

SOBORNOST

St. Thomas the Apostle Orthodox Church

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American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese

*ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE
OF CONSTANTINOPLE*

SERVICES

Wednesday: Reader Vespers 6:30 PM

Saturday: Confession 4:30 PM

Great Vespers 5:00 PM

Sunday: Matins 8:45 AM | Sunday

School 9:30 AM | Divine Liturgy 10 AM

**February 8, 2026 – Sunday of the Prodigal Son | Afterfeast
of the Reception of the Lord in the Temple**

The Inner Unity of the Triodion

The Sunday of the Prodigal Son

The parable of the Prodigal forms an exact icon of repentance in its different stages. Sin is exile, enslavement to strangers, hunger. Repentance is the return from exile to our true home; it is to receive back our inheritance and freedom in the Father's house. But repentance implies action: "I will rise up and go..." (Luke 15:18). To repent is not just to *feel* dissatisfied, but to take a decision and to *act* upon it.

On this and the next two Sundays, after the solemn and joyful words of the Polyeleos at Matins, we add the sorrowful verses of Psalm 136, "By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept...". This Psalm of exile, sung by the children of Israel in their Babylonian captivity, has a special appropriateness on the Sunday of the Prodigal, when we call to mind our present exile in sin and make the resolve to return home.

The Saturday of the Dead

On the day before the Sunday of the Last Judgment, and in close connection with the theme of this Sunday, there is a universal commemoration of the dead from all



the ages. (There are further commemorations of the dead on the second, third and fourth Saturdays in Lent.) Before we call to mind the Second Coming of Christ in the services on Sunday, we commend to God all those departed before us, who are now awaiting the Last Judgment. In the texts for this Saturday there is a strong sense of the continuing bond of mutual love that links together all the members of the Church, whether alive or dead. For those who believe in the risen Christ, death does not constitute an impassable barrier, since all are alive in Him; the departed are still our brethren, members of the same family with us, and so we are conscious of the need to pray insistently on their behalf. *(from The Lenten Triodion, translated by Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware, St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 2002)*

Today's Epistle Lesson – St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians 6:12-20 EOB

Brethren, You say: "All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial." "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be brought under the power of anything. "Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food," but God will bring to nothing both of these. However, the body is not for sexual immorality, it is for the Lord; and the Lord is made for the body. Now, God raised up the Lord, and he will also raise us up by his power. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be! Or do you not know that whoever is joined to a prostitute is one body? For God says, "The two will become one flesh." But whoever who is joined to the Lord is one spirit. Flee sexual immorality! "Every sin that a person can do is outside the body," but whoever commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit which dwells in you, and which you have from God? You are not your own! You were bought with a price! Therefore, glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which belong to God.

Today's Gospel Lesson – Saint Luke 15:11-32 EOB

The Lord said this parable, "A certain man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that will come to me.' So the father divided his livelihood between them. A few days later, the younger son gathered all that he had and traveled to a far country. There, he squandered his property, living immorally. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place in that country, and he began to be in need. He went and hired himself to one of the citizens of that country who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He wanted to feed himself with the husks that the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough to spare, and I am dying with hunger! I will get up, go to my father, and tell him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you! I

am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants.” So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still at a distance, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. He ran, and embraced his son, and kissed him. Then the son said, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you! I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring out the first robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet! Bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this, my son, was dead, and he is alive again! He was lost and [now he] is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

Now, his elder son was in the field. As he came near to the house, he heard music and dancing. Calling one of the servants, he asked what was going on. The servant replied, ‘Your brother has returned! Your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and healthy.’ However, the elder son became angry and he would not go in. Therefore, his father came out and begged him. But he answered his father, ‘Look, for so many years I have served you, and I have never disobeyed a commandment of yours. Yet, you never gave me a goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this, your son, arrived, he who has devoured your living with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.’ The father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours! But it was fitting to celebrate and to rejoice, for this, your brother, was dead, and is alive again. He was lost and is found!’”

Homily on the Reception of the Lord in the Temple

By Archpriest Rodion Putyatin

Holy Father, Bless! So the deacon speaks on behalf of all Christians, addressing the priest. The deacon does not bless, but asks the priest to bless. Why? Because among us Orthodox, especially at church services, God blesses the priest, he sends up the glory to God, and equally, God's blessing and sanctification is taught mainly by the priest. So it is with us, so it was with the Old Testament. When the righteous Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary with the Infant Jesus on the fortieth day after His birth came to the temple of God to bless God and receive a blessing from God, who blessed? The Priest, the holy righteous Symeon. Anna the prophetess also blessed God then, but she blessed later, when she heard Symeon blessing.

What does this, listeners, mean? Why in our country, especially in the church, during the services God blesses and God's blessing is taught mainly by the priest? Why is the priest's blessing especially holy before God, favorable, and for us especially gracious, saving?

Blessing God and teaching the blessing of God, the priest thus mediates between God and those who are blessed. But how does he mediate? "We have one mediator

- Jesus Christ: For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). Between the Holy God, who lives in the unapproachable light, and sinful people, who live in darkness and the shadow of death, there can be no mediator other than the God-man, Jesus Christ.

Yes, only Jesus Christ alone could redeem us, and redeemed us from the letter of the law, and gave us a blessing. Without Him, we would never, forever and ever, bless God, and therefore we would not receive blessings from God; without Him we, due to our blindness, could not and, due to our sins, would not dare to bless God, to rejoice in God. Only He, as the Son of God, could tell us and said that there is a God, said and, as God Himself, showed God in Himself, showed and proved that God is omniscient, omnipotent, holy, righteous, merciful, philanthropic, showed us His Divine teaching, His deeds, especially His sufferings, death and Resurrection; He showed, proved, assured, convinced us that there is a God, there is Eternal Truth and infinite Love, and thus calmed us, reconciled us with God, so that we can boldly bless God, rejoice in God from the bottom of our hearts. And why did the God-bearer Symeon rejoice and bless God? Precisely because he held Jesus Christ in his arms and saw in Him salvation for all people and the light of the Gentiles.

Therefore, blessing God with the priest and receiving a blessing from God through the priest, we thereby show our faith in Jesus Christ, our Advocate with God, our Mediator, Redeemer, Conciliator, whose title the priest represents and whose very name is depicted with the folded fingers of his hand. The priest represents Jesus Christ. Not that he only reminds us of Him or repeats His words and actions, no, but acts, speaks with such authority and power that only Jesus Christ, the Mediator of God and men, has.

We Christians have, in addition to the priest, each of us has, so to speak, his own permanent representative of Jesus Christ: this is the sign of the cross. When, while blessing or invoking God, we overshadow ourselves with the sign of the cross, by this we also show that we bless God or call on Him, we are blessed and sanctified by Him through Jesus Christ crucified on the cross. Yes, to bless God, to pray to Him with the cross means to bless, to pray with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, with His mediation and intercession for us before God. Where the sign of the cross is, there is Christ with His grace and holiness. So, the cross is a representative of Jesus Christ, but mainly represents Him as a priest.

Jesus Christ is always with us, so that we can do nothing without Him; especially He is with us when we bring to God our common and concordant prayers, petitions, thanksgiving, so that if there are at least two or three of us gathered for this, Christ is in our midst. It is this special, predominant presence of Jesus Christ with us that the priest represents. Christians serve, pray to God with a priest, which

means that Christ is in their midst, mediating and interceding for them before God. The priest blesses, which means that here the grace of Christ is special. When you alone bless God, pray, overshadowing yourself with the sign of the cross, you act, you use the tool that Jesus Christ has earned us access to, acquiring boldness towards God and acquiring the right to the blessing of God. But when a priest blesses God, prays and, making a sign of the cross with his hand, he gives God's blessing, it is the same as Jesus Christ Himself, through the mouth of a priest, praying and blessing God, mediating and interceding for us before God, and He Himself by the hand of a priest gives a blessing from God.

How is it that God blesses the priest with the right to teach? How does he have the right to represent Jesus Christ? Jesus Christ Himself, by His Holy Spirit, through the laying on of hands by bishops, gives the priest this advantage, so that he represents Him, so that he speaks and acts with His authority and power. First, Jesus Christ gave this privilege to His apostles, and the apostles passed it on to their successors, and so in our Church spiritual persons with the authority and power of Christ will be born successively from the Holy Spirit. Thus, the blessing of a priest, according to the authority and power of Christ given to him, is not an expression of his own benevolence or consent, but the giving of God's grace or God's permission, and therefore that which is blessed by the priest is always holy and lawful, no matter with what mouth he blesses and no matter with which hand he gives the blessing.

And so, this is why among us Orthodox, especially at church services, it is the priest who blesses God and the blessing of God is taught predominantly by the priest: the priest predominantly represents Jesus Christ. That is why the blessing of the priest is especially holy before God, favorable to Him and especially grace-filled, saving for us: in the blessings coming from the mouth of the priest, the voice of His beloved Son is heard by God the Father, and with the blessing hand, the blessing of God is given by the One in Whom they will be blessed ... all the tribes of the earth (Gen. 12:3).

Christian Listeners! When Symeon the God-bearer, holding the Infant Jesus in his arms, blessed God and then taught the blessing of the Mother of God, the Mother of God was silent, listened. You see, the Mother of God listened attentively when Symeon, as a priest, blessed God and taught her blessing.

Be attentive to the priest, to his blessing, and not only in church, but everywhere, and always. The grace of the priesthood is inalienable from the priest; it is with him in every place, at every time. In your inattention, irreverence, your disrespect for the priest, be careful not to refer to God, whom He blesses, and to Jesus Christ, whom He represents!

Oh, that Christians were all attentive, Queen of Heaven, according to Your prayers for us, the servants of Christ and the participants of the Mysteries of God, as You once listened to the holy righteous Symeon! Then it would be clear that they know God, believe in Jesus Christ and please You, Most Blessed One. Ah, then only it will be seen! Amen. (*from johnsanidopoulos.com*)

A Word From the Holy Fathers

If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world" (1 John 2:1-2).

Today, beloved brethren, you will go to repent. As a pastor, I would like to instill in you what is required of someone who begins confession so that his confession is true, pleasing to God and soul-saving. Namely, what is required from the repentant is contrition for his sins, the intention to correct his life, faith in Christ and hope in His mercy.

And so, first of all, contrition for one's sins is required. But this is something that we spiritual fathers very often do not see in our spiritual children.

Quite a lot of people come with the spirit of complete indifference, and if they had not been asked anything, they would either say nothing, or would only say in general to the spiritual father they are sinful for all their sins. And do they say this with a heartfelt consciousness of their guilt? No, therefore woe unto them, having done it without the consciousness of their sins, but in order to quickly finish with confession. Beloved! Let us not turn the work of God's extreme mercy towards us sinners into a reason for God's wrath. How insensitive we are! Don't we have anything to grieve about in confession? How many sins do we have? If we began to weep all our lives about our sins, then we would not do anything unnecessary, but only what should be done. Oh! If any one of us were to say that he has no sin, he would be deceiving himself, and it would be in vain for him to seek the truth.

Can't you see your sins? Pray to God that He will let you see them. It's not for nothing that you often said with the priest in Church: "Lord, grant me to see my own sins!" (Prayer of Saint Ephraim the Syrian). Let us try, at least now with our common strength, to see our sins, so that later in confession we can confess them with heartfelt contrition. And our first very important sin is that we, being great sinners, do not feel that we are sinners who deserve not mercy, but God's punishment! Let us condemn ourselves first of all for this insensibility, and say to the Lord with all our souls: Here I am, Lord and Master of my life, an insensitive sinner, I am the greatest sinner, but I do not feel my sins. It must be because my sins have multiplied more than the sand of the sea, and I am full of sins, like a

smallpox patient with smallpox. I repent to You, my Lord God, with all my heart for my insensibility, and I pray to You: Grant me to feel with all my heart how much I have angered and am angering You. O, this imaginary, Pharisaic righteousness of ours, how many people it has destroyed and is destroying! And to spite us, it strikes our heart precisely during fasting, during the very mystery of repentance and before the mystery of Holy Communion.

But let's look further - with what sins did we sin against God the most? If we are people of little faith, we live on earth not for heaven, not for God and the salvation of our souls, but for the earth and everything pleasant on earth, in a word, we live for the flesh, for its pleasures, and not for our immortal soul, not for her future life - isn't this a great sin? Have we forgotten the sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, for us, His Most Pure Blood shed for us on the Cross, His glorious Resurrection! Was it not for us, that is, to raise us up to paradise, having been removed from paradise by sin, by His descent to earth, His divine teaching, His miracles, His prophecies, for example, about the future Last Judgment, about the resurrection of the dead on the last day, about the blessedness of the righteous and the eternal torment of sinners? Finally, His suffering, His resurrection from the dead and His ascension into heaven? Therefore, if it is true that we must live here for the life of the age to come, then is it not a sin not to live for that life, but to live with all our thoughts and with all our hearts on earth and for the earth? And how much sin happens because we only want to live well on earth and do not believe with all our hearts in the future blessed life? How much anger, hatred, love of money, envy, stinginess, deception comes from this? Hence all the vices: all carnal lusts, all passions of the soul. So let us repent of this, that is, we will repent that we have little faith, if not unbelief, and that for God and for the salvation of our souls, we either do not live for here, or we live for it very little; also that there is little hope in our hearts, if not none at all, for a future life. We also suffer from the greatest sin of ingratitude to God, not loving Him for His countless, ineffable mercies. I think everyone is aware of this, at least from time to time. Here are all of you who move on your own feet, all of you are healthy in body and soul, honorable in mind from God the Creator, with free will, and what were you so recently? Nothing; but the Lord brought you all from non-existence into existence and from that time on He gave you everything: He gave you a soul with its abilities, a body with its wise and beautiful structure, He gave you and is constantly giving you food to nourish your body, clothes to clothe it, gave a corner for you in His land, and shelter for your dwelling; feeds you with the priceless, life-giving food of His body and blood; He delights and gives you peace; makes you happy by listening to His word, forgives you your sins without number, constantly preserves your life like a mother the life of a child, grants us His future kingdom, and who knows what He doesn't do out of His love for us sinners and ungrateful people? It is

impossible to list. And what? How do we respond to His love for us - a love that has no number or measure? Just lawlessness, just bad behavior, just ingratitude. And so, with tears, let us repent of our ingratitude before God, of our dislike for Him, and also with tears we will ask Him for the gift of love. O, "Bless the Lord, my soul, and do not forget all His rewards" (Ps. 102:2).

The repentant is also required to have the intention to correct his life: and pay attention to this. When going to confession, say to yourself, after confession, I will try with all my might to correct myself from those sins that I now want to repent of. I won't deceive myself any longer; I will not lie to God; I will no longer insult the mystery of repentance. Help, Lord, strengthen my spiritual strength, Lord! What is the benefit of such repentance, after which they again, without a twinge of conscience, indulge in the same sins of which they repented? In such people the proverb is fulfilled: "A dog returns to his vomit, and a pig, having washed, to his puddle" (2 Peter 2:22).

Finally, what is also required from the repentant is faith in Christ and hope in His mercy. Anyone approaching confession must believe that during the mystery Christ Himself stands invisibly and accepts his confession; that only Christ can forgive sins, since He, through His suffering, His honorable blood and His death, sought for Himself the right from the Heavenly Father to forgive us all our iniquities, without offending divine justice, and that He, in His mercy, is always ready to forgive us all kinds of sins, if only we confessed them with heartfelt contrition; if only we had the intention to live better in the future, if only we had faith in Him in our hearts. "Your faith will save you: go in peace" (Mark 5:34). This is what He says internally to everyone, after absolution from the priest, who repents as they should.

Let us all repent sincerely; let's do everything we can to improve our lives; let us bring God the fruits of repentance. Amen.

– St. John of Kronstadt, *Discourse on Repentance*

Homilies on the Commonwealth of the Church – The Chanter

by Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos

The ministry of the chanter has an evolution through the centuries, as we see in various ancient ecclesiastical texts. In the first Christian period, all the people said "Amen" and chanted the Psalms of David, or they all chanted, as happened at the Secret Supper where "they went up to the Mount of Olives singing hymns" (Matt. 26:30).

Later, there was a chanter who started the Psalm and the whole congregation followed, as it appears in the "Apostolic Constitutions", where it is written: "Let

the reader ... chant the Psalms of David and the people will chant the verses." This happens even today in some churches where the chanters chant some Psalms of David and the people repeat "For His mercy endures unto the ages, hallelujah." Later, however, because many troparia were composed, which were also difficult to chant, though mainly because the heretics composed hymns with heretical content, that is why "canonical chanters" were established, who had to chant the Orthodox hymns.

In fact, the Penthekti Ecumenical Synod with its 75th Canon determines how the chanters should chant in the church. It decided: "We will that those whose office it is to sing in the churches do not use undisciplined vociferations, nor force nature to shouting, nor adopt any of those modes which are incongruous and unsuitable for the church: but that they offer the psalmody to God, who is the observer of secrets, with great attention and compunction. For the Sacred Oracle taught that the Sons of Israel were to be pious."

Thus, the evolution of both hymnography and ecclesiastical music contributed to the creation of a special category by Christians, who will acquire specialized knowledge in order to maintain dignity during sacred services, especially during the celebration of the Divine Liturgy.....

If the High Priest and the Priest during the Divine Liturgy are in the type and place of Christ, the chanters are in the type and place of the Angels. This is clearly seen in the Book of the Revelation of John the Theologian, where in the heavenly Divine Liturgy, the Angels chant: "Holy, Holy, Holy Lord Sabaoth" and "Hallelujah".

The work of the chanters in the Church and indeed in the Divine Liturgy is very important.... However, two serious issues must be highlighted.

The first is that the chanters perform an important work, an important ministry, since they are the exponents of a great science, liturgical hymnography and ecclesiastical music.

Through the centuries, great hymnographers composed sacred hymns of great value, which express the theology and faith of the Church. This is seen in the resurrection troparia composed by Saint John of Damascus which we chant every Sunday, as it is also seen in the wealth of Orthodox hymnography during the Despotic and Theometric feasts and the feasts of the Saints of our Church.

If we add that great composers covered these hymns with exquisite music in various tones, according to the content of each troparion, then we understand that those who go up to the analogion of the Sacred Temples are the expressors of a great liturgical tradition going back centuries and convey to us an unfathomable wealth of liturgical life. This should not only be appreciated by the people of the

Church, but also by [the Greek] society and the State. The chanters keep alive an amazing culture.

The second point is that whatever is done in the Church, whatever ministry is practiced, must be done with a humble attitude, because the word of Christ applies to this point as well: "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6).

This means that, although the chanters are bearers of a great and rich ecclesiastical tradition, they are not the center of worship and the Divine Liturgy. The center of ecclesiastical life is the Holy Altar, the Sacred Sanctuary and the High Priest and Priest who officiates, and not the analogion of the sacred chanter. The Officiating Bishop and Priest is responsible for worship and the Divine Liturgy, but the center is Christ. Thus, there should be humility and cooperation while there should not prevail the individualization of gifts.

The chanters are the assistants of the Bishop and the Priests, and they do not act independently, because a Divine Liturgy cannot only take place with chanting. Therefore, the Bishop-Metropolitan is responsible for everything that happens in each Metropolis, and in the Holy Temples the Priest is responsible for the performance of the sacred services and Divine Liturgies. However, the chanters are our valuable partners in the performance of the sacred services and Divine Liturgies, and we glorify God for the work they do in the Church. (*Translated by John Sanidopoulos*)

The True Nature of Fasting

[This material is taken from the introduction to The Lenten Triodion published by St. Tikhon's Seminary Press – ed.]

During Lent there is frequently a limitation on the number of meals eaten each day, but when a meal is permitted there is no restriction on the amount of food allowed. The Fathers simply state, as a guiding principle, that we should never eat to satiety (when we are full) but always rise from the table feeling that we could have taken more and that we are now ready for prayer.

If it is important not to overlook the physical requirements of fasting, it is even more important not to overlook its inward significance. Fasting is not a mere matter of diet. It is moral as well as physical. True fasting is to be converted in heart and will; it is to return to God, to come home like the Prodigal to our Father's house. In the words of St. John Chrysostom, it means 'abstinence not only from food but from sins.' 'The fast,' he insists, 'should be kept not by the mouth alone but also by the eye, the ear, the feet, the hands and all the members of the body': the eye must abstain from impure sights, the ear from malicious gossip, the hands

from acts of injustice. It is useless to fast from food, protests St. Basil, and yet to indulge in cruel criticism and slander: ‘You do not eat meat, but you devour your brother.’ The same point is made in the Triodion, especially during the first week of Lent:

As we fast from food, let us abstain also from every passion. . . . Let us observe a fast acceptable and pleasing to the Lord. / True fasting is to put away all evil, / To control the tongue, to forbear from anger, / To abstain from lust, slander, falsehood and perjury. / If we renounce these things, then is our fasting true and acceptable to God. . . . Let us keep the Fast not only by refraining from food, / But by becoming strangers to all the bodily passions.
(*From Vespers for Forgiveness Sunday, Monday and Tuesday of Clean Week*)

The inner significance of fasting is best summed up in the triad: prayer, fasting, almsgiving. Divorced from prayer and from the reception of the holy sacraments, unaccompanied by acts of compassion, our fasting becomes pharisaical or even demonic. It leads, not to contrition and joyfulness, but to pride, inward tension and irritability. The link between prayer and fasting is rightly indicated by Father Alexander Elchaninov. A critic of fasting says to him, ‘Our work suffers and we become irritable. . . . I have never seen servants [in pre-revolutionary Russia] so bad-tempered as during the last days of Holy Week. Clearly, fasting has a very bad effect on the nerves.’ To this Father Alexander replies, ‘You are quite right. . . . if it is not accompanied by prayer and an increased spiritual life, it merely leads to a heightened state of irritability. It is natural that servants who took their fasting seriously and who were forced to work hard during Lent, while not being allowed to go to church, were angry and irritable.’ (from *The Diary of a Russian Priest*)

Fasting, then, is valueless or even harmful when not combined with prayer. In the Gospels the devil is cast out, not by fasting alone, but by ‘prayer and fasting’ (Matt. 17:21; Mark 9:29); and of the early Christians it is said, not simply that they fasted, but that they ‘fasted and prayed’ (Acts 13:3; compare Acts 14:23). In both the Old and the New Testament fasting is seen, not as an end in itself, but as an aid to more intense and living prayer, as a preparation for decisive action or for direct encounter with god. Thus our Lord’s forty-day fast in the wilderness was the immediate preparation for His public ministry (Mat. 4:1-11). When Moses fasted on Mount Sinai (Ex. 34:28) and Elijah on Mount Horeb (3[1] Kings 19:8-12), the fast was in both cases linked with a theophany. The same connection between fasting and the vision of God is evident in the case of St. Peter (Acts 10:9-17). He ‘went up on the housetop to pray about the sixth hour, and he became very hungry and wanted to eat’; and it was in this state that he fell into a trance and heard the divine voice. Such is always the purpose of ascetic fasting – to enable us, as the

Triodion puts it, to ‘draw near to the mountain of prayer’ (*Matins for Tuesday of the first week*).

Prayer and fasting should in their turn be accompanied by almsgiving – by love for others expressed in practical form, by works of compassion and forgiveness. Eight days before the opening of the Lenten fast, on the Sunday of the Last Judgment, the appointed Gospel is the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25:31-46), reminding us that the criterion in the coming judgment will not be the strictness of our fasting but the amount of help that we have given to those in need. In the words of the Triodion:

Knowing the commandments of the Lord, let this be our way of life: / Let us feed the hungry, let us give the thirsty drink, / let us clothe the naked, let us welcome strangers, / let us visit those in prison and the sick. / Then the Judge of all the earth will say even to us: / ‘Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you.’ (*Vespers for Saturday evening – Sunday of the Last Judgment*)

This stanza, it may be noted in passing, is a typical instance of the ‘evangelical’ character of the Orthodox service-books. In common with so many other texts in the Triodion, it is simply a paraphrase of the words of Holy Scripture. The second-century *Shepherd of Hermas* insists that the money saved through fasting is to be given to the widow, the orphan and the poor (Similitude V.iii.7). But almsgiving means more than this. It is to give not only our money but our time, not only what we *have* but what we *are*; it is to give a part of ourselves. When we hear the Triodion speak of almsgiving, the word should almost always be taken in this deeper sense.

Great-Martyr Theodore Stratilatis as a Model for our Lives

By Protopresbyter Fr. George Papavarnavas

Saint Theodore the General lived during the reign of Licinius (late 3rd and early 4th century). He was from Euchaita in Galatia and lived in Heraclea near the Black Sea. He was an officer in the Roman army and was distinguished for his bravery. He had the gift of speech, which he used in the best way, since it was a tool that helped a lot in sowing the word of God. With the fiery missionary zeal that distinguished him he preached the word of God with boldness and courage and attracted many who were well-intentioned to the faith of Christ.

Licinius admired the bravery of Theodore, together with the gift of speech he had, and expressed a desire to meet with him and speak, despite being informed he was a Christian. Saint Theodore met him at the main gate of the city and Licinius suggested they go to the pagan temple to pray and sacrifice to idols. Saint Theodore asked to entrust to him the gold and silver statues of the gods he brought with him, in order to pray at his house. The Saint prayed to the true God and broke

the statues into tiny pieces and distributed them to the poor. When Licinius was informed of this he ordered that he be harshly tortured. The Saint endured with patience, inner peace and joy during the terrible torture, imprisonment and crucifixion, glorifying God who healed him of all his wounds, but He also sent angels to take him down from the cross. When Licinius saw the Saint before him totally healthy he ordered that he be beheaded, and in this way he handed his holy soul "into the hands of the living God".

His life and deeds give us the opportunity to highlight the following:

The Word of God, with a capital "W", is Christ, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. And the word of God with a small "w" is whatever God says to His people, His exhortations, promises and precepts, which were communicated to the people by the Prophets, and are "words of eternal life", as the Apostle Peter responded to a question of Christ. That is, Christ had asked His Twelve Disciples if they wanted to distance themselves from being near Him, as others had done, because His words seemed difficult to accept that referred to the partaking of His Body and Blood, and the Apostle Peter responded: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn. 6:68). In other words, the words of God are not new words, but they hide life within it. It has energy and Grace, as well as the power to renew man and lead him to communion with God. When the word of God finds listeners, who have the disposition to implement what they hear, then they bear fruit, as the seed has fallen on fertile ground. But the fruition of the word of God does not only depend on the audience but also on preachers of the divine word, who should try to teach and inspire mainly by example. Besides, as Saint Seraphim of Sarov says, the best evangelism is that which takes place with "the intensity of prayer and example".

The words of a teacher of the Church, who has the blessing to speak and to comfort the faithful, must be words of God and not words about God. This means that his words must be empirical words and not reflective and philosophical. That is, they should convey to the people what they saw and heard from God, like the Prophets, who preceded their speech with the words: "Thus says the Lord." Listen well, for since the Prophet says that these words are not his words, but are words spoken to him by God to speak to the people, that if they obey or disobey they will have to answer to God and not him.

Preachers of the divine word must do the same today, namely Bishops, who are the predominant teachers of the Church, as well as Presbyters, Catechists, etc., who teach the word of God with the blessing of the Bishop. And if they don't have personal knowledge of God, then they must rely on the experience of the Holy Fathers, who participate in the glory of God, and therefore their words are not the result of reflection, but are empirical words, the words of God. And, of course,

there is a big difference between empirical and reflective speech, because the former has the power to regenerate man, while the latter is empty human reasoning, without regenerative power. Saint Diadochos of Photiki calls the words of the Holy Fathers "spiritual words" which satiate the soul, while the intellect reflects and philosophizes about God, and is considered more impoverished than anything in the world. He urges the preacher of the divine word to pray and seek illumination from God before he speaks. Of course, the same should be done by those who study or hear the word, that God may enlighten them to understand correctly, and then make it a part of their life.

The words of God are "pure words", according to the sacred Psalmist, which makes man wise, illuminates the mind and entirely sweetens the heart. It is mighty like an earthquake, but gentle like a sprinkling of rain. It is spiritual water that refreshes, but also solid food that supports and strengthens the faithful and helps them exceed daily problems, maintain inner peace, and have a joyful disposition before God and people. *(from johnsanidopoulos.com)*

Holy Martyrs Mary, Martha, and Lykarion

*Having passed through the same womb into the light, Martha and Mary are deprived of the light by the sword. * Lykarion received a double crown, both as a Venerable and Athlete of the Lord.*

Saints Martha and Mary were sisters according to the flesh, and together they were both consecrated to virginity. One day as the governor was passing by their house, they leaned out of the window and said to him that they were Christians. The governor grieved because of this, and he deplored the death which they would receive on account of their youth. The Saints responded, that death on behalf of Christ is not death, but life, which has no end.

The Holy Venerable Martyr Lykarion confessed the same thing. He was a child monk that was raised by the Saints. At the order of the governor all three were crucified on three crosses. Finally, executioners beheaded them with a sword, and in this way they delivered their souls into the hands of God, and received crowns of martyrdom. *(from johnsanidopoulos.com)*

Also Commemorated Today

[Follow the links below for more information. - Ed.]

Prophet [Zechariah](#), from among the 12 [Minor](#) Prophets (520 BC).

St. [Lyubov](#) of Ryazan, fool-for Christ (1921).

New Hieromartyrs [Simeon](#), [Andrew](#), [Sergius](#) and Peter priests (1938).

New Hieromartyr [Alexander](#) priest (1942).

St. [Sabbas](#) II, archbishop of Serbia (1271).

St. [Macarius](#), bishop of Paphos in Cyprus (Greek).
 Martyr [Conitus](#) (Cointha, Cynthia) of Alexandria (249).
 St. [Agathangelus](#), bishop of Damascus (ca. 325).
 Sts. John and Basil of the Kiev Caves.
 St. [Kew](#) (Kewe, Ciwa, Kuet, Kywere, Ciwg, Cwick, Kigwoe), virgin of Cornwall.
 St. [Cuthman](#), hermit of Steyning.
 Martyrs [Nicephorus](#) and Stephen (Greek).
 Martyrs [Philadelphus](#) and Polycarp (Greek).
 St. [Pergetus](#) (Greek).
 St. [Oncho](#) of Clonmore, the Poet (Onchuo) (c. 600)
 St. [Elfleda](#), Abbess Virgin (Aelflaed, Ethelfleda, Edilfleda, Elgiva) (714)
 St. [Honoratus](#) of Milan, bishop (570)
 Sts. [Jacut](#) (Iagu) and Guethenoc (Jacu and Gwezheneg), monks of Armorica (5th c.) (Brittany)
 St. [Juventius](#) of Pavia, bishop (1st c. ?)
 St. [Mary](#) of Czechia, founder of the convent of St. George in Prague (994)
 St. [Meingold](#) (Mengold, Meingaud) of Huy (892), martyr (Belgium)
 St. [Nicetius](#) (Nizier) of Besançon, bishop (611) (France)
 St. [Paul](#) of Verdun, bishop (c. 649) (Gaul)
 Martyrs [Paul, Lucius, and Cyriacus](#) of Rome (unk)
 St. Lassa (Lasair) of Meath (woman) (unk) (Ireland)
 St. Airy, Bishop of Verdun (France) (591)

Pray for our priests and seminarians!

Prayer is powerful, and we need more priests in our Diocese. Metropolitan Gregory is asking that each one of us pray daily that we have more vocations to the priesthood. He also wants us to pray by name for our clergy and seminarians--they aren't sick! The clergy that we are to pray for are: Fr. Kevin Greenwood, Fr. Andrew Gromm, and Deacon Donald Koch. The seminarians are: Deacon Maximus Cannaverde, Bradley Shaffer, Nicholas Cizin, John Bonnewicz-Coffey, John Fedornock III, Clay Raburn, Spyridon Raburn and Ignatios Leonardo (please also pray for Joshua Horner, who is taking a break from seminary to work full-time). We started this four years ago, and we already see its fruit – Fr. Seamus was on this list the last time I ran it!

Prayer for vocations

Master of all, You promised us, “I will be with you always, even until the very end of the world,” and You have taught, “I will build My Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Mindful of this pledge, we beseech Your great goodness to inspire men to the Holy Priesthood, the service of Your Holy Orthodox Church, so that she may properly be able to fulfill Your will for Your

people in this age. There are children to baptize, the sick to heal, and the dying to care for. There is the Bread of Life to distribute, and the Word of God to teach. There are sins to forgive, and charity to be done in Your Name. Send Your Church in this hour and in every age “vessels of clay” to be instruments of Your presence. Hear us, O Lord, and have mercy.

Prayer for the priesthood

O Lord Jesus Christ, Good Shepherd of Your sheep, light the fire of ardent love in the hearts of all Your priests, that they may ever and in all things seek only Your glory. Remember especially, Lord, our Metropolitan Gregory, and our spiritual father Seamus, who are laboring in Your vineyard for the salvation of all those whom You have entrusted to them. Remember also, O Lord, our priests Fr. Kevin Greenwood, Fr. Andrew Gromm, and Deacon Donald Koch, and seminarians Deacon Maximus Cannaverde, Bradley Shaffer, Nicholas Cizin, John Bonnewicz-Coffey, John Fedornock III, Clay Raburn, Spyridon Raburn, Ignatios Leonardo and Joshua Horner. Make their lives as holy as the word they preach. Keep them from being discouraged. Hear their prayers for our salvation. Give them wisdom and courage to proclaim Your truth. Make them priests after Your own heart. For You are a merciful God who loves us, and to You we give glory, together with Your eternal Father and Your all-holy, good and life-giving Spirit, now and ever and forever. Amen.

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In Your Prayers – Please Remember... His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch BARTHOLOMEW, His Eminence Metropolitan GREGORY, Fr. Seamus & Family, Fr. Joseph & Family, His Grace Bishop Neofitos of Eldoret and Northern Kenya, Patty Blaydoe, Bennett family, Tatyana & Slava Chumak & family, Luke & Marlena Cooper, Roberta Corson, Tina Crull, Marlene Doukas, Alaina Espinal, Angelo Espinal, Linda A. Georgiev, Sandi Hebel, Howl family, John M. Janowiak, Johnson family, Andrew Kinn, Kopan family, Helen, Brian, Luke and Mia Mahony, Valentina Makowelski, David & Kathryn Newman, Bobby Nutter & family, Nicholas Pavlik, Weston Perry & family, John Reece, Mary Reed, Marge Rusnak, Rose Song, Dennis Thomidis, Fr. Nectarios & Ia, Mother Virginia Marie & the Carmelite Nuns of Port Tobacco, the suffering people of Ukraine & the Middle East, the newly reposed handmaiden of God Janette Gaydovchik and servant of God Robert Murray, and those in need of our prayers. (Please advise Fr. Seamus of changes.)