

# A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church



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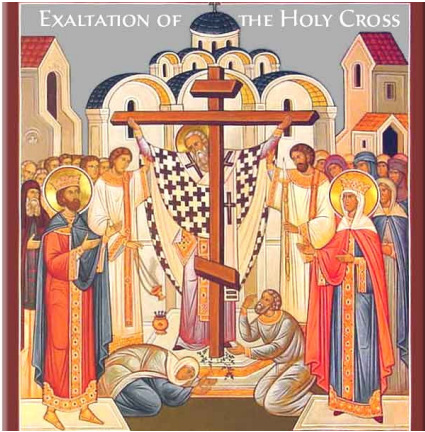
*Glory be to Jesus Christ!*

*Glory be Forever!*

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15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost-Exaltation of the Life-Giving Cross

September 17, 2023



In some ways, people today are too familiar with the image of the cross. Some wear it as just another a piece of jewelry or otherwise use it to symbolize values or organizations that have nothing to do with the cross through which our Lord conquered death.

Unfortunately, those who confess its true spiritual significance can easily rest content with beliefs about the

cross without actually obeying the clear instructions of our Lord that we must deny ourselves, take up our crosses, and follow Him. Celebrating the Exaltation of the Cross with integrity requires that we confess truthfully with St. Paul: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ Who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself for me."

The Lord's Self-Offering on the Cross for the salvation of the world is unique and all encompassing. As we chant when we especially celebrate the cross, "Before Thy Cross, we bow down and worship..." We must not respond passively to the cross, however, as though all the work has already been done in a way that requires nothing of us. For the only way to share in  
*(continued p.3)*

+ 15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost +

Sts. Sophia, Faith, Hope & Love

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 1:18-24

Gospel: John 19:6-11, 13-20, 25-28, 30-35

St. George Orthodox Christian Church is a community of believers who strive to live a life according to the Gospel of Christ and teachings of the Church.

We worship God in Trinity - Father+Son+Holy Spirit.

We are dedicated to Christ's commandment, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, ad with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.*

## **Homily on the Cross, by Metropolitan Sotirios of Pisidia**

Today, on this Sunday after the Elevation of the Holy Cross, we are once again reminded of the blessings that our Lord's sacrifice on the Cross has given us. The Lord was crucified on Golgotha, and it was there that He took upon Himself the iniquity of sin, and all the personal sins of humanity.

They were nailed to the Cross with Him, "killing" these sins and destroying them. Or, as the Prayer of 6th Hour says, our Lord Jesus Christ, "by His precious Cross destroyed the

record of our sins, triumphing over the source and power of darkness"; Every person who believes in Christ when they are baptized is freed from their sins, and when they come out of the waters of Baptism, a new life in Christ begins.

The record of their past sins is purged, and they start fresh. Indeed, in our baptism we participate in the death and burial of Christ. As St. Paul writes: "*Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that body of sin might be done*

*away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin*" (Romans 6:6). "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation*" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

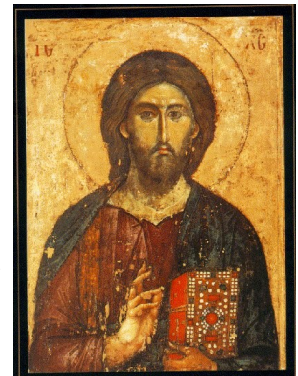
The Holy Apostle Paul writes about the grace of Christ acting and living within him. He has placed himself in Christ's hands. Everything he does is as Our Lord wills. Whether it is deciding where to go or what to do, Christ is in control. St. John Chrysostom has commented on these  
*(continued on p.2)*

We invite all to worship in our services. Sunday Divine Liturgy begins at 9:30 AM

If you have any questions about the church or would like to speak with our

pastor, please call Fr. Matthew at 607-280-1586

Glory be to Jesus Christ.  
Glory be Forever.





As the deliverer  
of captives  
and defender  
of the poor,  
healer of the infirm  
and champion of kings,  
victorious great  
martyr George  
intercede with Christ  
our God that our souls  
may be saved.

**News and Notes**

We welcome all who are with us today and invite you to join us at our coffee social following the Divine Liturgy.

**Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)**

Please keep the following in your prayers: Mother Onufria, Meg, Larissa, Jack, Evan, Ryan, Anatoly, Alexey, Heidi, Mackenzie, Mike, Jessica, Lisa, Jeff, Bonnalee, Stan, David, Carol, Norris, Debbie, Linda, Daniel, Matthew, Michael, Tom, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

**From St. John Kronstadt**

Keep a strict watch against every appearance of pride: it appears imperceptibly, particularly in time of vexation and irritability against others for quite unimportant causes.

The miraculous effect of the life-giving Cross upon our souls, tortured by the poison of evil, proves to us most undoubtedly and clearly: (1) That we have indeed a soul, a spiritual being; (2) That there are evil spirits, harming our souls; (3) That

God exists and our Lord Jesus Christ, and that He is always with us through His Divinity; and (4) That He has indeed accomplished our salvation by His sufferings and death on the Cross, and has destroyed the power of the Devil by means of the Cross.

How many proofs of the advantage of our faith there are in the wonderful action upon us of the life-giving Cross alone! Glory be to the Christian faith! Men and women who are leading a spiritual life see by the eyes of their heart how the Devil lays his snares, how the angels guide us, and how the Lord, in His Sovereign power, allows the temptations, and how He comforts.

The only means by which you can spend the day in perfect holiness, peace, and without sin, is the most sincere, fervent prayer as soon as you rise from sleep in the morning. It will bring Christ into your heart, with the Father and the Holy Ghost, and will thus strengthen and fortify your soul against any evil; but still it will be necessary for you carefully to guard your heart.

**Homily on the Holy Cross, cont'd from p.1**

words of St. Paul, saying: "Because Paul did everything according to the will of God, he did not say "living in Christ," but much more- "Christ lives inside me." Because he had Christ within, he acted according to the Divine Will.

Because of this great blessing, St. Paul's life was completely transformed, as he was under the light of faith in Christ and inspired by it. The Apostle's life was much like anyone else's, in that he had to eat and work to earn a living. Inside him, however, was the powerful faith in Christ's love for sinners, in such a way that he felt that Christ was crucified for him alone! In his own words, he writes to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." (verse 20).

My brothers and sisters, when we see the great heights that St. Paul reached, how much he is glorified by men and angels, precisely because he

conformed his will to the will of Christ, then we can understand the power of the Christian life. Whoever chooses to walk the path of Christ, doing God's will in word and action,



will succeed in every respect. We see the proof, not only in the life of St. Paul, but in all the Saints throughout the ages, no matter their social position. We remember their holy lives and miraculous intercessions with admiration, asking for their prayers to help us.

But even as we do this, a conflict arises. While we can accept all of this

theoretically, it becomes much more difficult when we think about our own daily struggles, being dragged from thoughts of God by our personal weaknesses and temptations from evil. We lose our focus on God, and hear voices that sow doubts. These voices attempt to discourage us by telling us that the Gospel cannot be applied today in our corrupt society, and that not everyone can be like St. Paul. It is impossible!

Of course, all of these are merely attempts to "excuse our sins," as the Psalm says (140/141:4). When we talk about imitating St. Paul, we do not mean ascending to the third heaven or doing miracles. What we can do, is imitate his faith, love, and obedience to Christ. In that way, MILLIONS of Christians have imitated him. We are not alone in this, as we have divine Grace as our helper. With Almighty God, nothing is impossible! It is enough for us to want to take Our Lord's hand and follow the path that Christ has set for us, with His example and His word. Amen.



## Homily on the Exaltation of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross, (cont'd from p.1)

the Savior's life is to enter personally into the deep mystery of His sacrifice. He offered Himself fully and in free obedience to the point of death, burial, and descent into Hades in order to conquer the corruption to which we had enslaved ourselves. In order to embrace the liberation and healing of our Crucified and Risen Lord, we must die to all that holds us back from embodying the fullness of His great victory. That means offering ourselves without reservation for union with Christ in holiness as we become "partakers of the divine nature" by grace.

In the world as we know it, doing so requires a perpetual struggle of the soul. The fight is not against other people and certainly not against God. Instead, it is a battle with ourselves because we have all accepted the lie that true fulfillment comes from our own will being done. In one way or another, we have all come to identify with our self-centered desires such that we think we could not exist without gratifying them. Consequently, to put the demands of loving God and neighbor first in life requires us to deny ourselves and to abandon our well-settled habit of living in the service of our passions. We must all be "crucified with Christ" in the sense of dying to the corruptions that keep us from sharing in the Savior's restoration and healing of the human person in the divine image and likeness.

The Lord's command to take up our crosses, deny ourselves, and lose our lives has nothing to do with appeasing an angry Father by our suffering. It is not concerned with the pointless task of trying to earn forgiveness by paying a debt or meeting a legal obligation. Instead, it is about doing what is necessary to find healing. In order to regain physical health, we may have to do some painful and difficult things at times, like having surgery, going to physical therapy, or changing our diet. Those are not punishments, but simply what is necessary for us to regain our health in light of our particular physical condition. If we want to get better, we will put aside our preferences and accept the inconvenience.

The same thing is true for us spiritually. Offering ourselves to the Lord for the healing of our souls in whatever circumstances we face is how we take up our crosses. From the origins of the Church to this very day, that

has meant literal martyrdom for those who refuse to deny Christ when the powerful of this world kill them as a result. For all who unite themselves to Christ, there must be some form of martyrdom as we die to self-centeredness by putting faithfulness to the Lord and service to our neighbors before satisfying our own desires. If we do not take up our crosses in the challenges that we face daily, whatever they may be, then we show that we are ashamed of Christ and of His Cross. We show that we want no part of Him and prefer to gratify our own desires instead of offering ourselves for the service of His Kingdom.

Like Peter before He denied the Savior three times, we may well believe that we would never do such a thing. Like Peter, however, we may have such a poor understanding of the Messiah we serve that we will be unprepared when our eyes are opened to the truth. Today's gospel passage comes right after Peter tried to correct the Savior when He predicted His death and resurrection. The Lord said to him in response, "Get behind me, Satan, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." Peter had likely envisioned the Messiah as a successful military leader who would defeat the Romans and give the Jews a powerful earthly kingdom. The idea of following someone like that appealed to his pride, for being the chief disciple of the new King David would bring riches, power, and glory.

When the Savior made clear that the religious leaders of Israel would reject Him, that He would be killed, and that He would rise from the dead, Peter was horrified to the point that he tried to set Christ straight. That is when the Lord said in no uncertain terms that to reject the cross was the way of the devil, the way of completely rejecting His ministry for the salvation of the world. Remember that Satan had tempted Christ in the desert by promising Him worldly power if He worshiped him. Now Peter provided the same temptation. That is when Christ told the disciples that they would have no part in Him if they did not also take up their crosses. In this light, it is not surprising that Peter later denied He knew the Lord three times after His arrest and abandoned Him at His crucifixion. At that time, he and the other disciples were ashamed of a Messiah Who died on a cross.

*(continued p4, column 1)*



Likewise, we show that we are ashamed of our Lord when we refuse to take up our crosses. Our lives are filled with opportunities to turn away from prideful self-centeredness as we put the needs of those around us before ourselves. Instead of indulging in gluttony, greed, hatred, envy, or other passions, we must redirect the energy of our souls to blessing our neighbors. Remember that the Lord did not go to the cross for His own benefit, but for ours. We will offer ourselves more fully to Him as we offer ourselves to serve those in whom He is present to us each day. If we do not, we will show that we are ashamed of our Lord.

The same is true whenever we refuse to keep a close watch on our hearts. The ancient idols of sex, money, and power are worshiped openly in our culture, and we must be ready to embrace the cross of rejecting their powerful temptations. Today reserving sexual intimacy for the union of husband and wife in marriage is widely considered archaic and oppressive. Pornography is easily available and generally accepted, even though it is poisonous in so many ways. Money and what it can buy often become the measure of our lives, regardless of what we say we believe. Many people today seem to take pride in hating those with whom they disagree about politics and in self-righteously and hypocritically condemning them. Nothing could be more contrary to denying ourselves and taking up our crosses than to embrace such temptations in our hearts. Nothing could be more deadly to our souls.

Thankfully, there was hope for Peter and there is hope for us also through our Lord's great victory over sin and death on His Cross. Let us celebrate the Exaltation of the Holy Cross by showing that we are not ashamed of His Self-Offering for our salvation. No matter the circumstances of our lives, let us deny ourselves as we embrace the crosses of our lives. That is how we may all enter into the joy of the Kingdom.

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The Holy Martyrs Saint Sophia and her Daughters Faith, Hope and Love were born in Italy. Their mother was a pious Christian widow who named her daughters for the three Christian virtues. Faith was twelve, Hope

was ten, and Love was nine. Saint Sophia raised them in the love of the Lord Jesus Christ. Saint Sophia and her daughters did not hide their faith in Christ, but openly confessed it before everyone.

An official named Antiochus denounced them to the emperor Hadrian (117-138), who ordered that they be brought to Rome. Realizing that they would be taken before the emperor, the holy virgins prayed fervently to the Lord Jesus Christ, asking that He give them the strength not to fear torture and death. When the holy virgins and their mother came before the emperor, everyone present was amazed at their composure. They looked as though they had been brought to some happy festival, rather than to torture. Summoning each of the sisters in turn, Hadrian urged them to offer sacrifice to the goddess Artemis. The young girls remained unyielding.

Then the emperor ordered them to be tortured. They burned the holy virgins over an iron grating, then threw them into a red-hot oven, and finally into a cauldron with boiling tar, but the Lord preserved them.

The youngest child, Love, was tied to a wheel and they beat her with rods until her body was covered all over with bloody welts. After undergoing unspeakable torments, the holy virgins glorified their Heavenly Bridegroom and remained steadfast in the Faith.

They subjected Saint Sophia to another grievous torture: the

mother was forced to watch the suffering of her daughters. She displayed adamant courage, and urged her daughters to endure their torments for the sake of the Heavenly Bridegroom. All three maidens were beheaded, and joyfully bent their necks beneath the sword.

In order to intensify Saint Sophia's inner suffering, the emperor permitted her to take the bodies of her daughters. She placed their remains in coffins and loaded them on a wagon. She drove beyond the city limits and reverently buried them on a high hill. Saint Sophia sat there by the graves of her daughters for three days, and finally she gave up her soul to the Lord. Even though she did not suffer for Christ in the flesh, she was not deprived of a martyr's crown. Instead, she suffered in her heart. Believers buried her body there beside her daughters.

