

Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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✠ June 24, 2012 ✠

Nativity of the Holy Glorious Prophet Forerunner St. John the Baptist



⇒ This Week:

✠ Thurs. June 28 6:30pm ~ Vespers – Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul

⇒ Reception for Fr. Gerasim Eliel to follow

✠ Fri. June 29 10:00am ~ Divine Liturgy – Feast of St. Peter & Paul

⇒ Thanks to all our Pepper Place workers and contributors!

⇒ Father will be away the next two Sundays and week of July 1 - 8.

⇒ The Apostles' Fast

concludes ~

June 30

HOMILY from the Prologue:

About St. John the Baptist {the Forerunner} and how Isaiah Prophesied Concerning Him

"The voice of him that cries in the wilderness: Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isaiah 40:3).

When a king wants to visit a certain place, he sends before him in advance his heralds. To an unusual King an unusual herald is appropriate. The herald of Christ the King in the wilderness was Moses; in Jerusalem, the Prophets; in Nazareth, the Archangel; in Bethlehem, the Magi of the East; on the Jordan, St. John. Not one king in the history of mankind has had such heralds. St. John the Baptist was also as unusual and special as were the other heralds of Christ.

He was the voice crying in the two-fold wilderness: in the wilderness of Jordan and in the human wilderness. Just as the wilderness of Jordan was fruitless and dry, so the wilderness of the human spirit, was unfruitful and dry. John was not able to make the human wilderness green and fruitful, but he cleared and plowed it and, in that way, was preparing the earth and leveled it for the great Sower Who, by His coming, brings with Him the seed and the rain to sow the seed of knowledge and the rain of grace from on high to make it green and be fruitful.

By repentance, John prepared the way and by baptism in water, made the path straight. The way and the paths these are the souls of men. By repentance, the souls of men were prepared to receive the seed of Christ and by baptism in water to bury that seed deep in the earth of their heart. The proud and the lowly when they are immersed naked in the water are all as one, equal in their nothingness before the majesty of the All-glorious Christ the Savior: "Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low" (Isaiah 40:4). The word here is not about earthly valleys and hills but of lowly and proud men. As corpses in the grave are all the same before the eyes of a living man, thus all sinners, lowly and proud, slaves and masters are equal before the living God. Such a wondrous vision was seen by Isaiah, the son of Amos, the prophet of the living God, the one and true God.

O Lord, Heavenly King, to Whom the heavenly hosts worship day and night, look down once again upon our nothingness and because of Thy humiliation and Passion for us - save us!
To Thee be glory and thanksgiving always! Amen.

Pearls of the Holy Fathers 6:2

When at prayer in church it is profitable to stand with closed eyes in internal mindfulness, and to open your eyes only when you become downcast, or when sleep should weigh you down and incline you to doze; then you should fix your eyes upon an icon and the candle burning before it.

St. Seraphim of Sarov

At the approach of the great Feasts you must be especially watchful over yourself. The enemy endeavors beforehand to chill the heart towards the subject of the event celebrated, so that the Christian should not honor it by the heartfelt consideration of its reality. He acts upon us either through the atmosphere, or through the food and drink we have taken, or through his fiery arrows, plentifully darted at the heart and violently inflaming the entire man, at which time evil, impure and blasphemous thoughts occur to us, and we feel a hearty aversion to the subject of the solemnity. We must overcome the enemy by forcing ourselves to devout meditation and prayer.

St. John of Kronstadt

Take provisions for your long way, O wise man! Remove the heaviness of sleep from your heart, O invited guest! Set your baggage in order for departure, O sojourner! The morningtide is nigh at hand, O wayfarer; why do you sleep? Arise and prepare yourself, O mariner who is to voyage on the sea! Arise and make ready the tackle of your ship, for you do not know at what hour the wind will carry you out!

St. Isaac the Syrian

The seeing and evaluating of one's own achievements and deeds will only increase sinful and deceitful self-esteem and diminish our sole hope on God's mercy. What is more reliable and pleasing to God from us is the following: "O Lord, I have nothing and dare not even lift up my eyes; have mercy on me according to Thy great mercy!" The more there will be contrition and trust in God, and not in deeds or something else of our own, the more God's mercy will increase in us.

New Hieromartyr Barlaam of Russia

'Come, my people, enter into your inner room' — the shrine of your heart, which is closed to every conception derived from the sensible world, that image-free dwelling-place illumined by dispassion and the overshadowing of God's grace; 'shut your door' — to all things visible; 'hide yourself for a brief moment' — the whole of man's life is but a moment.

St. John of Karpathos

There is no sweeter life than the spiritual life. Love our Christ greatly. We shall depart, perhaps tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, we know not when. And afterward, where we shall be, we will yearn for this life, but will not be able to come back. We shall long to be able to live it again in order to struggle more and better, to repent, to love our Christ more, but we shall not be able. Therefore, let us pray now so that we not grieve our Christ.

Elder Ieronymos of Aegina (1966)

Repentance is the way and the key to the Kingdom of Heaven, without which no one can enter into it. Let us keep to this path, O brethren; for the path now in this short life is narrow and afflicted, but later in that endless future life there shall be abundant and unutterable rewards.

St. Alexander of Svir (17th C)

I am neither a faster nor a man of prayer nor a struggler, but on the contrary, I eat and drink and have contact and speak with everyone; but I do everything to the glory of God. In all my sorrows I often remember and cry out with heartfelt sighs the favorite words of Chrysostom: "Glory be to God for all things!"

Elder Hilarion

God cannot be known except by devotion. ~ St. Hilary of Poitiers

Becoming a Monastic: How Do I Decide?

"Go to the monastery and there you will find out God's will." This is the answer given by one elderly monk to a young person seeking God. Only a direct experience of the monastic life will reveal a calling to live it. Jesus points this out, in a sense, when the rich young man asks Him, "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" The answer came, "Keep the commandments'...'All these I have observed; what do I still lack?'...'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Mt. 19:16-26).

Perfection and Following Christ

We all know that our main goal in life is to attain salvation through a lifetime process of daily struggle to be holier, to acquire the Holy Spirit. In the Gospel of St. Matthew cited above we are told how we can reach this goal. To keep the commandments and gain eternal life is asked of all Christians. But to be perfect — if this is your wish — first, sell all you have and give to the poor. Then, Christ urges us, "Come, follow Me." Here we have the very root of monastic life, called into existence by Christ Himself. The foremost model of this manner of life is our Lord Jesus Christ, Who obeyed God the Father even unto death. To follow Him is a total calling and total obedience. This is asked of all who wish to be perfect, particularly the monastics.

To follow Him "out of the world" is not a separation stemming from hate,

but from love. Leaving the world's preoccupations behind, the monastic is free to pray for the salvation of the world. Day and night, whether the world is busy rushing here and there or sleeping, the monastics are in church praying. They safeguard humanity with their prayers which are like ever-burning flames going up to God all around the world. Around the clock someone is praying, keeping the flame burning continually. Some monasteries read the holy Psalter unceasingly, all the monks taking turns. Thus the monastics struggle to purify mind, heart, soul and body, and become living temples of God by fully responding to Christ's call to 'be perfect and follow Him."

Discernment of God's Will

"Go to the monastery and you shall find out" is the advice: see how nuns and monks live, in your home follow the monastic saying, "be a monk before you become one" — and pray, pray fervently to God to reveal to you His holy will. And there will be a day when you will know deep in your heart the answer and nothing will hold you back from Christ.

In the lives of the Saints we see many who when they understood this calling, immediately left for the monastery without looking back. Many people say, "But how can we know God's will?" Pray, ask in prayer to be guided, knowing that God is a living presence in your life — and He Who reads hearts will reveal His will to you.

Today, before beginning a secular career, one must be accepted at

demanding schools and study with great perseverance until a diploma and tide are earned. To learn the monastic life it is quite different: we go to the monasteries to see, understand and learn from living examples. The only way to learn the life is to live it. To put on monastic clothes does not mean that we studied beforehand somewhere until we reached a degree of perfection, it is rather only the first step. We must not be deterred by those who, feeling sorry for a young life "wasted" in the cloister, ask, "Whatever made you become a nun?"; or by others who just do not understand at all, thinking it to be an eccentric, exaggerated life. If we pay heed to any, it should be to those who exclaim, "How blessed are the parents who have consecrated a child to God."

The Influence of the Family

Sometimes there is difficulty in receiving family support for what is seen as a radical decision. It is truly a blessing when a family can properly understand the sacrifice being asked of them. From the Old Testament we know that we should always offer to God the best we have, an unblemished, pure offering. In the New Testament we see the Father sending His Only-begotten Son to be crucified, offered as sacrifice to save the world from sin and death. There is also the example of the righteous Joachim and Anna who prayed all their life to have a child. Granted one in old age, they consecrated her to God from conception. This is the Mother of God, given as a gift to righteous parents who in their turn gave her back to God. How beautiful to give their only child to God and not to keep her to themselves!

Many of the greatest Saints of the Orthodox Church were exposed to the monastic life since childhood or even dedicated to God from birth. Many Saints were born to parents who prayed and fasted. The children were received from God and offered back to Him in thanksgiving. What joy and happiness did St. Emilia have to be the mother of St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Macrina, St. Peter of Sebaste and Monk Naucratus: out of nine children, five became monastics — and of those, four became canonized Saints. Children are given to the parents by God. Parents are actually only guardians called to direct them back to God, and one day to give an account for their upbringing (cf. Ezekiel 18).

The reward for a family which joyfully gives one of their own to God is shown in an oral tradition that says, "when she becomes a nun she will lift up with her even nine generations of her family."

"Thy Will Be Done"

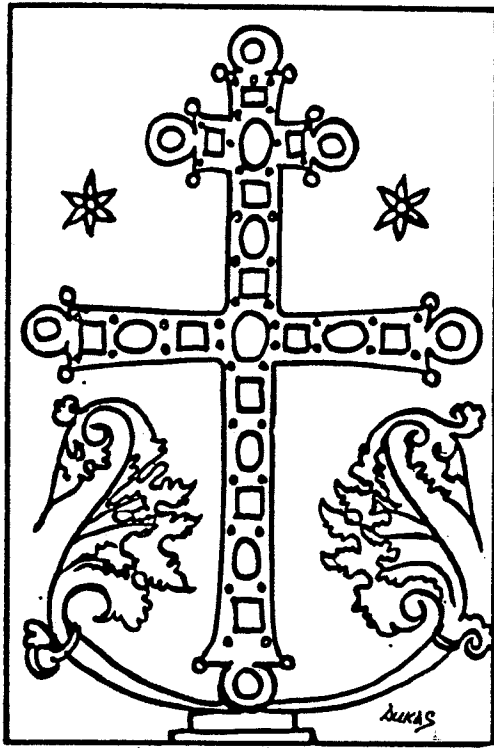
We may or may not have the benefit of a supportive and godly family, or friends who understand our hunger. But it is God's will which must determine the decision about the direction of our lives. Those who hear in their hearts "Come, follow Me," are invited to visit, experience the monastery — perhaps the flame of desire to live for Jesus alone will ignite. "For nothing thrown into the fire can remain in its own nature, but necessarily it becomes fire"

(The Fifty Spiritual Homilies of St. Macarius, G. Maloney tr., Paulist Press, 1992, p.215).

From "Life Transfigured" - Holy Transfiguration Monastery ~ Nativity 1999

June 27

*St. Sampson the Glorious
Innkeeper and Physician*



It comes as no surprise that scientific skill of a sixth century physician could be combined with the devout worship of a zealous Christian with the result that he became a venerated saint of the Church. Sampson, who came to be known as the "Glorious Innkeeper and Physician," was

such a man. His title is curious only until something is known about this rare man whose life was crowded with glorious accomplishments in the name of the Lord and for the benefit of mankind.

Sampson, a native of Rome, was descended from royalty through his father's kinship with the lineage of Emperor Constantine. His birthright assured him a life of comfort and glamor, but instead he chose to pledge himself to the service of God and mankind. The demands of his tasks were never too much to bear and he took great delight in them. Following the customary liberal and fine arts education, he applied himself exclusively to the study of physical medicine and spiritual philosophy, for which he exhibited a remarkable skill and insight.

He acquired an enviable reputation as physician and man of faith when, with the passing on of his parents, he transformed the family estate into a clinic and hostel for the physically incapacitated and the spiritually distressed. Within a short time, the word of his healing power of body and mind attracted so many people seeking both his physical and spiritual healing, that he found it necessary to hire a staff to care for the ever-increasing numbers. All his benevolence was at his own personal expense. When he was satisfied that his refuge was adequately staffed,

he endowed the hostel with the total wealth willed to him, content to live in poverty. He then set out for Constantinople, the city he had for so many years yearned to see.

Sampson's reputation preceded him to Constantinople, and although he had hoped to live in relative obscurity, devoting the remainder of his days to asceticism, he found as much need for his services in this Byzantine paradise as there had been in Rome. Lacking the facilities which had been at his disposal in Rome, he settled in modest quarters contributed by a kind admirer and without ceremony set about waging a one-man war against disease and despair.

Sampson's holy work did not go unknown to Patriarch Menas of Constantinople. When Emperor Justinian fell ill and failed to get relief from his physicians, the Patriarch Menas suggested that the suffering Emperor summon the physician Sampson. The weary Justinian nodded assent; Sampson was rushed to his bedside. The physician's skill was equal to the occasion and the grateful ruler rewarded his healer with the establishment of a medical center that far exceeded what he had left in Rome.

Emperor Justinian is remembered as the man responsible for the erection of the Cathedral of Haghia Sophia in Constantinople. Although Sampson's medical center was not as grand as the Cathedral, it was as noble in purpose. There, Sampson continued to serve God and man until his death, which came peacefully on 27 June 598. +

Lord! I thank Thee with my whole heart for having saved me an innumerable multitude of times from the shamefulness, violence, and cruelty of the passions, and for having quenched in me the fiery arrows of the evil one, and for having guarded my soul with peace, refreshing it with the dew of Thy grace. Glory to Thee, most merciful and Almighty, that by Thy grace I still remain whole and unharmed, in spite of the innumerable wiles of the invisible and most evil enemies endeavouring to devour me! I believe and know that Thou, Lord, wilt deliver and save me from all their snares and calumnies, by ways known unto Thee, and wilt grant Thy heavenly kingdom to me, and not to me only, but to all those who live piously and are subjected to the calumnies of the spirits of evil; for to Thee it appertains to be merciful and to save those who desire to be saved, and even those who do not desire to be saved. "Save me", it is said, "whether I wish or do not wish to be saved" (Evening prayer of St. John Damascene).

Life in a Monastery

(Holy Transfiguration Monastery Newsletter)

Life in a monastery can be unimaginable to some. How could one live in the same place for years? Live with the same people day in and day out? And what about attending all those church services, whether or not we are in the mood to pray? Obedience, a hallmark of monastic life, is off the charts in anything that we free-spirited Americans would even consider. Yet, for centuries, and even here in modern day America, some have freely chosen to live this ancient way of life.

What one comes to see and experience, if one is willing to stay long enough in a monastic community, is that this way of life is truly a gift from God. Along with the normal adjustments of the first year or so, comes a bonding with those whom we now call mother and sister. These mothers and sisters in Christ now stand beside us when we feel down or lonely or even confused by the ways of our new home. They, by their own example, teach us how to be joyful in the daily routine—which rather than being boring, becomes a real atmosphere for prayer, silence, and gentle conversation with God. We see them willingly break their routine when pilgrims arrive or feast days alter the schedule. They show us by their stability why the Psalmist would cry, "A day in thy courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness" (Ps. 84:10).

Attending the daily services nurtures in us the vocabulary of prayer. We begin to

memorize the Psalms just by hearing them so often. The theology of the Church is sung in hymns and the daily commemoration of saints begins to make them familiar friends who are "present" to us as we move through our temptations and trials. Lifting our voices in daily praise of God lifts the heart as well. Tensions, worries, cares seem to float off into the heavens along with the words of song. Again we can sing from Psalm 84, "Blessed are those who dwell in thy house ever singing thy praise!"

On a somewhat more practical plane we might be surprised to experience how the Lord cares for monastics and provides for their every physical need. Food arrives in the hands of pious pilgrims who visit for an hour or a week. Neighbors share the harvest of their productive gardens, and money to pay for electricity, heat and other necessities comes in the mail along with the bills—most often, just in time and just enough. What about the building projects that monastic communities accomplish? Such funding does not arrive from government grants, but from supportive faithful who offer back to God part of what He has so freely given them. A miracle? Truly, indeed, and promised by the Lord who said to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all things shall be given to you (cf. Mt 6-33).

In a time of sickness or family crisis, the prayers of the community and the liturgical services comfort the monastic. The holy sacraments of Confession, Communion, and Unction are available for our healing and strength. The walls of

the monastery are adorned with icons to remind us of the presence of the Lord and His saints. Relics of saints are present in the church for us to venerate and to ask their supplication. Blessed holy oils give us peace as we are anointed in prayer. Also the labors and work assignments normally carried out by us are lovingly taken care of by the other sisters until we can return to our duties.

Certainly, we will not deny that monastic life also comes with many struggles—opportunities to rid ourselves of selfishness, pride, laziness and all the other passions. Some days and seasons can feel very dark and heavy. Yet along

with these trials so much support and help is available. Opening ourselves to such help opens the whole kingdom of God to us. He is present in every moment, in every circumstance, and is ready to pour out His mercy if only we ask.

Experiencing life in a monastery year after year, season after season, trial after trial, affirms in us the knowledge that God truly cares for those who seek first the kingdom. We can then chant with heartfelt feeling the Litiya hymn, "Rich men have turned poor and gone hungry, but those who seek the Lord shall lack no good thing" (cf. Psalm 34).

From the Letters of Elder John Krestiankin of the Pskov Caves Monastery (2006):

"Everyone saves himself in his own field. Human mistakes – yours, mine, the Synod members', the Patriarch's – are all before God's judgment. But God's judgment and man's judgment are not the same.

Mainly I will have to answer whether or not I am doing what I am blessed to do, whether I am saving myself like a true slave of the Lord, and whether those who have been entrusted to me are being saved around me.

I myself always kept to such a rule of life: "Do not ask for anything, and do not refuse anything." I myself was ordained, and I accepted it as a natural course of life (I was drawn to the Church from childhood). I accepted also a seven-year suspension from serving (ed. a seven-year prison sentence in Soviet times) as from God, and was returned to service by God's will before the term was over. 'Everything through Him, everything from Him, and everything to Him.' That is how we live.

Now that I have reached the end of my life's path, I can witness to the fact that there is nothing better nor surer than to live according to God's will. Life's circumstances quite clearly show us God's will. It is necessary and important on our part to have an inner spiritual yearning and desire to fulfill God's will in our lives. Believe me, the Lord accepts and justifies our sincere feelings. Beyond our understanding and comprehension, He leads our rickety little boat with His firm hand.

I am ninety-one years old, and I can witness to myself and others that the Lord know our hidden thoughts, and guides our lives according to our faith and striving for the truth, often healing and correcting things that due to our ignorance and misunderstanding might prevent us from fulfilling the will of God in our lives. To the believer, all that is according to faith is for the good, and everything that comes to us in life is either for our help or instruction." ❖ ❖ ❖