



## *Fire & Light*

### St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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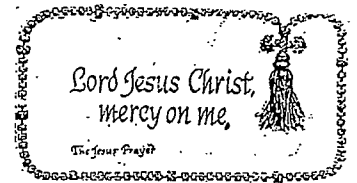
✠ **March 3, 2013** ✠

### Sunday of the Prodigal Son

Martyrs Eutropius & Cleonicus of Amasea (308)

Martyr Basiliscus of Comana (308)

No kind word,  
or thoughtful deed  
is ever lost.  
It lives in eternity,  
for God Himself  
is love. ~ anon.



✠ **Tues. March 5, 6:30pm ~ Inquirer's Class**

⇒ *Many Years! Newly Illumined Luke Bradley! God's blessings on his future!*

✠ **Saturday, March 9 10:00am Memorial Saturday Divine Liturgy**



#### Looking Ahead:

⇒ Next Sunday is Meatfare Sunday. A Parish Meatfare Dinner is in order.

✠ **Great Lent Begins Monday, March 18** ✠

✠ **Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete: Mon. thru Thurs., March 18 thru 21**

✠ **First Presanctified Liturgy: Friday, March 22 ... with Potluck Lenten Supper**

⇒ **Note: All services are at 6:30pm.**

#### A Prayer for Those Departing this Life

✠ Every day call this prayer to mind, and repeat it to yourself as often as possible: 'Lord, have mercy upon all who appear before thee today.' For at every hour and every moment thousands of people depart from this earthly life and their souls appear before God - and how many of them depart in loneliness, unknown to anyone, sad and dejected because no one feels sorrow for them or even cares whether they are alive or not! And then, perhaps, from the other end of the earth your prayer for the repose of their souls will rise up to God, although you never knew them nor they you. How deeply moving it must be for a man's soul, as he stands in fear and trembling before the Lord, to know at that very instant that there is someone to pray even for him, that there is still a fellow creature left on earth who loves him! And God will look on both of you more favorably, for if you have had so much pity on him, how much greater will God's pity be, for God is infinitely more loving and merciful than you! And he will forgive him for your sake. ~ *Fyodor Dostoyevsky: 'The Discourses of Father Zossima'*

#### Teachings of St. Ephraim the Syrian on Repentance

✠ "Whoever grows himself wings upon the earth," says St Ephraim, "is one who soars up into the heights; whoever purifies his mind here below, there glimpses the Glory of God. In whatever measure each one loves God, he is, by God's love, satiated to fullness according to that measure. Man, cleansing himself and attaining the grace of the Holy Spirit while still here on earth, has a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven."

The pledge within us of "theosis" (or "deification") is the Baptism of Christ, and the main force that drives the Christian life is repentance. St Ephraim was a great teacher of repentance. The forgiveness of sins in the Mystery of Repentance, according to his teaching, is not an external exoneration, not a forgetting of the sins, but rather their complete undoing, their annihilation. The tears of repentance wash away and burn away the sin. Moreover, they (i.e. the tears) enliven, they transfigure sinful nature, they give the strength "to walk in the way of the Lord's commandments," encouraging hope in God. In the fiery font of repentance, the Saint wrote, "You sail yourself across, O sinner, you resurrect yourself from the dead."

## On God's Will

An interview excerpt from Archimandrite Tikhon Shevkunov, Abbot of Sretensky Monastery in Moscow, and author of the best-selling book, "Everyday Saints."

**Fr. Tikhon, how does one in fact hear and understand God's will for oneself? It sounds wonderful... but how?**

To hear, understand, and feel God's will for oneself, and then to find the strength to fulfill this it – I think that this is the most important thing in a person's life. I always say in our pastoral theology courses that priests and spiritual fathers have one task: to seek and find God's will together with the person who comes to them. Don't rush to say: "See, God's will is such-and-such." Rather, one needs to seek it out gradually in the various circumstances of one's life. It is presumptuous and silly for someone to claim: "God's will has been revealed to me!" Fr. John (Krestiankin), an Elder to whom – I am sincerely convinced – the Lord did indeed reveal His will for people, only once said to me: "This is God's will for you." In certain circumstances of life, finding God's will is quite easy, because it is stated in the Gospel in the most straightforward manner. But sometimes circumstances get so tangled up that it can be very difficult to understand what one ought to do.

**A difficult task...**

Yes, it can sometimes be very difficult for a spiritual father to guide someone to an understanding of God's will. It is no wonder that the Holy Fathers wrote that pastoral service is the "art of arts and science of sciences."

**Is this, generally speaking, a feasible task – given that even (Elder) Fr. John (Krestiankin) spoke to you directly about God's will only once?**

He spoke about it only once, but he many times led many people to an understanding of God's will. You're right; it's a difficult task. But, on the other hand, this certainly doesn't mean that someone, along with his spiritual father, cannot understand God's will. The Lord puts priests in a position to help lead people to salvation by God's will. Pastors gradually, step by step, uncover the will of God alongside their spiritual children – through life itself, through Holy Scripture, through questioning more experienced people. This is a great gift of God in our Orthodox Church.

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## Constant Companion

✠ The person who fears the Lord has humility as his constant companion and, through the thoughts which humility inspires, reaches a state of divine love and thankfulness. For he recalls his former worldly way of life, the various sins he has committed and the temptations which have befallen him since his youth; and he recalls, too, how the Lord delivered him from all this, and how He led him away from a passion-dominated life to a life ruled by God. Then, together with fear, he also receives love, and in deep humility continually gives thanks to the Benefactor and Helmsman of our lives.

**St. Maximus the Confessor**

**It is good that you have failings and weaknesses; with repentance and contrition they will lead you to Paradise.**

*Newmartyr Archbishop Barlaam of Russia*

## **The Greatest Disease – Evil Thoughts**

**Elder Paisios of Mt. Athos, *Spiritual Struggle*, p.22f**

- Geronda, I am anxious and can't sleep when I have a problem to deal with.

- Your basic problem is your many thoughts. If you didn't have all these thoughts, you would be able to accomplish much more in your assigned duties and in your spiritual life. Here is one way to avoid all these thoughts: When you think of something that, let's say, needs to be done tomorrow, tell yourself, "This work is not for today, I will think about it tomorrow." Also, when you have to make a decision, do not trouble yourself with the thought of how to make the best decision, and thus end up constantly procrastinating. Make a decision and move on; then let God take care of the rest. Try to avoid being overly meticulous and scholastic about too many details, which will only confuse your mind. Do whatever you are able to do with *philotimo* (self-sacrificing love), simplicity and, above all, with great trust in God. This way we "oblige" God, in a manner of speaking, to help us, when we place our hopes and our future in His hands. Even a healthy person will become useless with too many thoughts running through his mind. One who is sick and suffering can justifiably have worrisome thoughts. But one who is healthy and yet becomes confused and suffers from sinister thoughts, deserves a straitjacket! To be healthy and yet tormented by one's thoughts is a terrible sickness!

In our times, one of the greatest illnesses is the vain thoughts of worldly people. People can have all the good things in life except good thoughts. They are tormented simply through not facing up to things in a spiritual manner. For example, someone sets out to go somewhere but has a little car trouble and is a little late getting to his destination. If he has a good thought, he will say, "Perhaps the Benevolent God brought this delay in order to prevent a possible accident. How can I thank You, my God, for this?" So he praises God for the delay. On the contrary, if he does not have a good thought, he will not face the incident in a spiritual manner; he will curse and blame God: "What a misfortune, what a useless delay! And where is God in all this?"

When we accept whatever happens to us with a good and positive thought, we are helped; while on the contrary, we are tormented and come apart at the seams emotionally and physically when negative and evil thoughts prevail. Once, years ago, we got on a truck, which had some boards for seats, in order to go from Ouranoupolis (Chalkidiki) to Thessaloniki. The truck's interior was a mess; suitcases, orange crates, fish, empty and dirty fish crates being returned, students from the Athonias School (a high school on Mt. Athos), some sitting and some standing, monks, lay people... One layman came and sat next to me. He was a little stout, and because he was somewhat squeezed, he began to complain loudly, "What a state!..." A little further inside the truck stood a poor monk surrounded by crates so you could only see his head. In the meantime, as the truck bumped its way along the cart track, the monk had to remain standing and hold on to the wobbling crates to prevent them from falling on him.

With all of this going on, the other fellow was complaining of being squeezed a little in his seating arrangements. So I told him, "How can you be complaining when you see what that monk is enduring?" So I asked the monk, "How are you managing, Father?" And with a smile he told me, "Geronda, it's better here than hell!" One man was tormented, even though he was able to sit, while the other was content to stand, and be virtually buried under all those crates. And this was a two-hour drive, not just a short ride. The layman's mind was on the comfort he would have had if he were riding on a bus, while the monk was thinking of the suffering in hell, and was happy enough to ride in a filthy truck. He was thinking, "We are going to reach our des-

tionation in two hours and get out, while the poor people in hell will be tormented forever. After all, there it is hell, and not some unpleasant accommodations. Glory be to God, it is better here."

\_ Geronda, how do you explain the varying degree of trust held by two novices toward their Elder?

\_ Thoughts. One can have fault-finding thoughts about everything and everyone. If a man does not have a good thought and does not remove self-interest and desires from his activities, that is, if he continues to act selfishly, he cannot be helped even by a Saint. A saintly Elder, even Saint Anthony, and all the Saints together, cannot help such a selfish man. Not even God Himself can help such a person, even though He desires it very much. When someone loves himself and is selfish, he interprets everything in a way that suits his inner self. Some people interpret things carnally or in a sinful manner, others in whatever manner suits their ego, and gradually these irrational interpretations become second nature to them. No matter how you behave, they will be scandalized.

There are some people who soar if you pay them some attention, if you tell them an encouraging and heartening word. If you don't pay any attention to them, they are deeply saddened and have an extreme reaction, which comes from the tempter, the devil. Or they may see some activity going on and say, "Aha! This is what must be happening." Later they convince themselves that this is indeed what happened. Or, they may see someone in a rather thoughtful mood and imagine that he has something against them, while in fact the other person is pensive simply because he is troubled by a personal concern.

Some time ago, someone came to me and said, "Why did so and so use to speak to me but doesn't now? Could it be something I said?" So, I told him directly, "Look, he may have seen you but not noticed you, or had something on his mind, such as a sick friend who needed a doctor, or the necessary currency to travel abroad, and so forth." In fact the other person really was worried about a sick friend who needed to be taken care of. But because this man was expecting undivided attention and his friend did not stop to talk to him, he allowed a whole series of bad thoughts to go through his mind.

{to be continued}

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⊗ We should constantly occupy our mind with beneficial spiritual thoughts, so that the cunning devil will not find the opportunity to bring us a thousand and one filthy and sinful thoughts that defile our soul and render us guilty and unclean before God. So let us attend, my child, to every thought of ours as well as our every word and deed so that we will not grieve our sweetest Jesus Who suffered a cruel and painful death for us, the guilty ones. My child, attend to your thoughts. Have a fighting spirit and always be ready to confront thoughts. Do not yield, for we pay dearly and gravely for every concession.

**Elder Ephraim**

⊗ **"Be attentive to your heart and watch your enemies, for they are cunning in their malice. In your heart be persuaded of this: it is impossible for a man to achieve good through evil means. That is why our Savior told us to be watchful, saying: 'Straight is the gate, and narrow is the way that leads to life, and few there are that find it' (Mt. 7:14)."**

**St. Isaiah the Solitary, *the Philokalia Vol. 1***

⊗ An Athonite elder said, "Blasphemous thoughts are like airplanes that annoy us, against our will, with their noise, and we are powerless to prevent them. The heavy anti-aircraft battery is psalmody, because it is both prayer to Christ and disdain for the devil."

## Our True Desire

From *Life Transfigured, Holy Transfiguration Monastery Journal, Summer 1996*

In the closing prayer of the Ninth Hour we confess, in the words of St. Basil the Great, that "we have walked according to the desires of our own hearts" and that "our days have been consumed with vanity." What a crowd of desires of all sorts jostles us daily! The Canon of St. Andrew of Crete does not hesitate to call them repeatedly "disordered desires," for it was not like this that we were created or meant to be. "The eye was created for light, the ear for sounds, each thing for its particular purpose; and the desire of the soul, for soaring toward Christ" (Nicholas Cabasilas quoted in J.C. Larchet, *Therapeutique des Maladies Spirituelles*, Vol. 1, Paris, 1991, p. 1). But instead of this unified ascent, our longings take many different directions, dissipating the soul's power and limiting its aspirations toward God. "Why is it that our love for Jesus Christ is so weak?" asks St. John Chrysostom. "Is it not because we exhaust all our soul's strength on vain passions?" (ibid., p. 83) How then can we begin to emerge from this pattern, restoring little by little the true focus of our soul's desire? One way, perhaps the surest and safest, is to carefully consider and emulate the models set before us by the Church.

In relation to desire, the Sunday of Zacchaeus immediately comes to mind. The Gospel of this first of five preparatory Sundays leading up to Great Lent speaks eloquently of very focused desire (Luke 19:1-10). The rich, despised tax-collector forgets everything in his determination to behold the Savior. In climbing a tree he abandons his dignity, ignores people's reactions and overcomes his physical limitation. Later on in the story, when Jesus comes to his house, Zacchaeus also renounces the passion of greed which had so dominated his life and takes concrete action against it. As testimony that a real transformation is taking place in this soul, we have the well-known words of Christ Himself: "Today salvation has come to this house!" (v. 9). Fr. Alexander Schmemmann has said, speaking of Zacchaeus:

"Man follows his desire. One can even say that man *is* desire ... The only question, therefore, is whether we desire the right goal. .. Ours is to desire that which is deepest and truest in ourselves, to acknowledge the thirst and hunger for the Absolute which is in us ... And if we desire deeply enough, strongly enough, Christ will respond (Great Lent, Crestwood, 1974, p. 18)."

The forceful picture of the determined tax-collector filled with desire for the Lord reminds us of similar moments we have experienced—moments of inspiration, of expectation, of commitment, when even the efforts we make seem effortless; moments in which suddenly we are inflamed with love for God, and our whole soul seems united in one strong longing. But, of course, these times are relatively few and far between. Most of our days are filled - or need to be filled - with determination of a very different kind: determination that is a labor of love and of the will, to "cleave to the Lord with purpose of heart" (Acts 11:23).

Of this type of faithfulness the Prophet Daniel is a strong model. Interestingly enough, his commemoration also falls in a preparatory period of the liturgical year - during the Nativity Fast on December 17, just one week before the Feast of Nativity itself.

Daniel is actually called a "man of desires" three times in the book of Scripture that bears his name (9:23, 10:11, 12:10), and the hymnography in his honor frequently echoes this special title. Living as he did in exile in Babylon (7th century B.C.), circumstances were not particularly conducive to the manner of ardent faithfulness he exemplified. The Canon of Matins for his feast day indicates the various ways he expressed his great yearning for God. It speaks of his "chastity shining forth as the morning;" of his being "nourished in soul by the word" of God, but "casting food aside" following the Old Testament dietary laws and prescribed fasts. This he was able to do, we are told, because he "kept [his] thoughts focused upon God" at all times, "patiently, expectantly, in misfortune" crying out:

"Bless the Master. . . exalt Him . . . unto the ages" (See Odes 1,3,8). We also have a glimpse of his life of prayer in a long, fervent penitential entreaty recorded in Daniel 9:2-19. Perseverance in prayer and in praise; unceasing remembrance of God; eagerness for the Word of God; adherence to the commandments of the Old Testament laws - in these simple, yet powerful ways Daniel came to be called a "man of desires."

Thus as we prepare both for the Lord's coming forth clothed in flesh from the Virgin, and then from the tomb at Pascha clad in victory, the Church sets before us two Saints as models of desire to emulate. Each of us is also called to be a "man of desires" in the lofty sense exemplified by Zacchaeus and the Prophet Daniel. But in order to grow in this direction we must, like them, concentrate on Christ, direct our desires toward Him and devote our energies to godly pursuits. "Where there is zeal," St. Theophan the Recluse assures us, "the grace of the Holy Spirit, like a flame, will also be present" (The Art of Prayer: An Orthodox Anthology, by Igumen Chariton, London, 1966, p. 163). And St. Gregory of Nyssa urges: "We must constantly arouse ourselves and never stop drawing closer and closer . . . He gives us the power to rise and make progress" (From Glory to Glory, Crestwood, 1979, p. 191). Thus our restless, vain and misplaced desires are put to flight little by little. As expressed in liturgical texts, "Desire is checked by desire"- for Christ alone is our true desire.

"The true satisfaction of the [soul's] desire consists in constantly going on with her quest and never ceasing in her ascent, seeing that every fulfillment of her desire continually generates a further desire. . . She realizes that she will always discover more and more of the incomprehensible and un-hoped for beauty of her Spouse through all eternity" (ibid., p. 270-1).

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### **"Be Not Wise in Your Own Eyes"**

From *Life Transfigured*, Holy Transfiguration Monastery Journal, Nativity, 1999

**"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones" (Proverbs 3:5-8).**

We live in an age that places great importance on the gifted capabilities of the mind of man. He is told he should be able to use his powers of consideration and discernment to both understand and overcome life's difficulties and challenges. In those situations where he is not able to actually overcome (for instance, to be healed of a severe chronic illness or to prevent the death of a loved one), he is at least expected to have enough understanding to relieve his own sense of helplessness.

The quote from the book of Proverbs cited above has quite a different perspective, in the form, one might say, of an invitation from the Lord. However, the original Hebrew text has important nuances lost in the translation cited above:

**"Rely upon the Lord with your whole heart and do not support yourself on your own faculty of understanding. In all your ways know Him and He will make your way smooth, right and free of obstacles. Be not wise in your own eyes; reverence and honor the Lord and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones."**

This provokes a strong image of two divergent paths: self-reliance or trust in God. Most of us are well aware of the pain, exertion, and struggle that are inherent in self-reliance, a pain that builds on itself and often ends in a dead end. Accepting the Lord's invitation to lean on Him also involves ascetic effort - choosing, in the face of strong and confusing emotions, to set aside the false

belief that one can be one's own means of support and choosing instead to trust in God. This effort leads to peace and life, as Christ promises, "I am the vine, ye are the branches .... He who abides in Me bears much fruit, for without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:1,4).

In commenting on James 2:14: "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works?", the Orthodox Study Bible says: "The faith that saves is a complete faith, not just the mind believing and the tongue confessing, but the whole man trusting in the living God. This means our faith and our relationship with God are dynamic and living. Our faith grows and affects our actions, or it dies."

Holy Scripture provides innumerable examples of those who chose, in the face of intense inner conflict, to trust in the Lord with their whole hearts: Noah who built an ark in response to God's command, Abraham who was asked by the Lord to sacrifice his only son, Moses who returned from Midian to Egypt to lead the Israelites from slavery, the paralytic at the sheep's pool who bemoaned the fact that he had no one to put him into the water, the blind man who went and washed in the pool of Siloam, and our Lord Himself in the Garden of Gethsemane. When these lives are viewed in this way they provide us with the courage and determination to make similar choices, for if anyone of them had been caught in the snare of self-reliance, his life would have been drastically different.

Reading daily from Scripture and looking for these instructive examples supports the decision to trust in God. When a passage is particularly helpful, copying it out and putting it in a visible spot, perhaps the prayer corner or on the refrigerator, makes it accessible in needed moments.

The spirit of the world emphasizes the need to rely on our own logic, but our Orthodox Faith teaches differently. In one of the prayers of thanksgiving said after receiving Holy Communion we ask to be "freed from the slavery of our own reasonings." Choosing to trust in God is our part in enabling us to embrace this freedom.

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### **The Most Sweet Delight**

"The Apostle Paul said of our seeking this [Divine love], as opposed to that which is bound within the physical life: 'But I pursue, if I might also apprehend that for which I also was apprehended by the Christ, Jesus' [Philippians 3:12]; that is, [St. Paul is saying he] seeks to love Jesus as much as He loved [him]. This condition of absolute love - beyond all measure - for Jesus, he considered the supreme fulfillment of the desires of his heart; and thus, aside from the enjoyment of this love, there was no longer anything about which he desired to think or to seek. Neither the afflictions of the body nor the wonders of creation could separate him from this lofty love. He happily forsook all other things, as long as he was not deprived - even for one hour - of the most sweet delight, which the energy of the spirit(\*) kindles in the heart in the form of the presence of love."

**St. Mark the Ascetic**

### **The Love of Christ**

"How many things [St. Paul] was able to ignore, on account of this spiritual love, he tells us himself: 'What shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?' [Romans 8:35] And he concludes with the magnificent assurance: 'For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord' [Romans 8:39]. He said all of this because he did not want his mind to be captured by anything; he wished - at all times - to think upon the love of Christ, and to fill his heart with it.

**St. Mark the Ascetic**

## **ST. EPHRAIM THE SYRIAN'S PRAYER FOR THE CHURCH**

THOU DIDST ESTABLISH on earth the Holy Church in the image of the Heavenly Kingdom; Thou didst build her with love, establish Her with compassion, and Thou didst spiritually betroth Thyself to Her, and gain Her by Thy suffering.

But the hater of mankind, in his shameless impudence, attacketh Her in the person of Her servers.

O Lord, do not leave Thy Holy Church without Thy care, that the promise that Thou didst utter concerning Her invincibility may not be shown false. Do not let Her majestic beauty be disfigured or Her wealth be stolen.

Fulfil Thy promise that Thou didst make to Peter; seal Thy words with deeds. Fortify Her gates, strengthen Her bars, exalt Her horn, raise up Her head. Bless Her sons, preserve Her children, give peace to Her priests and subdue those who wish Her evil.

May Thy peace dwell in Her, and drive away from Her all evil schism. Grant that we may lead a calm, peaceful life in fear of Thee. May we maintain our Faith, with great confidence and perfect love. May our life be pleasing to Thee and may we find compassion in Thee in the day of reckoning. May we ceaselessly bring praise to Thee, O Lord, and to Thy Father and to Thy Holy Spirit. Amen.

***From the Spiritual Psalter of St Ephraim the Syrian - Psalm 86***