

Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

3101 Clairmont Ave. Birmingham, AL 35205

Church Tel. 930-9681 / 854-4235

Visit stsymeon.com &

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✠ December 11, 2011 ✠

26th Sunday after Pentecost

Second Sunday before the Nativity

The Holy Forefathers

St. Daniel the Stylite of Constantinople (490)



Let us praise Adam,
Abel, Seth and Enos,
Enoch and Noah,
Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
Moses, Job and Aaron,
Eliezar, Joshua, Barak, Samson,
Jephtha, David and Solomon!
- Matins of Forefathers

✠ Tues Dec. 13 6:00am Divine Liturgy for St. Herman

✠ Inquirer's Class – Tuesday evening ~ 6:30pm

⇒ No Wednesday service

Looking Ahead:

For the Nativity of Our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ:

✠ Pre-Nativity Compline: Wednesday, December 21 – 6:30pm

✠ Friday, December 23 – 10:00am Royal Hours of the Nativity

✠ Saturday, December 24 – 6:00pm – Christmas Eve Vigil

✠ Nativity Divine Liturgy – Sunday, December 25 - 10:00am



The Invitation

✠ What was the nature of the invitation? God the Father has prepared in Christ for the inhabitants of earth those gifts which are bestowed upon the world through Him, even the forgiveness of sins, the cleansing away of all defilement, the communion of the Holy Spirit, the glorious adoption of sons, and the kingdom of the heavens.

~ St. Cyril of Alexandria (444)

The Holy Prophets:

✠ It is somewhere said by one of the holy Prophets, *'Will the Lord God do anything without revealing the teaching thereof to His servants the prophets?'* For the God of all made known to the holy Prophets those things which were hereafter to take place, in order that they might previously declare them, that so they might not be disbelieved, when in due time what had been foretold arrived at its fulfillment.

~ St. Cyril of Alexandria

CONCERNING HOLY ANTIDORON (BLESSED BREAD)

The bread which we receive after the Divine Liturgy, known as Antidoron ("instead of the Gifts") is given especially to those who for some reason or other did not or could not prepare for Holy Communion. This bread is the remainder of the loaves (prosphora) from which the small particles were taken out to be used in the Liturgy for the Holy Lamb and other commemorative particles, and therefore it has a special blessing, although it is not the Body of Christ. The faithful should partake of this blessed bread with great piety, taking care that not a single crumb falls astray, and that when it is consumed it is done with fasting, and not treated as ordinary food. Some pious Orthodox Christians keep a number of small particles of Antidoron at home, and after their morning prayers partake of it, "instead of Holy Communion," as it was intended; in this way the whole week is sanctified and we continue to participate in the previously celebrated Liturgy.

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Pearls of the Holy Fathers 4:1

How near is our Lord unto him who believes! ~ St. John of Kronstadt

You must unfailingly approach according to this instruction, namely: approaching the holy altar, picture to yourself that in actuality you have become worthy to be at the Last Supper together with Christ and the holy Apostles.
Elder Nazarius of Valaam

An elder had received the grace of being able to see what things happening elsewhere, and he said, "I have seen a brother meditating in his cell and the demons standing outside the cell. While the brother was praying they were not able to enter, but when he stopped praying, then the demons entered the cell and fought with him
Apophthegmata Patrum

The only way that a man who wishes to be wise in the eyes of God can do so is to become a fool to the world and a despiser of human glory.
St. Isaac the Syrian

We should consider, dearly beloved brethren — we should ever and anon reflect that we have renounced the world, and are in the meantime living here as guests and strangers. Let us greet the day which assigns each of us to his own home, which snatches us hence, and sets us free from the snares of the world, and restores us to Paradise and the Kingdom. Who that has been placed in foreign lands would not hasten to return to his own country? Who that is hastening to return to his friends would not eagerly desire a prosperous gale, that he might the sooner embrace those dear to him?
St. Cyprian of Carthage

A brother asked an elder: "How is it that God promises good to the soul in the Holy Scriptures, yet the soul does not wish to remain in the good, but inclines to what is transitory and unclean?" The elder answered: "Because it has not yet tasted the sweetness of heavenly things; therefore, it turns more quickly to what is unclean."
Patrum Aegyptiorum (Fathers of Egypt)

When you go to your spiritual father for confession, do not bring yourself as an accuser of other people, saying, "he said this," and "so-and-so said that". . . but speak about your own doings, so that you may obtain forgiveness.
Elder Daniel of Kantounakia

A great elder had become clairvoyant, and he affirmed with great vigor, "The power that I have seen at the moment of baptism, I have also seen at the clothing of a monk when the habit is put on him."
Apophthegmata Patrum

A wise man is one who pays attention to himself and is quick to separate himself from all defilement.
St. Thalassius of Libya

There is no prayer so quickly heard as the prayer whereby someone asks to be reconciled with those who are angry with him. For when he charges himself with the offence, this prayer is immediately answered.
St. Isaac the Syrian

Abba Poemen often said, "We do not need anything except a vigilant spirit."
~ Sayings of the Fathers

The hardest thing of all is to subdue the flesh for God's sake. ~ St. Silouan the Athonite

An elder said, "He who lives in obedience to a spiritual father finds more profit in it than one who withdraws to the desert."
Apophthegmata Patrum

A reminder from Church History for the Nativity Season:

THE NESTORIAN HERESY AND THE THIRD ECUMENICAL COUNCIL

From *The Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God* (an excerpt)

By St. John the Wonderworker of Shanghai and San Francisco

WHEN ALL THOSE who had dared to speak against the sanctity and purity of the Most Holy Virgin Mary had been reduced to silence, an attempt was made to destroy Her veneration as *Mother of God*. In the 5th century, the Archbishop of Constantinople, Nestorius, began to preach that of Mary had been born only the man Jesus, in Whom the Divinity had taken abode and dwelt in Him as in a temple. At first he allowed his presbyter Anastasios and then he himself began to teach openly in church that one should not call Mary Theotokos, since She had not given birth to the God-man. He considered it demeaning for himself to worship a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Such sermons evoked a universal disturbance and unease over the purity of faith, at first in Constantinople and then everywhere else where rumors of the new teaching spread.

St. Proclus, the disciple of St. John Chrysostom, who was then Bishop of Cyzicus and later became Archbishop of Constantinople, gave in church a sermon, in the presence of Nestorius, in which he confessed the Son of God born in the flesh of the Virgin, Who in truth is the Theotokos (Birth-giver of God), for already in the womb of the Most Pure One, at the time of Her conception, the Divinity was united with the Child conceived of the Holy Spirit; and this Child, even though He was born of the Virgin Mary only in His human nature, still was born already true God and true man.

Nestorius stubbornly refused to change his teaching, saying that one must distinguish between Jesus and the Son of God, that Mary should not be called Theotokos, but *Christotokos* (Birth-giver of *Christ*), since the Jesus Who was born of Mary was only the man Christ (which signifies Messiah, anointed one), like to God's anointed ones of old, the Prophets, only surpassing them in fullness of communion with God. The teaching of Nestorius thus constituted a denial of the whole economy of God, for if from Mary only a man was born, then it was not God Who suffered for us, but a man.

St. Cyril, Archbishop of Alexandria, finding out about the teaching of Nestorius and about the Church disorders evoked by this teaching in Constantinople, wrote a letter to Nestorius, in which he tried to persuade him to hold the teaching which the Church had confessed from its foundation, and not to introduce anything novel into this teaching. In addition, St. Cyril wrote to the clergy and people of Constantinople that they should be firm in the Orthodox faith and not fear the persecutions by Nestorius against those who were not in agreement with him. St. Cyril also wrote informing of everything to Rome, to the holy Pope Celestine, who with all his flock was then firm in Orthodoxy.

St. Celestine for his part wrote to Nestorius and called upon him to preach the Orthodox faith, and not his own. But Nestorius remained deaf to all persuasion and replied that what he was preaching was the Orthodox faith, while his opponents were heretics. St. Cyril wrote Nestorius again and composed twelve anathemas, that set forth in twelve paragraphs the chief differences of the Orthodox teachings from the teachings preached by Nestorius, acknowledging as excommunicated from the Church everyone who should reject even a single one of the paragraphs he had composed.

Nestorius rejected the whole of the text composed by St. Cyril and wrote his own exposition of the teaching which he preached, likewise in twelve paragraphs, giving over to anathema (that is, excommunication from the Church) everyone who did not accept it. The danger to purity of faith was increasing all the time. St. Cyril wrote a letter to Theodosius the Younger, who was then reigning, to his wife Eudoxia and to the Emperor's sister Pulcheria, entreating them likewise to concern themselves with ecclesiastical matters and restrain the heresy.

It was decided to convene an Ecumenical Council, at which hierarchs gathered from the ends of the world should decide whether the faith preached by Nestorius were Orthodox. As the place for the

Council, which was to be the Third Ecumenical Council, they chose the city of Ephesus, in which the Most Holy Virgin Mary had once dwelt together with the Apostle John the Theologian. St. Cyril gathered his fellow bishops in Egypt and together with them traveled by sea to Ephesus. From Antioch overland came John, Archbishop of Antioch, with the Eastern bishops. The Bishop of Rome, St. Celestine, could not go himself and asked St. Cyril to defend the Orthodox faith, and in addition he sent from himself two bishops and the presbyter of the Roman Church, Philip, to whom he also gave instructions as to what to say. To Ephesus there came likewise Nestorius and the bishops of the Constantinople region, and the bishops of Palestine, Asia Minor, and Cyprus.

On the 10th of the calends of July, according to the Roman reckoning, that is, June 22, 431, in the Ephesian Church of the Virgin Mary (Our own Deacon Ephraim has visited the ruins of this church in Ephesus.), the bishops assembled, headed by the Bishop of Alexandria; Cyril, and the Bishop of Ephesus, Memnon, and took their places. (*Note: Our own Deacon Ephraim has visited the ruins of this very church in Ephesus*) In their midst was placed a Gospel as a sign of the invisible headship of the Ecumenical Council by Christ Himself. At first the Symbol of Faith which had been composed by the First and Second Ecumenical Councils was read; then there was read to the Council the Imperial Proclamation which was brought by the representatives of the Emperors Theodosius and Valentinian, Emperors of the Eastern and Western parts of the Empire.

The Imperial Proclamation having been heard, the reading of documents began, and there were read the Epistles of Cyril and Celestine to Nestorius, as well as the replies of Nestorius. The Council, by the lips of its members, acknowledged the teaching of Nestorius to be impious and condemned it, acknowledging Nestorius as deprived of his See and of the priesthood. A decree was composed concerning this which was signed by about 160 participants of the Council; and since some of them represented also other bishops who did not have the opportunity to be personally at the Council the decree of the Council was actually the decision of more than 200 bishops, who had their Sees in the various regions of the Church at that time, and they testified that they confessed the Faith which from all antiquity had been kept in their localities.

Thus the decree of the Council was the voice of the Ecumenical Church, which clearly expressed its faith that Christ, born of the Virgin, is the true God Who became man; and inasmuch as Mary gave birth to the perfect Man Who was at the same time perfect God, She rightly should be revered as THEOTOKOS.

At the end of the session its decree was immediately communicated to the waiting people. The whole of Ephesus rejoiced when it found out that the veneration of the Holy Virgin had been defended, for She was especially revered in this city, of which She had been a resident during Her earthly life and a Patroness after Her departure into eternal life. The people greeted the fathers ecstatically when in the evening they returned home after the session. They accompanied them to their homes with lighted torches and burned incense in the streets. Everywhere were to be heard joyful greetings, the glorification of the Ever-Virgin, and the praises of the Fathers who had defended Her name against the heretics. The decree of the Council was displayed in the streets of Ephesus. (To be continued)

Our Christ is Invisibly Present

✠ With fear and reverence may you stand in church, for our Christ is present invisibly with the holy angels. The attentive and reverent He fills to the full with grace and blessing, the heedless He censures as unworthy.

Try to receive Communion as often as possible – you have the freedom – for divine Communion is the best help for one struggling against sin.

May you approach the divine mystery with much compunction, contrition and consciousness of your sins. Great is the mercy of God, Who condescends to enter within you, not abhorring the multitude of your sins. But from a boundless love and affection He comes to sanctify you, counting you worthy to be His child and co-heir of His Kingdom.

Elder Ephraim

Saints remembered this week:

December 12 ~ St. Spyridon the Wonderworker of Trimythus

St. Spyridon, the God-bearing Father of the Church, the great defender of Corfu and the boast of all the Orthodox, had Cyprus as his homeland. He was simple in manner and humble of heart, and was a shepherd of sheep. He was married and had a daughter named Irene. After his wife's departure from this life, he was appointed Bishop of Trimythus, and thus he became also a shepherd of rational sheep. When the First Ecumenical Council was assembled in Nicaea, he also was present, and by means of his most simple words stopped the mouths of the Arians who were wise in their own conceit. By the divine grace which dwelt in him, he wrought such great wonders that he received the surname "Wonderworker." So it is that, having tended his flock piously and in a manner pleasing to God, he reposed in the Lord about the year 350, leaving to his country his sacred relics as a consolation and source of healing for the faithful.

About the middle of the seventh century, because of the incursions made by the barbarians at that time, his sacred relics were taken to Constantinople, where they remained, being honored by the emperors themselves. But before the Fall of Constantinople, which took place on May 29, 1453, a certain priest named George Kalokhairetes, the parish priest of the church where the Saint's sacred relics, as well as those of Saint Theodora the Empress, were kept, took them away on account of the impending peril. Travelling by way of Serbia, he came as far as Arta in Epirus, a region in Western Greece opposite to the isle of Corfu. From there, while the misfortunes of the Christian people were increasing with every day, he passed over to Corfu about the year 1460. The relics of Saint Spyridon remain to this day, according to the rights of inheritance, the most precious treasure of the priest's own descendants, and they continue to be a staff for the faithful in Orthodoxy, and a supernatural wonder for those that behold him; for even after the passage of 1,500 years, they have remained incorrupt, and even the flexibility of his flesh has been preserved. Truly wondrous is God in His Saints! (Ps. 67:3 5)

December 13 ~ St. Herman the Wonderworker of Alaska

St. Herman (his name is a variant of Germanus) was born near Moscow in 1756. In his youth he became a monk, first at the Saint Sergius Hermitage near Saint Petersburg on the Gulf of Finland; while he dwelt there, the most holy Mother of God appeared to him, healing him of a grave malady. Afterwards he entered Valaam Monastery on Valiant Island in Lake Ladoga; he often withdrew into the wilderness to pray for days at a time. In 1794, answering a call for missionaries to preach the Gospel to the Aleuts, he came to the New World with the first Orthodox mission to Alaska. He settled on Spruce Island, which he called New Valaam, and here he persevered, even in the face of many grievous afflictions mostly at the hands of his own countrymen in the loving service of God and of his neighbour. Besides his many toils for the sake of the Aleuts, he subdued his flesh with great asceticism, wearing chains, sleeping little, fasting and praying much. He brought many people to Christ by the example of his life, his teaching, and his kindness and sanctity, and was granted the grace of working miracles and of prophetic insight. Since he was not a priest, Angels descended at Theophany to bless the waters in the bay; Saint Herman used this holy water to heal the sick. Because of his unwearying missionary labors, which were crowned by God with the salvation of countless souls, he is called the Apostle to America, and has likewise been renowned as a wonderworker since his repose in 1837.

Saints remembered this week:

December 13 ~ St. Lucia the Virgin-martyr

Saint Lucia was from Syracuse in Sicily, a virgin betrothed to a certain pagan. Since her mother suffered from an issue of blood, she went with her to the shrine of Saint Agatha at Catania to seek healing (see Feb. 5). There Saint Agatha appeared to Lucia in a dream, assuring her of her mother's healing, and foretelling Lucia's martyrdom. When her mother had been healed, Lucia gladly distributed her goods to the poor, preparing herself for her coming confession of Christ. Betrayed as a Christian by her betrothed to Paschasius the Governor, she was put in a brothel to be abused, but was preserved in purity by the grace of God. Saint Lucia was beheaded in the year 304, during the reign of Diocletian.

December 17 ~ St. Dionysios of Zakynthos

The holy hierarch, Saint Dionysios, who was born and reared on Zakynthos, was the son of pious and wealthy parents, Mocius and Paulina by name. In his youth he entered the ancient monastery of the Strophada Islands, which lie south of Zakynthos, and there he donned the monastic habit. Later, he was appointed Archbishop of Aegina, and adorned its throne for a considerable time. Thereafter he returned to his homeland.

One incident in his life especially reveals to what virtue he attained. A man came to him in desperation, witnessing that he had committed a murder, and was being pursued by the slain man's family. He asked Saint Dionysios to give him refuge. The Saint agreed to this, upon learning that it was his own brother whom the man had slain, he said nothing, but concealing the agony of his grief, hid him. When the Saint's kinsmen arrived at the monastery, he told them that the Murderer had gone by such and such a way. When they had departed, he admonished the man concerning the gravity of his sin, instructed him in repentance, and sent him off in peace having forgiven him his brother's murder. According to local tradition, this man later returned and became a monk at this same monastery. Saint Dionysios reposed in peace in 1621, leaving behind his sacred and incorrupt relics as a treasure for his fellow citizens.

On the Incarnation

"With this purpose did the God of all things become man, that is, in order that by suffering in the flesh, which is susceptible to suffering, He might redeem our whole race, which was sold to death; and that by working wondrous things by His divinity, which is not susceptible to suffering, through the medium of the flesh, He might restore it to that incorruptible and blessed life from which it fell away by yielding to the devil; and that He might establish the holy orders of intelligent existences in the heavens in immutability by the mystery of His Incarnation, the doing of which is the recapitulation of all things in Himself."

"He remained therefore, also, after His Incarnation, according to nature, God infinite, and more, having the activity proper and suitable to Himself...and manifested through His perfectly holy flesh by wondrous acts economically, to the intent that He might be believed in as God, while working out of Himself by the flesh, which by nature is weak, the salvation of the universe."

St. Hippolytus of Rome (2nd C)

I Believe ...

(from Celebration of Faith': Volume 1, I Believe, by Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, SI'S Press)

...In one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible...

I believe in one God This confession of the one God is the principle of all principles in Christianity, its most basic foundation. Christianity first entered into the world ruled by polytheism, for pre-Christian man named nature as his God, he deified nature, or more accurately, the various powers acting within it. "The world is full of gods," wrote the Greek philosopher Thales, and this means, in modern terms, that a multitude of powers and "laws" operate within the world.

Christianity rebelled against the world's deification by preaching and confessing one God, meaning that all powers, all life, all "laws," everything that lives in the world, the very world itself, is from God, but is *not* God.

Paganism and polytheism sensed the divine origins of the world, but they did not know God. Its "gods" were merely reflections of the world itself, which accounts for the rivalries among the gods of polytheism, and the idolatrous, magical character of paganism.

Therefore, to proclaim, to confess the one God means to affirm that there is a spiritual Supreme Being, a transcendent Being Who alone is capable of revealing the meaning of each form of life.

The Symbol of Faith immediately names this one God, *Father*: "I believe in one God, the Father..." For if the word "God" conveys the absolute transcendence of the Divine, His absolute supremacy over the world, the experience of God as the Most High, the Unreachable, the Other — then naming God "Father" affirms not only His relationship to the world, but affirms also a relationship whose very essence is love, intimacy and care.

If Christianity rejects polytheism and proclaims God as the absolute Being, then with exactly the same force it also rejects that idea of God known as *deism*. This is the understanding of God as "cause," or, in the famous analogy of Voltaire, as the Watchmaker who creates a complex mechanism, sets it in motion, then participates

no further in its action. It is precisely this sort of abstract, purely philosophical understanding of God which is rejected when we name God Father. The Father gives life and continues to love His creation, to care for it, to participate in it. The Gospel says that God is love, and therefore in naming Him Father we are responding to His love with our own love, our own trust, our own loving, filial obedience.

Having named Him Father, the Symbol of Faith also confesses God to be "Almighty." With this word we express our belief that the God Whom we call Father embraces with His Providence all of life, or better, that everything in the world belongs to Him, is from Him, lives through Him.

There is nothing that Christianity has fought more forcefully than "dualism", the belief of many pre-Christian religions in two creations: light and darkness, good and evil. Dualism has its origins in the experience that suffering and evil — in the understanding of the dualists — has its source in matter, it is therefore necessary to escape matter and to seek pure spirituality. Matter comes from evil, is evil. Later we will speak again about the Christian understanding of the evil that has spilled into the world created by a good and radiant God. For now, let me simply emphasize that this understanding excludes any sort of dualism. The world is created in love. If it falls from love, then this is precisely a fall, and not the essence of the world.

Finally, the Symbol of Faith confesses God to be the Father, the Almighty, the Creator - "the Creator of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible." **The world is created, its origin is in God. It does not come from itself, it is not the accidental linking of cells, it is not absurd. It has meaning, it has an origin and a purpose, and everything within it is connected to transcendent divine wisdom: heaven and earth, visible and invisible. "And God saw that it was good"** (Gen 1:31). With this confession every coarsely oversimplified understanding of the world, every reduction to pure "objectivity" is rejected. Created by God, the world reflects divine Wisdom, divine beauty, divine Truth. Everything is from God, everything is permeated with transcendent meaning; in this, as we shall see later, is both the joy and tragedy of the world and of life within it. ✕

WHY THE NATIVITY FAST HAS BEEN ESTABLISHED

From "Orthodox Russia," No. 21, 1995

The Orthodox Church prepares its faithful to welcome the Nativity of Christ in a worthy manner by means of a 40-day Nativity Fast, which lasts from November 15th to December 25th.

Besides generally known reasons, the Nativity Fast is also undertaken by Orthodox Christians in order to venerate the suffering and sorrow undergone by the Holy Mother of God at the hands of the scribes and the Pharisees just prior to the sacred event of Christ's Nativity.

Holy Tradition tells us that shortly before the Righteous Joseph and the Holy Virgin set off for Bethlehem, they were subjected to the following tribulation: A certain scribe by the name of Ananias, entering their home and seeing the Virgin pregnant, was severely distressed and went to the High Priest and the entire Jewish council, saying: "Joseph the carpenter, who has been regarded as a righteous man, has committed an iniquity. He has secretly violated the Virgin who was given to him from the Temple of God for safekeeping. And now she is with child." Then the High Priest's servants went to Joseph's house, took Mary and Joseph, and brought them to the High Priest, who began to denounce and shame the Most-blessed Virgin Mary.

But the Holy Virgin, crying in deep sorrow, replied: "The Lord God is my witness that I am innocent and have known no man." Then the High Priest accused the Righteous Joseph, but the latter swore on oath that he was not guilty of this sin. Yet the High Priest did not believe them and subjected them to the trial that was customary in those times, (when a woman suspected of violation was given to drink bitter water that had been cursed by the High Priest.). However, the trial just served to confirm the innocence of the Holy Virgin and the Righteous Joseph. All those present were amazed at this, unable to understand how a Virgin could simultaneously be with child and yet remain inviolate.

After that the High Priest allowed the holy couple to go home in peace. The Righteous Joseph took the Virgin Mary and went to his house, joyously glorifying God. But this was not the end of the Holy Theotokos' trials. It is well known that afterwards she shared with Joseph the toil of a three-day journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. And in Bethlehem there was no place for the Holy Virgin either in an inn, or in some home, and since night was already approaching, She was forced to seek shelter in a cave which served as a resting place for cattle. In this humblest of shelters the Most-blessed Virgin remained in prayer and divine contemplation. It is here that she painlessly gave birth to our Lord Jesus Christ, Savior of the world.

We can see from all of the above that the days immediately preceding the Nativity were not days of rest and comfort for the Holy Mother of God. In those days she suffered various sorrows and trials, but did not leave off her prayers and contemplation. The Holy Church appeals to the faithful to participate, at least to some small degree, in the Holy Theotokos' spiritual labor, constraining one's flesh during the Nativity Fast and nourishing one's soul with prayer.

However, the Church warns us that external fasting only is not enough. We must also apply ourselves to internal fasting, which consists of shunning malice, deceit, wrath, worldly bustle, and other vices. During this Fast, as at all times, we must show works of love and mercy to our fellow human beings, doing all we can to help those in need and in sorrow. Only then will our fasting be genuine and not hypocritical, only then will it be God-pleasing, and only then will we know the true joy of the bright Feast of Christ's Nativity.

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Take as an example the wisdom of Joseph and his submission. Do battle in chastity and service until you make yourself a king.

~ St. Pachomius the Great (348)