptism and played a significant role in it), is one of the biggest feasts of our Orthodox people, with rich folklore, which of course is dominated by the sanctification of the waters, the diving for the Cross in seas and lakes and rivers, the blessing by priests of homes and places of work and fields and even automobiles and agricultural machinery, among other things.

An old Greek folk tradition states that on the Feast of Theophany the Kalikantzaroi depart. Kalikantzaroi are said to be small demon-like creatures who reside in the bowels of the earth and escape after Christmas, and during the Twelve Days of Christmas they pester and bother people, looking for sausages and sweets. They would only depart after the waters have been sanctified by the priest. Of course,



this is all part of Greek folklore and mythology, though it is based on the truth that every demonic presence is rid of with the sanctification of the waters.

The most important custom for January 5th, the eve of Theophany, is that it is a day of preparation and strict fasting. In fact, it is such a strict fasting day that no oil is permitted, together with no meat, fish, eggs or milk. Basically it is a day to eat vegetables and legumes with no oil.

This day of strict fasting is partly our preparation to drink the Holy Water from the Service of the Great Blessing of the Waters on January 6th, the Feast of Lights. Although we do not fast to drink the Holy Water necessarily, but to prepare to properly celebrate the Theophany and receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the Theophany Divine Liturgy. This is because fasting between Christmas and Theophany is prohibited by the Church, therefore the Church set aside only one day to especially help Christians prayerfully focus on the significance of this Great Feast of the Church.

In Crete, where this tradition is still alive by many, they prepared on Theophany Eve a Lenten meal with no oil called "fotokolyva" or "papoudia". It was boiled wheat (kolyva) with various beans like fava and lentils, generally any type of bean found in the house, that was served for the eve of the Feast of Lights (Foton). They boiled and ate it with salt, accompanied by bread, onion, olives, etc. (when we fast we can eat olives for nourishment but not olive oil). They would also give the fotokolyva to the birds, such as the chickens and pigeons, together with the animals of the house like the cattle, because the cattle plowed the fields to sow the wheat and legumes. It was considered necessary for them to taste the fruit of their labors.

Clarifications and Guidelines for the Observation of Theophany

By Metropolitan Nikodemos of Patras

1. Is there a difference between the Service of the Great Blessing of the Waters that is performed on the eve of Theophany on January 5th and that which is performed on the day of the feast on January 6th?

The Service of the Great Blessing of the Waters that is performed on the eve of Theophany and on the day of Theophany is exactly the same.

Some believe incorrectly that supposedly on the eve of Theophany the Service of the "Small" Blessing of the Waters is performed while the "Great" Blessing is performed on the day of the feast. In both cases, however, it is the Service of the Great Blessing of the Waters that is performed. The Service of the Small Blessing of the Waters is performed on the first day of every month, as well as in various circumstances requested by Christians (for the blessing of homes, shops, buildings, establishments, etc.). The Service of the Great Blessing of the Waters is performed only twice a year (the 5th and 6th of January) in churches.

2. Where is the Holy Water from the Great Blessing kept and why?

The Holy Water from the Great Blessing is kept in the church throughout the year. It is not kept without reason. And the reason is none other than for the faithful to "partake" of it under certain circumstances and conditions. A common case is for those who are undergoing repentance and are under a penance from their spiritual father which prevents their participation in the Divine Eucharist, for a certain period of time, and Holy Water from the Great Blessing is traditionally given to them as a blessing and consolation. Nothing impedes a person from receiving Holy Water, as long as they are in a state of "repentance and confession".

It must be understood that the Holy Water from the Great Blessing does not substitute or replace the Divine Communion of the Body and Blood of Christ, but brings benefit to those who prepare through repentance, to rid themselves of the obstacles of sin and be found worthy for Communion all the sooner.

3. Can the Holy Water from the Great Blessing that is kept in the home be consumed in a time of illness or to prevent the evil eye or any satanic energy?

The answer is affirmative. The sacred text of the Service of the Great Blessing refers to this, saying: "That this water may become a gift for sanctification, redemption for sins, for the healing of soul and body, and for every meet benefit,... That it may drive away all the cunning devices of our enemies, visible and invisible,... For those who drink therefrom and take home for the sanctification of their homes,... That it may be for those who drink and receive there from in faith a purification for their souls and bodies, let us pray to the Lord."

See also the Prayer to be Free of the Evil Eye: "Remove, drive away and banish every diabolical activity, every satanic attack and every plot, evil curiosity and injury, and the evil eye of mischievous and wicked men from your servant."

Without a doubt, the believer should avoid any outlets of manipulation, such as "spells", sorcery and other wiles of the devil, but rather as a conscious member of the Church they should resort to the valid "sanctifications" of the Church, such as the Service of the Great Blessing of the Waters as well as the so-called "Small" Blessing of the Waters, and thus they will become a partaker of divine grace through this medium of sanctification.

This assumes, of course, that in homes where the Holy Water of the Great Blessing is kept, the oil lamp will also be burning and will burn at all times, and there will be reverence from the members of the family, from the spouses and the children, and every cause will be avoided that will repel divine grace (such as blasphemies and other shameful things).

4. What is the relationship between fasting and the Holy Water from the Great Blessing?

The historical origins of the Great Blessing is as follows: In the ancient Church on the eve of Theophany - as well as on the eve of Pascha and Pentecost - the baptism of Catechumens took place, namely those who were becoming new Christians. The Sanctification of the Waters for the baptismal ritual was performed at midnight; this introduced the habit, according to St. John Chrysostom, of Christians taking this sanctified water and to either drink it or take it home with them for a blessing and to preserve it throughout the year. "This is the day on which Christ was baptized and through His baptism sanctified the element of water. Wherefore, at midnight on this feast, all (faithful) draw of the (holy) water and store it in their homes, because on this day the water is consecrated" (Homily on the Baptism of Christ).

Later, however, at a time of liturgical decline, the Service of Sanctification was isolated from that of Baptism, although it retained many of its elements. The habit remained for the faithful to take the sanctified water "for the sanctification of their homes", as it says in the sanctification prayer of the Great Blessing Service.

Early on the habit of keeping a fast remained before the feast of Theophany, for two reasons:

First, the two Great Feasts of Christmas and Theophany in the ancient Church were united together, and they were called Theophany or Epiphany, which was celebrated on January 6th (this is still maintained in the Armenian Church today), but St. John Chrysostom separated these two feasts in the fourth century and appointed the Nativity of Christ to be celebrated on December 25th and the Baptism of Christ with the Manifestation of the Holy Trinity on January 6th. Every Despotic Feast is preceded by a fast for the psychosomatic purification of the faithful. Let us remember that fasting has an element of mourning for sins. So when the two feasts were separated, the fast which preceded them moved for that of Christmas, and this is why the Church appointed only one day of fasting on the eve of Theophany as a preparation for the feast, and not more days because the holy Twelve Days of Christmas are a time of festivity.

Secondly, it was also an ancient habit for those who were about to be baptized to fast, and together with them their sponsors, relatives and other Christians who voluntarily complied to fast "on behalf of the baptismal candidate". Therefore it was not difficult in the minds of the Christians to link the drinking of Holy Water and fasting without any causal relationship between them.

Therefore, to transfer the issue to nowadays, we can say that those who frequently partake of the Holy Mysteries and keep the fasts of our Church, such as that of

January 5th, they are ready to drink from the Holy Water of the Great Blessing on January 5th and 6th. Otherwise, there should at least be a fast, as prescribed by one's spiritual father.

Lastly, those who occasionally drink from the Holy Water of the Great Blessing that they keep in their homes, in times of sickness and danger, etc., with or without fasting, let them not abstain from spiritual fasting, that we may "purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1).

Synaxarion of the Holy Martyrs Theopemptos and Theonas

*Theopemptos accomplished just as he said. Having accomplished the contest, your head was cut off with the sword. ** In the depth of the pit, Martyr Theonas, you surrendered as you cried out the Psalter. On the fifth Theopemptos departed this life by the sword.*

The Holy Martyr Theopemptos was a Bishop during the reign of Emperor Diocletian (284-305). When this tyrant initiated a persecution against the Christians in the year 290, this Saint was first to confess Christ, and received the crown of martyrdom. He was arrested and brought before Diocletian, and rebuked him for his errors. Wherefore he was placed in a blazing furnace and came out safe and sound. Then one of his eyes was torn out, and after they made him drink a deadly poison concocted by the magician Theonas. Being preserved unharmed by the grace of God, the magician Theonas was moved to believe in Christ. Being tortured in other similar ways, he was beheaded, and so received the crown of martyrdom. Theonas was buried alive in a deep pit dug for this purpose, and in this way delivered his soul into the hands of God. (*from johnsanidopoulos.com*)

Today's Epistle Lesson – St. Paul's Second Letter to Timothy 4:5-8 EOB

My son Timothy, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of one who proclaims the Good News and fulfill your ministry. As for me, I am already being offered in sacrifice, and the time of my release has come. I have fought the good fight! I have finished the course! I have kept the faith! 8 From now on, the crown of righteousness is reserved for me, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved His appearing.

Today's Gospel Lesson – Mark 1:1-8 EOB

The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophets: "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you. The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Make ready the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight!'"

John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. All the country of Judea and all those from Jerusalem went out to him. They were baptized by John in the Jordan river, confessing their sins. John was clothed with camel's hair, leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He preached, saying, "He who comes after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to kneel down and untie the strap of his sandals. I baptized you in water, but he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit."

A Word From the Holy Fathers

[Traditionally appointed to be read on the Eve of Theophany – Ed.]

The wise Solomon, distinguishing the times for the various affairs of life, and assigning to each one what is suitable, said: "There is a time for all, and a time for every thing; a time to be born, and a time to die." But, making a slight change in the sentence of the wise man, in proclaiming to you the saving Gospel, I say to you; there is a time to die, and a time to be born. What reason is there for this inversion? Solomon treating of birth, and dissolution, in conformity with the nature of bodies, spoke of birth before death, (for it is impossible to die without being born): but as I am about to treat of spiritual regeneration, I place death before life: since it is by dying to the flesh, that we come to be born in the Spirit; as even the Lord says: "I will kill, and I will make to live." Let us then die, that we may live. Let us mortify the carnal feeling, which cannot be subject to the law of God, that a strong spiritual affection may arise in us, through which we may enjoy life and peace. Let us be buried together with Christ, who died for us, that we may arise again with Him, who proffers new life to us. For other matters there is a time peculiarly appropriate: a time for sleeping and for waking, a time for war and for peace: but the whole period of man's life is the time for baptism. For as the body cannot live unless it breathe : neither can the soul live unless she know the Creator: for ignorance of God. is death to the soul: and he that is not baptized, is not enlightened; and without light neither can the eye perceive sensible objects, nor the soul contemplate God. All time, then, is opportune to receive salvation through baptism—night or day, hour or minute, even the least conceivable space of time. But it is just to regard as more suitable, the time which is more nearly connected with it: and what time is more closely connected with baptism than Easter day, since the day itself is a memorial of the resurrection, and baptism is the powerful means for our resurrection? On resurrection day, then, let us receive the grace by which we rise again. On this account the Church with a loud voice calls from afar her catechumens, that as she already has conceived them, she may at length usher them into life, and weaning them from the milk of catechetical instruction, give them to taste of the solid food of her dogmas. John preached a baptism of penance,

and all Judea went forth to him: the Lord proclaims a baptism whereby we are adopted as children; and which of those who hope in Him, will refuse to obey his call? That baptism was introductory: this is perfective: that separated from sin: this unites with God. The preaching of John was of one man, and he drew all to penance: and you, instructed by the prophets: "Wash yourselves: be clean:"—admonished by the Psalmist: "Come ye to Him, and be enlightened:"—having the joyful proclamation of the Apostles: "Do penance and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost:"—invited by the Lord Himself, who says: "Come to me all you that labor and are burdened, and I will refresh you:" (for all these passages have occurred in to-day's lesson)—you, I say, tarry, and hesitate, and put off. Although instructed in the divine word from your infancy, have you still not yet yielded to truth? always learning, have you not yet attained to knowledge? through life an inquirer, a seeker even to old age, when will you become a Christian? when shall we recognize you as our own? Last year you awaited the present time, and now again you put off to a future season. Take care that your promises extend not beyond the term of your life. You know not what the morrow will bring forth. Do not make promises concerning things not subject to your control. We call you, O man, to life: why do you shun the call? We invite you to partake of blessings: why do you disregard the gift? The kingdom of heaven lies open to you: he that invites you cannot deceive: the path is easy: there is no need of length of time, of expense, of toil: why do you delay? why do you refuse? why do you fear the yoke, as a heifer that never has borne it? It is sweet: it is light: it does not hurt the neck; but it ornaments it: it is not a yoke put on forcibly: it must be cheerfully assumed. Do you perceive that Ephraim is styled a wanton heifer, because, spurning the yoke of the Law, she wanders far away? Bend then your stubborn neck: submit to the yoke of Christ, lest rejecting the yoke, and leading a loose life, you become an easy prey to wild beasts. "O taste and see that the Lord is sweet." How shall I make those who know it not, sensible of the sweetness of honey? "Taste and see." Experience is more convincing than any reasoning. The Jew does not delay circumcision, being mindful of the threat, that "every soul that is not circumcised on the eighth day, shall be destroyed out of her people:" and you delay the circumcision—not that which is made by hands, in the stripping of the flesh, but that which is accomplished in baptism, while you hear the Lord Himself: "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." And in that ceremony pain was endured, and an ulcer was caused: but in this the soul is refreshed with heavenly dew, and the ulcers of the heart are healed. Do you adore Him who died for you? Suffer then yourself to be buried with him by baptism. Unless you be planted together with him in the likeness of his death, how will you become partner in his resurrection?

Israel was baptized in Moses in the cloud, and in the sea, presenting therein types for your instruction, and sensibly exhibiting the truth which was to be shown in the latter days: and you shun baptism, not as typified in the sea, but really perfected: not in the cloud, but in the Spirit: not in Moses, a fellow-servant, but in Christ, our Creator. Had not Israel passed the sea, he would not have escaped Pharaoh; and if you pass not through the water, you will not be delivered from the sad tyranny of the devil. Israel would not have drunk of the spiritual rock, had he not been typically baptized: nor will any give you true drink, unless you are truly baptized. He ate the bread of angels after baptism ; and how will you eat the living bread, unless you receive baptism previously? He entered into the land of promise, on account of his baptism: how can you enter into paradise, if you are not sealed by baptism? Do you not know, that an angel with a flaming sword is placed to guard the way to the tree of life—an awful and burning sword for unbelievers; but easily approached, and shining with mild radiance to believers? For according to the will of the Lord it turns: and its glittering side is presented to the faithful: its burning edge to the unsealed.

Elijah was not terrified at the sight of the chariot of fire, and the fiery steeds approaching him: but eager to ascend on high, he dared to mount the awful seat; and while yet in mortal flesh, he joyfully took the reins, to guide the flaming chariot: while you hesitate, not to mount a fiery vehicle, but to ascend into heaven through water and Spirit. Why not rather run to obey the call? Elijah showed the power of baptism on the altar of holocausts, having consumed the victim, not by fire, but by water: although the nature of fire is most opposed to water. When the water, with mysterious significance, was for the third time poured out on the altar, the fire began, and it blazed up as if fed by oil. "And he said: Fill four buckets with water, and pour it upon the burnt offering, and upon the wood. And again he said: Do the same the second time. And when they had done it the second time, he said: Do the same also the third time: and they did so the third time." The Scripture hereby shows, that through baptism, he that approaches to God, is admitted into his household ; and that a pure and heavenly light, through faith in the Trinity, shines forth in the souls of those who approach Him. If I were distributing the gold of the Church, you would not say to me: "I shall come to-morrow, and to-morrow you will give me some:" but at the present time, you would press for your portion, and unwillingly bear to be put off. Now that the munificent Lord offers you, not colored earth, but purity of soul, you frame excuses, you number over many causes of delay, instead of running to receive the gift. O – strange thing – you may be renovated without being put in the crucible: you may be formed anew, without being broken in pieces: you may be healed without suffering pain: and still, you do not value the favor. If you were the servant of men, and freedom were offered to

slaves, would you not hasten at the appointed time, and engage advocates, and implore the judges, that by every possible means your freedom should be obtained? Yes, you would submit willingly to the blow given for the last time, so that you might thenceforward be free from lashes. Now the divine herald calls you to freedom, slave as you are, not of men, but of sin; that he may free you from bondage, and make you a fellow citizen of the Angels, and even, by grace, an adopted child of God, heir of the blessings of Christ: yet you allege that you have not time to receive these gifts. O – wretched impediments – base and endless occupations! How long, then, must pleasures be sought after? How long must passion be indulged? We surely have lived long enough for the world: let us live henceforth for ourselves. What is equal in value to our soul? What can be compared with the kingdom of heaven? What adviser should be listened to in preference to God? Who is more prudent than the All-wise? Who is more useful than He, who alone is good? Who is nearer to us than our Creator? Eve gained nothing by listening to the suggestions of the serpent, rather than to the command of God. O – senseless words – I have not time to get cured: let me not yet see the light: do not yet present me to the King. Do you not speak plainly to this effect, nay, still more absurdly? If you were loaded with debts to the treasury, and a reduction of the claim were offered to the public creditors, and some one should maliciously attempt to deprive you of the benefit proffered to all, you would be angry with him, and exclaim against him as interfering with your right to a share of the general indulgence. And now that not only the pardon of past debts, but gifts for the time to come are proclaimed, you do yourself an injury which no enemy of yours could inflict, and imagine that you have suitably provided for yourself, and adopted wise measures, by neglecting to accept forgiveness, and continuing to death laden with sins. Yet you know that even he who owed ten thousand talents, would have been entirely forgiven, had he not provoked the severity of his creditor by his inhumanity towards his fellow-servant. We must also take care, that the same happen not to us, if, after obtaining grace, we pardon not our debtors ; which is required of us, that the gift bestowed may be perpetually preserved.

Enter into the recesses of your conscience: refresh your memory. If your sins are numerous, do not despair on account of their multitude: for where sin has abounded, grace will abound more, if you will just accept grace: to him who owes much, much also will be forgiven, that he may love the more. But if your faults are trivial and venial, and not to the death of your soul, why are you anxious about what may happen to you hereafter, while you have hitherto lived without reproach, although you were not as yet instructed in the law of Christ? Consider your soul as now placed in a scale, drawn to one side by the angels, to the other by demons. To which of them will you give the affections of your heart? What shall prevail with

you? the pleasures of the flesh, or the sanctification of the Spirit? present enjoyment, or the desire of future happiness? Shall the angels receive you; or shall those who hold you now, continue to hold you fast? When preparing for battle the generals give a watchword to the soldiers, that they may the more easily call on one another for assistance, and recognize one another, should they be mixed up with others in the conflict. No one can know whether you belong to us, or to our adversaries, if you don't manifest your brotherhood by mystic signs, if the light of the countenance of the Lord is not signed upon you. How can the angel claim you? how can he rescue you from the enemy, unless he recognize the seal? how shall you say: 'I am of God:' if you do not bear the mark? Do you not know that the destroying angel passed by the houses that were marked with blood, while he slew the first born in those that were not marked? A treasure unsealed is easily laid hold of by robbers; a sheep without a mark is carried away with impunity.

Are you young? secure your youth against vice, by the restraint which baptism imposes. Has the vigor of life passed away? Do not neglect the necessary provision for your journey: do not lose your protection: do not consider the eleventh hour, as if it were the first; since even he who is beginning life, ought to have death before his eyes. If a physician should promise you, by certain arts and devices, to change you from an old to a young man, would you not eagerly desire the day to arrive on which you would find your youthful vigor restored? Nevertheless, while baptism promises to restore to her pristine vigor your soul, which your iniquities have brought to decrepitude, and covered with wrinkles and defilements, you despise your benefactor, instead of hastening to receive the proffered boon. Are you without any solicitude to witness the miraculous change which is promised—how one grown old, and wasted away by corrupting passions, can bud forth anew, and blossom, and attain to the true bloom of youth? Baptism is the ransom of captives, the remission of debts, the death of sin, the regeneration of the soul, the robe of light, the seal which cannot be broken, the chariot to heaven, the means to attain the kingdom, the gift of adoption. Do you think that pleasure is preferable to these and such like blessings? I know the cause of your delay, although you cloak it with various pretexts. The things themselves cry out, although you are silent. 'Allow me to use the flesh for shameful enjoyments, to wallow in the mire of pleasures, to dip my hands in blood, to plunder the property of others, to act deceitfully, to perjure, to lie; and then I shall receive baptism, when I shall cease from sin.' If sin is good, persevere in it to the end: if it is hurtful to the sinner, why do you continue in pernicious pursuits? No one that wishes to get rid of bile, should increase it by hurtful and intemperate indulgence: for the body must be cleared of what injures it, and nothing done to increase the power of disease. A ship keeps above water as long as it can bear the weight of its cargo: when overloaded it sinks. You should

dread lest the same happen to you, and that your sins being exceedingly great, you suffer shipwreck, before you reach the hoped-for haven. Does not God see all that is done? Does He not perceive your secret thoughts? or does He co-operate in your iniquities? "You thought unjustly," He says, "that I shall be like to you." When you seek the friendship of a mortal man, you attract him by kind offices, saying and doing such things as you know will please him: but wishing to be united with God, and hoping to be adopted as a son, while you do things hateful to God, and dishonor Him by the transgression of His law, do you imagine to obtain His friendship by the things which are particularly offensive to Him? Take care, lest multiplying evils in the hope of being ransomed, you increase sin, and miss pardon. 'God is not mocked!' Do not trade away grace. Pleasure is the devil's hook, dragging us to ruin: pleasure is the mother of sin: and sin is the center of death. Pleasure is the food of the everlasting worm; for a while its enjoyment delights: but its fruits are more bitter than gall. Delay is equivalent to saying: 'Let sin first reign in me: afterwards the Lord shall reign. I will yield my members as instruments of iniquity to sin: afterwards I shall present them as instruments of justice to God.' Thus also Cain offered up sacrifices, reserving the best things for his own enjoyment, and giving those of an inferior kind to God, the Creator and Benefactor. Because you are strong, you waste your youth in sin. When your limbs are worn out, then you will offer them to God, because you can no longer use them, but must lie by, their vigor being destroyed by inveterate disease. Continence in old age is not strictly continence, but incapacity of indulgence. A dead man is not crowned: no man is just merely because unable to commit wrong. Whilst you have strength, subject sin to reason: for virtue consists in this, to decline from evil and do good. Mere cessation from evil of itself is worthy neither of praise nor of censure. If, on account of advanced age, you cease to do evil, it is the consequence of infirmity. We praise such as are good from choice, and such as necessity withdraws from sin. Moreover, who has marked out for you the limit of life? who has defined for you the length of old age? who is the surety on whom you rely for what is to happen to you? Do you not see infants snatched away, and others in the age of manhood carried off? Life has no fixed boundary. Why do you await that baptism should be for you as a gift brought by a fever? Will you wait until you are unable to utter the saving words, and scarcely to hear them distinctly, your malady having its seat in your head? You will not be able to raise your hands to heaven, or to stand on your feet, or to bend your knee in adoration, or to receive suitable instruction, or to confess accurately, or to enter into covenant with God, or to renounce the enemy; probably not even to follow the sacred minister in the mystic rites; so that the bystanders may doubt whether you perceive the grace, or are unconscious of what is done, and if even you do receive the grace consciously, you have but the talent, without the increase.

Imitate the eunuch. He found an instructor on the road, and he did not spurn instruction; but although he was a rich man, he caused the poor man to mount into his chariot: a grand and splendid courtier placed at his side a private individual, on whom others would look with contempt: and when he had learned the gospel of the kingdom, he embraced the faith with his heart, and did not delay to receive the seal of the Spirit. For when they drew nigh to a stream, 'behold,' he says, 'here is water:' thus showing his great joy: behold what is required: what prevents me from being baptized? Where the will is ready, there is no obstacle: for He that calls us, loves mankind, the minister is at hand, and the grace is abundant. Let the desire be sincere, and every obstacle will vanish. There is only one to hinder us, he who blocks up the path of salvation, but whom by prudence we can overcome. He causes us to tarry: let us rise to the work: he deludes us by vain promises: let us not be ignorant of his devices. For does he not suggest to commit sin to-day, and persuade us to defer justice till the morrow? Wherefore the Lord, to defeat his perverse suggestions, says to us: 'To-day, if you hear my voice.' He says: to-day for me: to-morrow for God. The Lord cries out: 'Today hear my voice.' mark the enemy: he does not dare counsel us utterly to abandon God, (for he knows that this were shocking to Christians,) but by fraudulent stratagems he attempts to effect his purpose. He is cunning in evil doing: he perceives that we live for the present time, and all our actions regard it. Stealing from us, then, artfully to-day, he leaves us to hope for to-morrow. Then when the morrow comes, the wicked distributor of time appears again, claiming the day for himself, and leaving the morrow to the Lord: and thus perpetually, by using the bait of pleasure to secure for himself the present time, and proposing the future to our hopes, he takes us out of life by surprise.

I once witnessed a stratagem of a bird. Her young ones being easy to be taken, she threw herself before them, as a ready prey to the fowlers, and fluttering in view of them, she neither could be caught, nor yet did she leave them without hope of catching her: and having in various ways deluded their expectations, keeping them intent on her, and afforded to her young ones the chance of flight, at length she herself flew away. Fear lest you also be deceived in like manner, since you prefer uncertain hope to the certain opportunity of present good. Come, then, at once, to me: devote yourself entirely to the Lord: give in your name: be enrolled in the list of the church. The soldier's name is enrolled: the champion enters on the combat, after his name has been inscribed on the lists: a naturalized citizen is registered on the city books. By all these titles you are bound to give in your name, as a soldier of Christ, a champion of piety, and one who aspires to citizenship in heaven. Have it inscribed on this book, that it may be inscribed above. Learn, be instructed in the evangelical discipline,—restraint of the eyes, government of the tongue, the subduing of the body, lowliness of mind, purity of heart, annihilation of pride.

When constrained to do any thing, add cheerfully something to what is exacted: when despoiled of your property, do not have recourse to litigation: repay hatred by love: when persecuted, forbear: when insulted, entreat. Be dead to sin: be crucified together with Christ: fix your whole affection on the Lord. But these things are difficult: what good thing is easy? Who ever raised a trophy while asleep: who ever, while indulging in luxury and music, was adorned with the crowns of valor? No one, without running, can gain the prize: brave struggles merit glory: combats win crowns. "Through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of heaven:" but the beatitude of the heavenly kingdom succeeds these tribulations: while the pain and sorrow of hell follow the labors of sin. If any one consider it attentively, he will find that not even the works of the devil are performed by the workers of iniquity without toil. What exertion does continence require? The voluptuous man, on the contrary, is exhausted by indulgence. Does continence diminish our strength in a like degree as detestable and unbridled passion wastes it away? Sleepless nights are, indeed, passed by those who devote themselves to vigils and prayers; but how much more wearisome are the nights of such as are wakeful for iniquity? The fear of detection, and the anxiety for indulgence, utterly take away all rest. If, fleeing the narrow path which leads to salvation, you pursue the broad way of sin, I fear lest continuing on it to the end, you come to an inn suitable to the road.

But you will say: the treasure is difficult to guard. Be vigilant, then, brother: you have aids, if you will: prayer as a night sentinel; fasting a house guard; psalmody a guide of your soul. Take these along with you: they will keep watch with you, to guard your precious treasures. Tell me, which is it better to be rich, and anxiously to guard our wealth, or not to have any thing to preserve? No one, through fear of being despoiled of his property, abandons it altogether. If men in each of their pursuits considered the misfortunes that may ensue, all human enterprise would cease. Agriculture is liable to the failure of the crops: shipwreck may defeat commerce: widowhood may soon follow marriage: orphanage may prevent the education of children. We, however, embark in each undertaking, cherishing the fairest hopes, and committing the realizing of them to God, who regulates all things. But you profess to venerate holiness, while in reality you continue among the reprobate. See, lest you hereafter repent of evil counsels, when your repentance may be of no avail. Let the example of the virgins serve as an admonition. Not having oil in their lamps, when they had to enter with the bridegroom into the nuptial chamber, they perceived that they were without the necessary provision: wherefore the Scripture styled them foolish, because, in going about to purchase, having spent the time in which the oil was wanted, they were, contrary to their expectations, shut out from the wedding. Take care, lest putting off from year to year, from month to month, from day to day, and not taking with you oil to nourish

your lamp, the day at length arrive to which you do not look forward, when it will be impossible to live any longer. There will be distress on all sides, and inconsolable affliction, the physicians having tried every remedy to no purpose, and your friends having lost hope. Thy breathing will be dry and difficult: a violent fever will burn and inflame your interior: you will heave deep sighs, and find no sympathy. You will utter something in low and feeble accents, and no one will hear you: every thing uttered by you will be considered raving. Who will give you baptism then? Who will remind you of it, when you will be plunged in deep lethargy? Thy relatives are disheartened: strangers care not; the friend hesitates, to remind you, fearing to disturb you: or perhaps even the physician deceives you, and you have not lost hope, being deceived by the natural love of life. It is night, and there is no attendant at hand: there is no one to baptize you. Death is impending: the demons seek to carry you off. Who will rescue you? God, whom you have spurned? But He will hear you: forsooth you now do hearken to Him! Will He give you a respite? you have made so good use of the time already given you!

Let no one deceive himself by vain words: for sudden destruction will rush upon you, and a storm of vengeance will overwhelm you. The angel sorrowful will come, and will force and drag away precipitately your soul, bound fast in sin, attached strongly to the things of life, and mourning without power of utterance, the organ of lamentation being closed. O! how you will be ready to tear yourself in pieces! how you will sigh! In vain you will repent for your omissions, in compliance with evil suggestions, when you shall see the joy of the just, at the splendid distribution of divine gifts, and the sorrow of sinners in profound darkness. What will you say, then, in the anguish of your heart? Alas! that I have neglected to cast away this heavy load of sin, when it was so easy to rid myself of it, and that I have drawn down on me this weight of woes! Alas! that I washed not away my stains, but remained defiled by sin! I should have been now with the angels of God! I should have been enjoying the delights of heaven. O! perverse counsels. For the temporary joy of sin, I am tormented for eternity! for the pleasure of the flesh, I am delivered over to fire! The judgment of God is just. I was called; and did not obey: I was instructed; and I did not pay attention: they besought me; and I scoffed at them. Such are the reflections you will make, bewailing your lot, if you be snatched away without baptism. O! man, either fear hell, or aim at the kingdom: do not disregard the call. Do not say: Hold me excused, for this or that reason. There can be no semblance of excuse. I am moved to tears, when I reflect that you prefer shameful actions to the great glory of God: and clinging to sin, you deprive yourself of the promised blessings, so that you may not see the good things of the heavenly Jerusalem. There are myriads of angels, the church of the first born, the thrones of Apostles, the chairs of prophets, the scepters of patriarchs, the

crowns of martyrs, the choirs of just. Conceive the desire to be enrolled with them, being washed, and sanctified by the gift of Christ: to whom be glory and power for endless ages. Amen."

– St. Basil the Great, Holmily 13, *Exhortation to Baptism*

Venerable Mother Syncletica of Alexandria

Syncletike left behind a life of bondage. Called by God she is joined with the servants in heaven.

By St. Athanasius of Alexandria

The blessed Syncletica (or Syncletike), named after the heavenly assembly [synkletos], was from the land of the Macedonians. Her ancestors, having heard of the love of God and the love of Christ of the Alexandrians, went from Macedonia to lay hold of the city of the Macedonian (Alexandria). When they arrived at the place, they found the circumstances to be better than what they had heard said about the place. It was not that a large number of people pleased them, nor did they marvel at the greatness of the buildings; but finding there a single faith with pure love, they regarded this foreign settlement their second home.

And the blessed Syncletike was admired from all sides because of her family; moreover, she was adorned by all the other customary worldly pleasures. And present with her as well was a like-minded sister, and two brothers who were also prepared for the most religious life. One of the brothers, when he was of youthful age, died; the other, having arrived at his twenty-fifth year, was exhorted into marriage by his parents. But when everything was prepared for the desired end, and when the contracts were completed, the young one flew away like a bird from a snare, having exchanged his earthly bride for the perfect and free assembly of the saints.

But she still being in paternal protection, for the first time trained her soul toward love for the divine; and thus she performed no cares of the body, as she carefully observed the impulses of her nature.

For she was exceedingly beautiful physically as to attract to herself from her first youth many suitors. Some were attracted by her abundant wealth, some by the decorum of her parents; but over and above these things they were attracted to the beauty of the girl herself. And certainly her parents gladly urged the young girl toward marriage, urging this so that through her the succession of their line would be protected. But the wise and noble-spirited woman did not at all arrange things according to these counsels of her parents; hearing worldly marriage, she imagined divine marriage; and overlooking many suitors, she possessed the inclination for the divine Bridegroom alone.

The weave of multicolored clothing did not seduce her eye, nor the different colors of precious stones. Cymbals did not deceive her hearing, nor was the flute able to weaken the course of her soul. The tears of her parents did not soften her, nor the exhortation of any other relative. But holding onto her reasoning power adamantly, she did not change her mind; and having closed up all her senses just like a window, she associated only with her Bridegroom, saying that Scripture: "As I am to my beloved, my beloved is to me." (Cant 2:16) And if discussions were smoky and dark, she fled them, bringing herself together with the inner treasures of her soul; where exhortations were shining and helpful, she directed all of her own mind toward the reception of what was said.

She had a love for fasting in which no one of those around her was her equal. She believed that fasting was the protection and foundation of other things. And if she ever had to eat outside of the accustomed time, she experienced the opposite thing from those who eat. For her face was a pallor, and the weight of her body collapsed; for when one is disgusted by an action, the action itself is changed. For as the beginning lays things out, so in general the things that depend on it follow from it. For while to those for whom food becomes and bears pleasure, the weight of the- body flourishes; to those for whom the opposite occurs, their flesh is undernourished and slight. The sickly witness to my word. Certainly the blessed one herself testing herself to cure her body [noseleuein to soma], brought blossom to her soul; for she acted according to the apostle who said: 'For as much as our outer human being perishes,' he says, "the inner human being is renewed." Therefore she struggled bravely while escaping the notice of many.

When her parents died, this one who was inspired for so long by divine thoughts took her sister with her-for her sister was deprived of sight-and departed from her paternal home. She led herself down to the tomb of a relative, which was remote from the city; and having sold everything she renounced her possessions and distributed them among the poor. Having summoned to herself one of the elders, she cut her own hair. At that time she put away from herself all cosmetics; this was a symbol that her soul had become a simple and pure being. Then for the first time she was deemed worthy of the name, .. "virgin."

Being trained sufficiently in sufferings; and having been led to the very height of the stadium, she made progress in virtues. How many then approached this divine mystery unprepared and inadvisedly, and fell short of the object of their desire, not having considered everything ahead of time? Just as people who are about to make a journey first give thought to their provisions, just so she, having prepared herself with provisions-with long sufferings-she made the journey toward heavenly things without restraint. For, having put away beforehand the things for the completion of the house, she made for herself the most secure tower. For having distributed her

property to the poor, and having renounced anger and memory of past injuries, and expelled envy and love of fame, she built up her house upon the rock from which the tower was splendid and the house free from storms.

What more do I say? For from the beginning she surpassed those who were in the habit of the solitary life. For just as the most naturally suited of children, still in the process of learning their letters, compete with those who are older in the presence of the teachers; just so, she, fervent in spirit, outran the rest. We are not able to speak of her active and ascetic life, because she did not allow anyone to become an observer of this. For she did not want the people who were with her to be heralds of her manly deeds. For she did not give as much thought to good deeds as to guarding the secret of them. For she bore in her heart that word of the Lord: "If your right hand does something, do not let your left hand know it." Thus, escaping notice, she performed the acts fitting to her profession (of the religious life).

Thus she observed carefully the first movements of her soul, not allowing herself to be dragged down by them together with bodily desires. Just like an unpruned tree she trimmed the offshoots of fruitless branches; for she set aside through fasting and prayer the thorny buds of thought. And if she progressed in one or another of these in some small way, she addressed various torments of them, mortifying the body by means of all sorts of sufferings. She was not satisfied by mere abstinence from bread, but she also contented herself with little water.

When the battle of the enemy was waged against her, she called emphatically upon her Master for aid by means of prayer; for she was not satisfied by a simple ascetic practice to extinguish the assault of the lion. And from her supplication the Lord was there, and the enemy fled. But often the hated one endured the battle, and the Lord did not ward off the murderer, in order to strengthen the exercise of the virtuous soul.

Therefore, by means of these things the surviving enemy was defeated, and she lightened her most piercing ascetic practice. She did this so that the members of her body might not be suddenly weakened; for this was the positive proof of defeat. She took care of her body when her own boat moved toward calm. Therefore the blessed one having seen accurately the little wave present in life, and foreseeing the surgings of the spirit, she was carefully steering her own ship toward devotion to God. For she anchored without disturbance in the saving harbor, placing herself in the most steadfast anchor, faith in God.

Thus having withdrawn by herself, she became perfect in good works. As time went on, and when her virtue blossomed, the sweet fragrance of her most glorious sufferings passed on to many. "For nothing", it says, "hidden will not be made manifest." For God knows how to proclaim by himself those who love him toward

the correcting of those who hear. Then therefore some began to enter with a desire for that which is better and to make entreaties for their own edification. For they approached the ways she led her life, wishing to be helped and according to the accustomed formula, they asked her: "In what way is it necessary (to be) to be saved?" But she, having sighed heavily and let flow a multitude of tears, withdrew into herself, and as if she had made an answer by means of the tears, she practiced a second silence. But the ones who were with her compelled her to speak of the mighty works of God. For the ones who admired her were amazed by the singular sight. And again they exhorted her to speak loud and clear. And the blessed one, having been compelled for such a long time, after sufficient time, and after a great silence, spoke in a humble voice the scriptural words.

It was a divine symposium for those present. For they were made merry from the chalices of wisdom. The blessed Syncletike was to them like the pouring out of divine drink and liquid. Each one of them received whatever she wanted. The ones who were gathered rejoiced greatly and robustly at these words, and again they persisted in not having taken their fill of good things.

The good-hating devil, not bearing such abundance of good things, wasted away, and devised in himself so that he was able to confuse the origin of good things. And further he asks the oldest virgin to the final struggle (agony); and he took revenge against her with hatred, not caring to begin the blows externally, but grasping her internal organs, he deeply assigned to her bodily suffering, so that she became inconsolable from human succor.

He first smites the most necessary organ in life, the lung, and through illnesses that bring ruin, bit by bit he fastens his malignancy (cancer). many blows and much time his own severity. For breaking up the lung into small pieces by means of spittle that brought them up, he cast it out. Unceasing fevers were present, consuming her body after the manner of a file.

When she turned eighty years old, the devil transferred to her the contests of Job. For he made use then of the same scourges. But in the present he cuts short the time, making the sufferings more burdensome. The blessed Job endured in the plague thirty-five years; here, the enemy, as though stripping off some first fruits the time of ten years, to attach the plagues to the holy body of this one. For three-and-a-half years through famous sufferings, she battled against the enemy. Therefore on Job the devil made the beginnings of wounds on the outside; on her he added punishments from the inside. For her internal organs having been struck by him, he assigned to her greater and more difficult sufferings. Thus I do not think that the oldest martyrs struggled more bravely than the famous Syncletike. For the abominable one attacked them from the outside. For whether he brought to them death by the sword, or fire, they were gentler than the present trials of Syncletike.

For instead of a fiery furnace burning her inward parts from below, the fire is burning from the inside bit by bit. And in the manner of a file over a very long time, her body wastes away. And it is truly weighty and inhumane to speak about. For the ones entrusted with judicial powers, when they wish to set upon the more serious sinners punishments, they destroy them by means of the slightest fire; thus the enemy from the insides made her punishment by causing the smoldering fever unceasing night and day.

Again seeing her confident affirmations against him, the hater of good was vexed. And seeing her destruction of his tyranny, he devised another type of evil; and he struck her speech organ, to cut off the spoken word, thinking that by this act he would starve of the divine words those who were with her. But if he deprived the hearing of use, he bestowed an advantage even greater. For perceiving with their eyes the sufferings, they strengthened further the will. For the wounds of the body of that one [Syncretike] cured the stricken souls. And one could see the caution and healing of those who saw the greatness of soul and patient endurance of the blessed one.

Therefore the enemy made this excuse for this blow against her: for having caused pain in one tooth, he made her gums putrid in like manner. And the bone fell out; the spreading passed into the whole jaw, and became decay of the body pressing on the neighboring parts; and in forty days the bone was worm-eaten. And within the space of two months' time, there was a hole. The surrounding spaces were all becoming black. And the bone itself was corrupted, and little by little wasted away; putrefaction and the heaviest stench governed her whole body so that the ones who served her suffered more than she did. Most of the time they withdrew, not bearing the inhuman odor; but when need called, the multitude approached, kindling incense, and again withdrew because of the inhuman stench. The blessed one clearly saw the adversary, and did not at all agree to have human aid brought to her, demonstrating again in this her own virility. But those who came with her exhorted her to anoint the places with unguent for their own weakness, but she was not persuaded. For she believed that through external assistance they would destroy the glorious contest. And the ones with her sent for a doctor, so, if he could, he would try to bring about a cure. But again she did not allow him to be brought, saying: "Why do you thwart this good battle? Why do you seek what is apparent, ignorant of what is hidden? Why do you concern yourself with what is, not contemplating the one who made it?" And the doctor, who was present, said to her: "We do not bring a remedy for the sake of cure or consolation, but in order to bury the alienated and dead part of the body according to custom, so that those who are here will not be corrupted at the same time. For they bring such to the dead, and we do it now; I put on aloe at the same time as myrrh and myrtle wet

with wine” And she accepted receiving his advice, feeling mercy rather for those who were with her; for from this the excessive stench was destroyed.

Who did not shudder, seeing such a great plague? Who was not helped, seeing the patient endurance of the blessed one, and forming a notion in her of the fall of the enemy? For seeking a feast, he became food. For she was offered as bait through the snare by the weakness of the body; seeing a woman, he looked down on her, for he did not know of her virile mind. He observed ailing members, for he was blind and not able to observe her strongest spirit. Therefore for three months she competed in this contest. Her whole body was strengthened by divine power. The completion toward her resting place was made less. Therefore she was without nourishment; for how was she able to take meals, when she was ruled by such putrefaction and stench? Even sleep was separated from her, cut off by her sufferings.

When the end of victory and the crown were near her, and she saw visions and the power of angels, and exhortations of holy virgins to the ascension, and being illuminated by ineffable light, and the land of paradise. And with the vision of these, she became as if one herself, proclaimed to those with her to bear nobly, and not to esteem the present lightly. She said to them, “In three days I will depart from the body”.... Not only this, but she revealed even the hour of her departure from there. And when the hour was complete, the blessed Syncletike went to the Lord, receiving the kingdom of heaven, the prize for her struggles for him. In glory and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, with the Father as well as the all-holy Spirit forever and ever. Amen. (*from Johnsapidopoulos.com*)

Also Commemorated Today

New Hieromartyr Joseph and with him 37 Martyrs (1921).

New Hieroconfessor [Paul](#), Bishop of Starobela (1932)

Virgin-martyr [Eugenia](#) (1933).

New Hieromartyr [Sergius](#) priest (1934).

Martyr Matthew (1938).

Venerable Symeon of the Pskov Caves (1960).

Prophet [Micah](#) (9th c. B.C.) (not the Minor Prophet – see 1 Kings 22).

-+Virgin-martyr [Apollinaria](#) of Egypt (470).

St. [Phosterius](#) the Hermit (wonderworker) (9th c.)

+Venerable [Gregory](#) of Crete, monk (820).

Martyr [Theoidus](#).

Martyr [Sais](#).

Venerable [Domnina](#)

St. [Tatiana](#).

New Monk-martyr [Romanus](#) of Carpenision, who suffered at Constantinople(1694).

New Hieromartyr Romanus of Lacedaemonia (1695).

St. [Menas](#) of Sinai, monk (6th c.).

++Translation of the relics of St. [Rumon](#), Bishop and Confessor of Tavistock in Devon (f.d. Jan 4)(6th c.)

St. [Cera](#) of Kilkeary, Virgin (Ciar, Cyra, Cior, Ceara, [Kiara](#), Chier) (7th c.)

St. [Convoyon](#) of Redon, Abbot (Conwoion, Konwoion) (868)

+St. Edward the Confessor, King of England (1066)

+St. Fridebert, bishop of Hexham (766)

St. [Talida](#) (5th c.)

St. [Emiliana](#), aunt of Gregory the Great (6th c.)

[Gaudentius](#) of Gnesen, monk (c. 1004)

St. [Telesphorus](#), Pope of Rome (2nd c.).

Social Team for January 12

Team 2 is up next week – Carrie LaMere, John Nelson, Michael Black, Kenneth Garner. 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. Nectaros & 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.)