



## *Fire & Light*

### **St. Symeon Orthodox Church**

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**August 6, 2017**

### **The Feast of the Transfiguration of Our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ**

Thou wast transfigured  
on the Mount, O Christ God!  
Revealing Thy glory  
to Thy Disciples  
as far as they could bear it!  
Let Thine everlasting Light  
shine upon us sinners!  
Through the prayers  
of the Theotokos,  
O Giver of Light,  
glory to Thee!

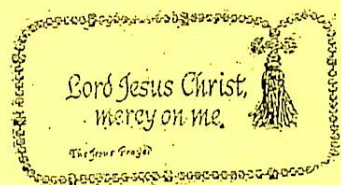
#### **✠ The Dormition Fast ✠**

✠ Tuesday, August 8, 6:30pm Akathist to St. Herman

✠ Wednesday, August 9, 6:30pm Paraklysis Service

➤ Annual Parish Assembly – Sunday, September 17

➤ October 7/8, 2017 – St. Symeon's 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary ~ with Archbishop Alexander



### **The Transfiguration ~ A Glimpse of Glory before the Cross**

**“We are children of God, and children, then heirs, provided we suffer with Him in order so that we may also be glorified with Him” (Rom. 8:16).**

In the Kontakion of the Feast of the Transfiguration, we hear that Christ was transfigured before His disciples so that when the disciples saw Him crucified, they would know it was *voluntary*. The revelation of Christ's divinity was a glimpse of His glory shortly before His crucifixion. Not long after His glorious moment on the mountain came His hour of suffering on the Cross.

Christ's suffering is never divorced from His victory over death. He had to suffer and die in order to meet and conquer death. His voluntary obedience to His Father to die on the Cross enabled Him to “trample down death by death.”

So too, for us to be called Christians, followers of Christ, we must accept our cross and suffering. We must die with Christ in order to reign with Him. This connection between suffering and glory is frequently presented to us by the Holy Church in order to encourage us when we meet trials. For example, in the Church calendar, every Friday of the year is dedicated to the memory of the Cross and Crucifixion, while each Sunday is a celebration of the Resurrection. Also, each Sunday at Matins we sing a hymn which says, “Behold, through the Cross joy has come to the whole world.”

Even the celebration of the Feast of the Transfiguration is placed in relation to the Cross in our Church calendar: Transfiguration is celebrated on August 6, exactly 40 days before the feast of the Elevation of the Holy Cross on September 14.

### **The Theotokos – Spiritual Queen of the Human Race**

✠ “The God-bearing St. Gregory says beautifully that the Theotokos made God into the Son of man, and men into sons of God. Thus she made earth into Heaven, deified humanity and honored the nature of women. The Theotokos marked out the citizens of the earth and destined them to become heavenly beings. She became the spiritual queen of the human race. In the end, the earth, the tomb and death itself could not hold down her God-bearing and God-holding body. Thus our Theotokos was transferred, in body and soul, from earth to heaven, in spite of the various reasoned and rationalistic opinions of certain modern theologians.”



## *This and That*

In his 2016 book Conserving America?: Essays on Present Discontents, Patrick J. Deneen, a Notre Dame political theorist, argues that Enlightenment liberalism, from which both U.S. parties are descended, is built on the premise that humans are by nature “free and independent,” and that the purpose of government is to liberate the autonomous individual. Making progress toward this goal, whether promoted by free-market parties of the right or statist egalitarian parties of the left, depends on denying natural limits.

This is contrary to what both Scripture and experience teach us about human nature. The purpose of civilization, in Deneen’s words, “has been to sustain and support familial, social and cultural structures and practices that perpetuate and deepen personal and intergenerational forms of obligation and gratitude, of duty and indebtedness.”

In other words, civilization doesn’t exist to make it possible for individuals to do whatever they want to do. To believe that is an anthropological error. A civilization in which no one felt an obligation to the past, to the future, to each other, or to anything higher than self-gratification is one that is dangerously fragile. In the waning decades of the Western Roman Empire, Augustine described society as preoccupied with pleasure-seeking, selfishness, and living for the moment.

Because it prescribes government of the people, liberal democracy can be only as strong as the people who live under it. And so, the question before us now is whether our current political situation is a betrayal of liberal democracy or, given its core principles of individualism and egalitarianism, liberal democracy’s inevitable fulfillment under secularism. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option*

Me, I believe that we must defend Western civilization. But what does it mean to defend a West that has become “preoccupied with pleasure-seeking, selfishness, and living for the moment”? Which West are we defending? Are we defending the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment West? Or are we defending the older civilization more consciously rooted in Christianity? And is picking and choosing even possible? After all, nobody asks the American soldier sent into combat if he is defending the world represented by Kim Kardashian and Donald Trump, the world represented by John Locke and Thomas Jefferson, the world represented by Bach and Shakespeare, the world represented by Aquinas and Bernard of Clairvaux, and so forth.

My thinking on the matter goes something like this. We have to distinguish between Western civilization and Western culture. I’m sure academics would dispute my use of these terms here, so I apologize for that. But I think it’s a helpful way to discern things. When I think of “civilization,” I think of the vast agglomeration of all the particular cultures within Western civilization, going back to antiquity. By contrast, I consider culture to be what we are, very generally, at this point in time.

I find it very hard to defend Western culture, in this sense. But I find it vital to defend Western civilization. The way I do this is by promoting knowledge and love of the best of Western civilization — which stands in contrast to our decadent contemporary Western culture. These are our roots, and we must recover them, cherish them, and *culture* them, in the sense that one cultures a seedling, to protect it and coax it to blossom and bear fruit. In a sense, we face a situation not unlike that of Erasmus of Rotterdam: completely aware of the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church in his day, but dedicated to reform within. Erasmus had to find within himself the resources to stay loyal to an institution that had grown corrupt. Surely doing this required not only an intellectual affirmation of what Roman Catholic Christianity taught, but also — Erasmus being a great humanist, and undoubtedly the most learned man in Europe of his day — an awareness of the scope of what the Latin church meant in Western civilization. To him, that was worth defending against the claims of his radical correspondent Martin Luther.

—Rod Dreher



## PRAYER AND THE TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD

By the Blessed Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow.



*The saintly Metropolitan Philaret was one of the most outstanding hierarchs of the Russian Church, he was born Basil Drozdov, the son of a priest: Although small in stature he stood out among his fellow students at the St. Sergius Holy Trinity Seminary by reason of his lively intelligence and genuine piety. His early talent for preaching brought him to the attention of Metropolitan Platon of Moscow,*

*who said of him, "I give sermons like a man, but he speaks like an angel."*

*In 1808 he received the monastic tonsure with the name Philaret, after Saint Philaret the Almsgiver. After being ordained to the diaconate, he taught Greek, Hebrew, and rhetoric at the St. Petersburg Theological Academy, where he prevailed upon the authorities to have courses taught in Russian rather than in Latin. This concern to make the understanding of Orthodoxy as accessible as possible motivated many of his subsequent undertakings in the course of his fifty years in the episcopal rank. He was responsible for having the Holy Scripture translated into Russian, and he himself wrote a Catechism, which has remained a standard text of the Russian Church ever since its initial publication in 1823.*

*As Metropolitan of Moscow, Philaret succeeded in having restored some measure of independence from the State, which the Church had lost in the "reforms" of Peter I. He labored to improve the caliber of seminaries and theological schools, and he gave crucial support to the spiritual revival generated by St. Paisius Velichkovsky and his monastic followers, at a time when many hierarchs and clergy looked askance at the institution of eldership, or "starchestvo" and the practice of unceasing prayer which this revival prompted. Metropolitan Philaret's own spiritual father was a close disciple of Saint Seraphim of Sarov, and although Philaret kept concealed his inner life, its excellence is manifest in the various miracles wrought by his prayers: a girl dumb for thirteen years began to speak, a merchant was spared the necessity of having his arm amputated, an eight-year-old paralyzed girl began to walk.*

*Metropolitan Philaret reposed on November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1867, being forewarned of the date two months earlier by his father in a dream. In his theological writings, Metropolitan Philaret often focused on the life of grace that is opened to believers in Christ. It is clear that he himself experienced this grace while still in this temporal world and certain that he now enjoys it in the fullest measure in the company of the saints.*

*And he took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray. And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistening. And, behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias. [Lk 9:28-30]*

† † †

How sublime a spectacle on Mount Tabor! A spectacle indeed worthy of being contemplated with rapture as the apostles contemplated it, and of being solemnly celebrated as we now celebrate it. It is not without meaning, that they who witnessed the great revelations on Sinai and Horeb, not without purpose, that Moses and Elias appear on Mount Tabor also. They shall see more here than they saw there, on Sinai and Horeb, the might and glory of God were revealed unto men, through the powers of visible nature; on Tabor, not only does divinity reveal itself to man, but humanity itself appears arrayed in divine glory, Moses quaked on Mount Sinai (Heb 12:21); Elias complained on Horeb (1 Kings 19:14); whereas on Tabor, through the fear of the apostles there shines forth joy: *It is good for us to be here.* (Lk 9:33)

Christians! Your heart is no doubt ready to say of the witnesses of the glory of Mount Tabor: *indeed it was good for them to be there.* What then, if we tell you that the way to the contemplation of the glory of Mount Tabor is not swallowed up in an abyss, is not walled up from us, nor overgrown with thorns, not forgotten, nor lost, but may still be indicated by those who know it, to those who seek it? (It is not difficult to understand that we speak here of the spiritual way, for a carnal way cannot possibly lead us to spiritual visions and divine revelations.)

Why does the evangelist, when about to describe to us the glorious Transfiguration of the Lord, first of all direct his own and our attention to prayer? He went up into a mountain to pray. Why, if not to point out to us in prayer the way to the light of Tabor, the key to spiritual mysteries, the might of divine revelation? If the divinely inspired Evangelist found it so necessary to associate the idea of prayer with the description of the glory of Tabor, then it certainly will not be amiss on our part also, Christians, to associate however short a meditation on the power and efficacy of prayer, with remembrance of the glorious Transfiguration of our Lord.

There are some Christians whose understanding and performing of the act of prayer is in an outward ritual sense, rather than in an inward spiritual one; these souls, while in no way doubting in the general belief that prayer is powerful and efficacious, are mistaken in their conduct. They do entirely err in the application of this truth to themselves and to their prayer.

Praying repeatedly, and seeing no result from their prayer, either in themselves or around them, they, instead of doubt-



ing the sincerity and merit of their own prayers, are prone to imbibe the idea inspired by a spirit of sloth and self-deceit, that powerful and availing prayer must needs be some peculiar gift of grace, reserved for some of God's elect, and for certain extraordinary cases only. To such we say without hesitation that there is no man whose prayer may not become powerful if he only desire it steadfastly and with a pure heart, with faith and hope in God, and that there is no case in which his prayer will not be granted, if only its object be not contrary to the Wisdom and Mercy of God, or to the true welfare of the suppliant. This is saying much. We trust, nevertheless, that we are not deceiving the true lovers of prayer.

Figure to yourselves a man who, by the power of prayer shuts or opens the heavens, stops or brings down rain; commands that a handful of flour and a little oil should suffice to feed several persons for several months, or perhaps even for more than a year and it is fulfilled; breathes on a dead man, and restores him to life; brings down fire from heaven to consume a sacrifice and an altar immersed in water. What can appear more extraordinary than this power of prayer? But it appears so only to a man who knows not what spiritual power is, whilst to one who does, it appears only as the act of a man like unto ourselves.

This is not my own opinion merely, but the teaching of an Apostle, St. James, exhorting us to pray one for another, and wishing to incite us thereto, says that the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much; and, he confirms this general precept and convincing motive by the example of that extraordinary man whom we have just pictured, and whom he represents as a man like unto ourselves: *Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit.* (Jas 6:17-18). Why is it said here that this wonderworking Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are? It is just that we, deeming him an extraordinary man, should not be discouraged from imitating him, and from attaining power in prayer.

If it appears to you that imitating the prayers of the prophet is far above your mediocrity and a height unattainable by you, then imagine yourselves as much below the prophet;

imagine yourselves to be even less than all other Christians, and even then, I affirm that your prayer will be powerful and effectual. Furthermore it may convert you from heathenism to Christianity, and it may lead you to the true knowledge and worship of God. Even though all this is unknown to you, and if there be no man near who can direct you, pray and open the heavens and bring down thence an angel unto you who will teach you.

You may ask whether I am dreaming and have been carried away by my desire to invite you to fervent and effectual prayer. No, my brethren and fellow worshippers. I am speaking of things that have actually happened before, and therefore may happen again, and which are contained as testimony within our holy books. The Roman centurion, Cornelius, whom we know from the Acts of the Apostles, was a Gentile. It is not known whether he knew the One God, but certain it is that he did not know Jesus Christ Whom God hath sent; but he did as much good as he was able. He feared and prayed always to God, though to him unknown; a devout man, and one that feared "God" with all his house, which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always. And what did the unceasing prayer of



the Gentile achieve? It did indeed call down heaven upon him, and brought to his aid high and even divine powers. In the midst of his prayers, an angel appears to him, saying, *Cornelius, thy prayer is heard, and thine alms are had in remembrance in the sight of God,* (Acts 10:31); and then instructs him to send for the Apostle Peter. And when the Apostle was preaching unto him Jesus Christ, the Holy Ghost, even before baptism, was poured from on high upon Cornelius...

But it is time at last to inquire why it is that so many prayers remain without effect, if every prayer may always be so powerful and effectual? For it is for the sake of this question principally that we have said all that which we have as yet spoken. Let us particularly note one instance in which a prayer really answered in an unanticipated and sublime way. Thus, Paul besought the Lord thrice to be delivered from a thorn in the flesh but God answered him: *My grace is sufficient for thee; for My strength is made perfect in weakness.* (II Cor 12:9). The temptation is not removed; but a victory still more wonderful is granted over the continuing temptation.



If we accept such cases, all unsuccessful prayers are accounted for by this short saying of the Apostle: *Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.* (Jas 4:3). Our prayers are fruitless for one of three reasons: either because they are not fervent and persevering supplications, which proceed from the depth of our souls, and into which our whole soul is poured forth; instead they are only weak desires which we utter without fervor, thinking; or because our supplications are unclean and evil, inasmuch as we ask that which is hurtful and of no benefit to our souls; or because we ask things not for the glory of God, but for the gratification of our carnal and selfish desires.

Pray, Christian, fervently and with the whole might of thy soul, pray diligently and perseveringly, pray rightly and purely; and if thou art not thyself equal to it, then pray for prayer itself, and by prayer thou wilt first obtain true and effectual prayer, and then this prayer shall overcome all things with thee and obtain all things for thee; it will guide thee unto Mount Tabor or create a Tabor within thee; it will call thy soul into heaven. Amen.



## CONFRONTING ECCLESIASTICAL ISSUES WITHIN OUR FAITH IN AN ORTHODOX MANNER

*By Elder Paisios the Athonite—the Blessed Geronta helps us to find the right manner in which to deal with the various ecclesiastical issues confronting our Church. He exposes the nuances of ego present in both the extreme modernist and extreme traditionalist. May God protect us and His Church from both!*

**W**e must avoid extremes; extreme solutions will never solve a problem. In the old days, the grocer would add little-by-little on the scale, to find the exact amount and get the right balance. He would avoid adding or removing something abruptly. Extreme views, no matter on what side, are always a source of trouble for Mother Church; but also for those who hold them, because - in the end - both will suffer. It's like having a possessed person, full of spiritual insolence (contempt for everything), pulling on one end; and a narrow-minded fool, zealous in his ignorance, pulling on the other.

This is a confrontation, in other words, between a foolish zealot and a man steeped in spiritual arrogance. And the two bicker and strike at each other, because what is missing from both is divine Grace. And the worst that could happen, God forbid, is that there will be no end to their bickering; one

end will keep on striking at the other, with no end in sight. But those who will take these extremes in order to bend them and bring them together—in harmony—will be crowned by Jesus Christ with two unfading crowns.

We must be careful not to create problems in the Church, or magnify the small indiscretions that take place here and there, because this will only make things worse and give pleasure to the devil. The person who gets overly upset and angry at the sight of a minor mistake, and rushes head on supposedly to put things in order, resembles the foolish sacristan who sees a candle dripping and rushes head on to put it out—knocking over people and candle stands in his way and causing even a greater disorder during worship.

Unfortunately, we have so many people keen on disturbing the Mother Church these days! The educated among them have only an intellectual grasp of the dogmas; they don't approach them in the spirit of our Holy Fathers. And the uneducated are not far behind; they have grasped the dogmas with their teeth only, and that's why they cannot discuss ecclesiastical matters without grinding their teeth at each other. As a result, they cause greater harm to the Church than the enemies of our Orthodox Faith. A torrential river is not good, because it will sweep away logs, rocks, even people; but a shallow river is not good either, because it will become a breeding ground for mosquitoes.

Then there are those who spend their time criticizing each other, instead of working for the common good. Instead of keeping an eye on themselves and their behavior, they watch for mistakes in others. They are on the look out for what others say or write, and they are ready to strike at them without mercy. These people cause great harm, because—on the one hand—they do injustice to their brothers and sisters; while—on the other—they undermine them before the faithful. And these actions also end up scandalizing and sowing unbelief in weak souls.

Those who may justify their malice by claiming their right to correct others instead of concentrating on their own faults, or those who go public with Church problems—even matters too sensitive to discuss—on the principle of tell it to the Church, should do two things: First, they should examine their own little church, their families or their Brotherhood; and only if these pass the test, if they prove good, they should go ahead and embarrass Mother Church. Good children, I believe, will never bring charges against their mother.

Each person complements the character of the other, and we are all obliged to tolerate not only the spiritual temperament of others, but also their human weaknesses. Now, unfortunately, there are those who have irrational expectations of other people. They expect everyone to be like them, to have their spiritual temperament; and if the other person does not meet their standard, if they are a bit more lenient or austere, they are eager to find them non spiritual.



## Some Teachings on Prayer ~ St. Theophan the Recluse (1891)

Some of the most profound insights on prayer ever written come from the pen of the 19th century Russian Orthodox Bishop, St. Theophan the Recluse. Resigning from his episcopal see in order to pursue a lifelong dream of solitude, prayer and study. St. Theophan spent the last 28 years of his life in a monastery, living in virtual seclusion.

It was here that he spent his days worshipping, studying and carrying on a large correspondence with people all over the Church. The wisdom expressed in his letters has become a treasure of modern Orthodox spirituality. Here is sampling of extracts from some of his letters on prayer.

### Spiritual Coldness

You have correctly determined that the enemy of our fundamental striving for prayer, and therefore, our chief enemy, is a spiritual cooling. Oh, what a bitter and wretched state it is! But realize that not all decrease in the heat of fervor is pernicious chill. Some comes from weakness, other from illness of the body. Neither is bad; both will pass.

Disastrous cooling down is caused by falling away from God's will, through our own willful passion for anything ungodly. Willful passion runs counter to our conscience, which tries to enlighten and to keep us from ungodly desires. Willful passion kills the spirit and cuts off spiritual life. This you must fear most of all – as fire, as death itself. Willful passion is caused by a loss of the fear of God and by inattention to oneself. These, then, you must watch for in order to avoid such a terrible evil. As for those times when a cooling down comes involuntarily, due to sickness or weakness of body, one law applies: Endure, without changing your appointed rule of prayer, even if it is completely without savor. For those who endure patiently, cold feelings pass, and the usual warm and heartfelt fervor quickly returns.

Please, hold it in your mind and make it a rule, never to let cooling arbitrarily steal away your fervor. In case of unavoidable cooling, make it another rule to drag and to keep dragging through your established prayer rule, with the assurance that this dry performance of deeds will soon bring back life and warmth to your prayer.

### The Jesus Prayer

Zealous Christians have a certain technique that they apply to secure the continual remembrance of God more firmly. It is the constant repetition of a short prayer, the Jesus Prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me." If you haven't heard this, then listen now. If you never done this, begin now. We must continue to hold our attention on God during the day. To support our attention we remember God through the Jesus Prayer. At times it is very fruitful to substitute a few Psalms for the short prayer, Psalms you have reflected upon and memorized. You can do this during free moments and throughout the day's activities. Repeating memorized Psalms is an ancient Christian custom.

You write that you are having trouble controlling your thoughts; they scatter easily, and praying does not proceed as you wish; and that, during the day, in the midst of work and association with others, there is little remembrance of God. Instantaneous prayer life is impossible. You must make a strong effort to control your thoughts, at least to some degree. Prayer does not come about as you expect – by just wishing for it, and suddenly there it is. This does not happen.

### Forcing Oneself to Pray

St. Macarios the Great of Egypt wrote: "One must force oneself to pray, even if one has no spiritual prayer. In such a case, God seeing that a man earnestly is striving, pushing against the will of his heart (that is, his thoughts), He grants him true prayer." By true prayer, St. Macarios means the undistracted, collected deep prayer that occurs when the mind stands unswervingly before God. As the mind begins to stand firmly before God, it discovers such sweetness that it wishes to remain in true prayer forever, desiring nothing more.

I have stated more than once exactly what efforts must be made: Do not allow your thoughts to wander at will. When they do involuntarily escape, immediately turn them back, rebuking yourself, lamenting and grieving over this disorder. As St. John of the Ladder says: "**We must lock our mind into the words of the Prayer by force.**"



## Pearls of the Holy Fathers {18}

The practice of virtues, even though performed with care and effort, does not afford complete security to the soul unless grace transforms them into an essential disposition of the heart. St. Gregory of Sinai

Unless the inner man meditates upon the law of God and is nourished thereby, unless he is strengthened by reading and by prayer, he is conquered by the outer man and he serves his master.

St. Moses of Optina

When we see a special disturbance and excitement of the passions accompanying the prayer of Jesus, let us not be dejected or perplexed by it. On the contrary, let us take courage and prepare ourselves for the struggle and for the most diligent prayer in the Name of Jesus as having received a clear sign that the Prayer of Jesus has begun to produce its proper effect in us.

St. Ignatius Brianchaninov

Before the war begins, seek after your ally; before you fall ill, seek out your physician; and before grievous things come upon you, pray, and in the time of your tribulations you will find Him, and He will hearken to you.

St. Isaac the Syrian

If, in listening to the church singing and reading, you cannot understand them, then with reverence say to yourself the Prayer of the Name of Jesus, in this way: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner." Strive to put this prayer deeply into your soul and heart; say it with your mind and thought, do not allow it even for a short time to depart from your lips; unite it as well as you can to your breathing and with whatever strength you have strive at the same time to force yourself to heartfelt contrition, so that you will repent of your sins with tears. If there are no tears, there should at least be contrition and moaning of heart. See to it that the church services do not proceed without this.

Elder Nazarius of Valaam

Receive willingly and carry out effectively your loving father's advice, that by the labor of obedience you may return to Him from Whom you had departed by the sloth of disobedience.

St. Benedict of Nursia

A monk is a man who prays for the whole world. . . Perhaps, you will say that nowadays there are no monks who would pray for the whole world; but I tell you that when we have no more men of prayer the world will come to an end and great disaster will befall — as, indeed, is happening already.

St. Silouan of Mt. Athos

I have the testimonies of the Lord in writing that say, I desire not the death of the sinner, but his repentance, and that he should turn from his wickedness and live. It was for this that He came down, to save sinners, to raise the dead, to quicken lost lives, to give light to those in darkness. In truth He came, and called us to the adoption of sons, to a Holy City which is ever at peace, to the life that never dies, to glory incorruptible.

St. Macarius the Great

Let us put a good finish to our beginning. Let us abide in poverty, in the condition of strangers, in suffering affliction, in petition to God, knocking importunately at the door. Near as the body is to the soul, the Lord is nearer, to come and open the locked doors of the heart, and to bestow on us the riches of Heaven. He is good and kind to man, and His promises cannot lie, if only we continue seeking Him to the end.

St. Macarius the Great

No one can rejoice here with the world, and reign there with the Lord.

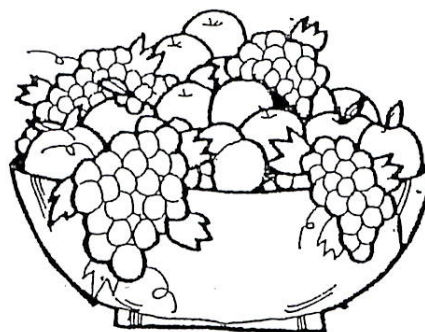
St. Gregory the Great



# *The Blessing of Fruit*

by

ALEXANDER SCHMEMANN



It is an ancient custom in Orthodox churches to bless fruits and vegetables on the feast of Transfiguration. This prompts us to ask ourselves: what is the meaning of this ancient rite, and of blessing, sanctification in general, since the blessing of fruit on Transfiguration is only one of many such rites? If we open the liturgical service book where all these rites are collected, the so-called "Book of Needs," we find special services such as blessings for a new home, a field, a garden, a well. It is as if the Church addresses itself to the entire world, as if God's right hand of blessing were being extended over all through these rites of blessing and sanctification. Why have people from time immemorial felt the need for blessings?

We must say immediately that proponents of anti-religious propaganda unquestioningly regard all these rites as superstition which, in their view, is the whole content of religion. They argue that superstition is a product of fear: a person is afraid of being poisoned, afraid of a bad harvest, afraid that his house will burn down, afraid of other people. Religion purveys deliverance from fear: sprinkle the fruit or the garden or the home with holy water and God will protect both them and you. "So you see, it's all crude ignorance, superstition and...deception." However, in presenting the issue this way, atheist propaganda does not mention any of the prayers or rites involved with these supposed superstitions. They make it sound as if priests, the clergy, are a cadre of swindlers who exploit fear and ignorance by using incomprehensible magical incantations. But if one actually listens to these prayers and looks closely at these rites, if only once in a lifetime one experiences the joy of that radiant and sunlit Transfiguration noonday blessing, then it becomes clear that the deception is not coming from the Church, but from ill-willed atheist propaganda. It is precisely this propaganda, and not the Church's prayer, which is permeated with fear, mistrust, and a need to denounce anything more elevated, more pure, more profound than its own simplistic, mundane, and materialistic approach to the world and to life. For what we see and hear and experience above all in these rites and prayers is joy and thanksgiving. But if fear were present, there could be no joy and no thanksgiving; and conversely, if joy is present, there can be no fear. Fear produces misery and mistrust, but there is none of this in transfiguration's light. But what is the source of this joy and thanksgiving?

One of Osip Mandelstam's poems, devoted to the eucharistic liturgy, the main service of Christian worship, includes this wonderful verse: "Take into your hands the whole world, as if it were a simple apple..." Perhaps here, because it is so simple and childlike, we see better than anywhere else the source of joy and thanksgiving that permeate Christian faith. In an apple, and in everything within the world, faith sees, recognizes, and accepts God's gift, filled with love, beauty and wisdom. Faith hears the apple and the world speaking of that boundless love that created the world and life and gave them to us

as our life. The world itself is the fruit of God's love for humanity, and only through the world can human beings recognize God and love him in return... And only in truly loving his own life, can a person thereby accept the life of the world as God's gift. Our fall, our sin, is that we take everything for granted—and therefore everything, including ourselves, becomes routine, depressing, empty. The apple becomes just an apple. Bread is just bread. A human being is just a human being. We know their weight, their appearance, their activities, we know everything about them, but we no longer know them, because we do not see the light that shines through them. The eternal task of faith and of the Church is to overcome this sinful, monotonous habituation; to enable us to see once again what we have forgotten how to see; to feel what we no longer feel; to experience what we are no longer capable of experiencing. Thus, the priest blesses bread and wine, lifting them up to heaven, but faith sees the bread of life, it sees sacrifice and gift, it sees communion with life eternal.

So, on Transfiguration we bring to church apples, pears, grapes, vegetables, and suddenly the church itself is transformed anew into that mystical garden, into that blessed paradise where man's life and his encounter with God began. And just as that first man rejoiced and gave thanks to God as he opened his eyes for the first time and saw this world where everything, by God's own word, was "very good," so in this rite of blessing we see the world as if for the first time, as the reflection of God's wisdom and love, and we rejoice and give thanks. And through this joy and thanksgiving our life is purified, renewed and reborn. No, we do not negate the material world, as atheist propaganda falsely claims, nor do we repudiate it; on the contrary, we sanctify and bless it, for in it we joyfully and with thanksgiving see and feel the gift of God. "Heaven and earth are full of your glory," we sing in church. The significance of blessing is that through it, this glory breaks into our drowsy consciousness, opens our ears, opens our eyes, and life itself becomes praise, joy and thanksgiving.

But what about evil, people ask me. What about suffering, what about death? To this we answer: if we are filled to the brim with this light, if we genuinely accept this blessing and sanctification and bring them within, then we ourselves become the place where the victory over evil begins. And death will be swallowed up in victory, for we live in a world where Christ lived and continues forever to be present. And if in everything and everyone in the world we see him, love him, give ourselves to him; if in all, we see the light of his presence, his love, and his victory—then nothing can separate us from him.