

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church

Rev. Matthew P. Binkewicz, Pastor

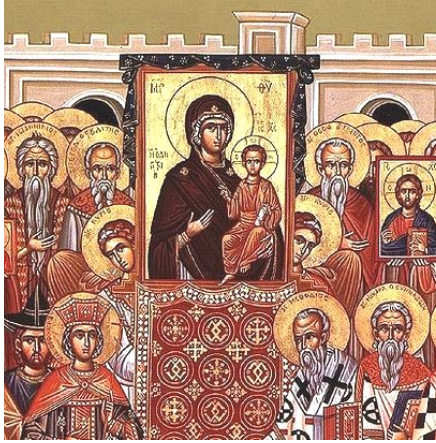
Glory be to Jesus Christ. Glory be forever.



Volume 9 Issue 402

1st Sunday of Lent-Sunday of Orthodoxy

March 8, 2020



Today is the triumph of Orthodoxy. On this First Sunday of Lent in 842 A.D. the iconodules—our “right believing” forefathers who upheld the Apostolic Faith, celebrated their victory over the heretical beliefs of the iconoclasts, the “icon-smashers.” Now, if there’s one charge we Orthodox hear more often than any other from some groups, it’s this: “You wor-

ship icons!” Of course, it’s at such times that we as Orthodox have the opportunity to explain that while we venerate and greatly honor the holy icons, we only worship God the Holy Trinity.

The greatest object of veneration in Israel was the Ark of the Covenant, which God directed the Israelites to appoint with pure gold and decorate with images of golden cherubim, (Exodus 25:18). No Israelite would even think of worshiping the Ark, but they held the Ark in holy awe and fear. The Ark contained the holiest objects of Israel’s veneration: the rod of Aaron and the Tablets of the Ten Commandments. But just a few chapters later in Exodus 32, we read that the Israelites were worshiping a golden calf. That is what we truly call idolatry, but the honor they rightly showed
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**** The Triumph of Orthodoxy ****

St. Theophylactus of Nicomedia

Epistle: Hebrews 11:24-26,32-12:2

Gospel: John 1: 43-51

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.

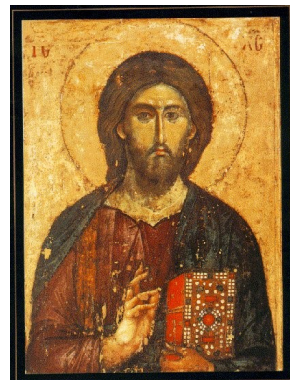
We worship God in Trinity - Father+Son+Holy Spirit.

We are dedicated to living out Christ’s commandment to, *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.*

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.



True Fasting by Metropolitan Ioil of Edessa

Whatever we gain and achieve in virtue and our moral perfection is an inviolable treasure and, moreover, one that’s personal, inalienable. It’s not ‘about us’, it’s ‘us’, not even the body and senses, but our soul, our inner spiritual worth, our existence. Since the struggle we’re engaged in is to live in a spiritual manner, we ought to do so properly.

For example, the Lord says that if we’re to benefit from the fast, we have to keep it in the

right way, because those who fast in the wrong way ‘have their reward’ (Matt. 6, 16). Today, at the gates of Great Lent, we’d like to indicate certain conditions which prevent fasting from bearing fruit and which deprive us of our spiritual reward.

In the very first place, there’s a misconception about the institution of fasting. Fasting isn’t merely abstention from certain foods, it’s also humility, repentance and inner contrition. It’s not

only bodily cleansing through a sparing diet, but also internal spiritual renewal.

Of course, God’s first commandment was that of fasting, from a particular food, and breaking it was what caused our expulsion from Paradise. Moses, the Lord, Paul and the saints of the Church all fasted. Fasting is the means not the purpose. The aim is restraint and our spiritual growth not to justify ourselves. Many believe it is
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Troparion to St. George

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
for our souls
salvation.

News and Notes

We welcome all who are worshipping with us today and invite you down to the church hall for our social hour.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

We ask that you keep the following in your prayers: Esther, Clement John, Mother Onufria, Olga, Lillian, Meg, Larissa, Stephen, Louise, Marcia, George, Lorraine, Peg, Christopher, Jackie, Karoline, Evan, Ryan, Kathleen, Sandy, Samuel, Anatoly, Alexey, Abraham, Susan, Jenny, Deb, Dan, Bob, Catherine, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & the persecuted for their faith in Christ.

In Defense of the Holy Icons

In his work, *On the Holy Spirit* (18:45) St. Basil the Great of Caesarea, wrote: "The honor paid to the image passes to the prototype," meaning that the Eastern Orthodox teaches that in the veneration of icons the praise and veneration shown to the icon passes to the archetype.

Thus to kiss an icon of Christ, in the Eastern Orthodox view, is to show love towards Christ Jesus himself, NOT to mere

wood and paint making up the physical substance of the icon. Christ, the Theotokos, mysteries of the Faith and So, the purpose of icons is, first, to create reverence in worship and, second, to serve as an existential link between the worshipper and God.

Icons have been called prayers, hymns and sermons in form and color. They are the visual Gospel. St. Basil said: "What the word transmits through the ear, the painting silently shows through the image, and by these two means, mutually accompanying one another . . . we receive knowledge of one and the same thing."

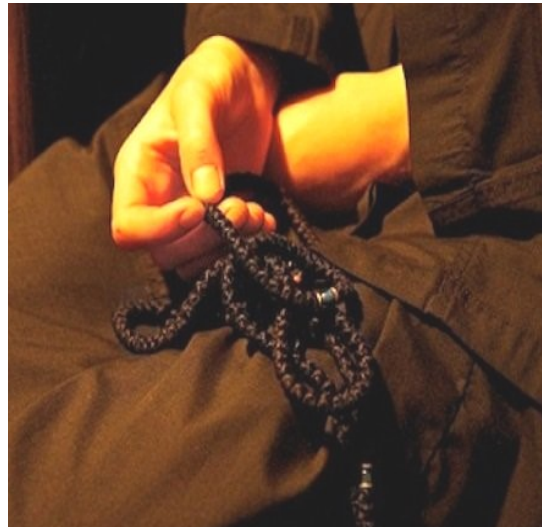
St. John of Damascus said: "If a pagan asks you to show him your faith, take him into church and place him before the icons." The icons in Orthodox churches present the mysteries of the Christian faith. The icon is a link between the human and the divine. It provides a space for the mystical encounter between the person beholding it and God. Icons provide courage and strength in a world marked with tragedy and suffering. The holy icons speak to our minds and are a blessing to

True Fasting, (cont'd from p. 1)

the prime virtue, though others consider it to be a badly-understood institution which serves no purpose today. Indeed, there are many who mock and ridicule it. Fasting can't be equated with dieting; they're two different things.

We have to fast with good intent and out of love for God, not 'to show others' that we're fasting.' Saint John Chrysostom writes that we often surpass the hypocrites themselves. He says that he knows people, many of whom don't fast, and others who make a great show of fasting. He also knows people who don't fast themselves, but 'wear the mask of fasters'. There are others who are even more bizarre: they themselves don't fast, but lecture others on how to do so. Looking good in the eyes of other people has no place in fasting. We fast in order to share in the sufferings of Christ. Fasting also helps us in our struggle against sin and the devil. Though demonic energy is as fierce as ever during the time of the fast, as

Saint Basil the Great says: 'the angel guardians of our life are even more diligent over their charges who are cleansing their soul with fasting'. He adds that the angels record all those



who fast 'in each Church'. Through fasting, we attract the grace and protection of God. The demon race continues to test us and is not expelled 'except in prayer and fasting' (Matt, 17, 21).

Fasting is necessary

Now that the arena of the fast is opening and our minds are turned to Easter, we're called upon to fast bodily and in the spirit. Saint Basil writes: 'Loose every bond of injustice' [Cf. Is. 58, 3-8, esp. 6-7 WJL]. Fasting is the tithe of the year which we owe to God. Restriction of sleep, nourishment and expressions of feeling, brings contrition to the heart and makes us mourn over our sins. Our living contact with God is comfort for those who mourn.

Over the days of the fast, it's likely that we'll encounter a variety of impediments to putting this spiritual effort into practice, for example recriminations with those around us, resentment on the part of other people and sheer badness. The days of the fast are tarnished with our passions. We shouldn't be put off. Let's love the fast and the time-honored discipline of abstinence, so that we have God's blessing and pass through the time of Lent with peace. To God be the Glory.

(Homily on the Sunday of Orthodoxy cont'd from p.1)

the Ark, we recognize as veneration, which gives glory to God.

The holy icons, the Gospel, the cross, are objects of Christian veneration precisely because they direct us and inspire in us worship of the Holy Trinity. When we see an icon of Christ, we know that He is not some mythical being, but rather the Lord God Himself who became incarnate on our behalf, to enter into human nature as man and defeat our sin and death as God. We can depict Christ iconographically, with great honor and in accordance with Holy Tradition because of and in affirmation of the historic reality of the Incarnation of the Word made flesh. This is the truth revealed in the icon of Christ and the icon of the Theotokos holding Christ.

Likewise, we depict the Saints who've triumphed in the life of Christ precisely because of the witness they are to the reality of changed lives, of deification, of growth in holiness that Christ God brings us by virtue of His Incarnation, entering into human nature as man and vivifying it, making it new once again, as God.

Our veneration of the holy icons witnesses to this truth. When we gaze upon an icon of the Theotokos or any of the Saints of the Church and venerate them, we affirm the reality of Christ God's work in them and through them to God's glory, as St. Paul says, that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be

glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ" (II Thess. 1:12).

And so, for us as Orthodox, the holy icons are more than 'pictures' and they are never "religious art": our Fathers in the Faith, countless of whom lost their lives in martyrdom to uphold the Apostolic, Orthodox Faith, rightly understood that without the holy icons, the fullness of the historic reality of the Incarnation, would be altered, if not lost altogether; the affirmation that the Word became flesh and "dwelt among us" to raise up fallen Adam, would come to be understood in increasingly twisted ways, threatening our faith, healing, and salvation in Christ.

Our Orthodox forefathers rightly understood that if the icons of Christ, His Saints, His miracles, and the faithful interpretation of the Gospels as passed down in the holy icons, were lost, the reality of the fullness of the Faith

Christ entrusted to His Church for all time, would also be lost.

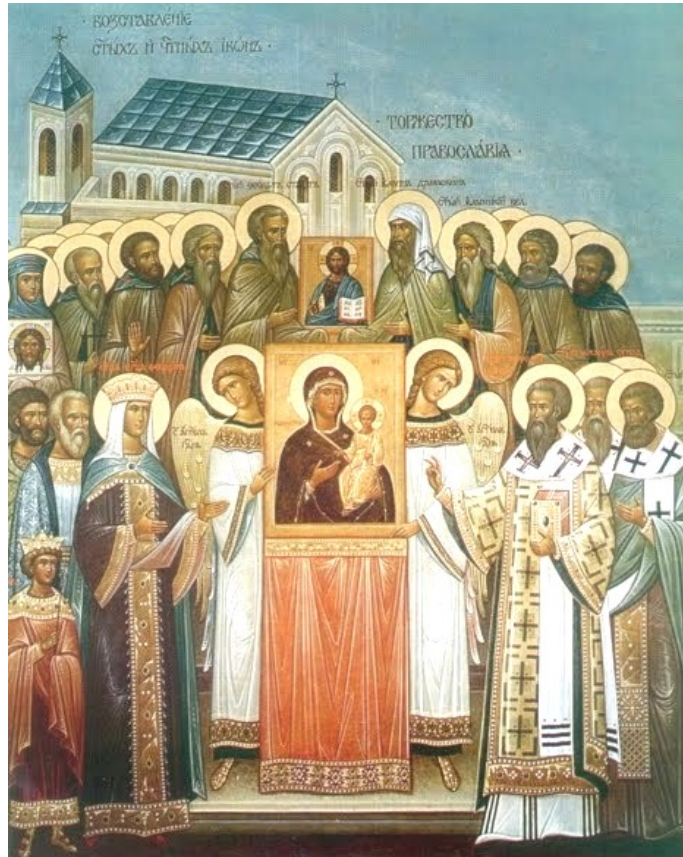
Those who gave their lives to uphold Orthodoxy, celebrated the victory of the Orthodox as God's protection of His Church, the Body of Christ in unity with Him, communing with Him. The battle against the iconoclasts was the last of a five hundred year struggle to uphold the Orthodox Faith against those who would change our faith and lead others into heresy. Each of these heresies tried to alter the Faith of the Apostles, the Orthodoxy, we still profess. They were all defeated in that 7th Council, the victory of which we celebrate today!

In this way, we truly affirm that the Feast of the Triumph of Orthodoxy goes to the very heart of our belief in Christ and our salvation. All other triumphs of our faith stem from this truth: "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death," as we'll sing at our joyous celebration of Pascha. It's because of Christ's incarnation, death, burial, and resurrection, that we're here today worshipping Him, participating in His life so that with Him, we too may be conquerors over sin and death.

The holy icons proclaim this truth: God is glorified in His Saints—in men and women turning from sin to Christ God, finding healing from sin-sickness, and by God's grace, becoming the men and women He created us and calls us to be: full of life, joy, discernment, light and life, having recovered our first beauty.

Truly, as St. Paul proclaims to us today, "we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses!" If people want proof of God's existence, reality, and relevance, they need look no further than the lives of these Saints, whose number is too great to count. For this reason, I greatly encourage you to daily take time to read the life of one of the many Saints commemorated on any given day in the Church calendar. We learn from their example to cling to Christ, to be in the world as witnesses of hope in Christ.

Every icon testifies to this redemptive work of God in us: redemption from a life of sin is real, healing is real, a new life is real, love and joy are real, salvation is real, the Kingdom of God is real—we see this reality no clearer than in the faces of the Saints, in the testimony of their lives. Let us strive to renew the image of God in all of us during our journey through Great Lent.



Prayers for the Dead by Michael Bressemer (pt. 2)

Other Western Christians believe the departed are not conscious but asleep (Mark 5:39; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Corinthians 11:30; 15:6,18-20; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15; 5:6,10). However, "asleep" is merely an idiom for physical death. The body can be asleep, awaiting to be awakened and resurrected at the final judgment, but the spirit (mind or nous) is still cognizant. Even in this life, you can be physically sleeping but still be conscious through having lucid dreams. The mind can be functioning even if the person is comatose. Those who have been pronounced dead but then revived have testified to "out of body experiences," which gives credence to the spirit still being active after the heart has ceased beating. (For a fascinating discussion of this subject read "The Soul After Death" by Fr. Seraphim Rose.)

Given that the spirit is conscious after death, and God is omnipresent (Psalm 138:7-12; Proverbs 15:3; Amos 9:2-3; Jeremiah 23:23-24), then there potentially exists interaction between mankind and God in the intermediate state. This is why Orthodox Christians beseech saints to pray for us. And if communication can exist in that direction, from the dead to God, why couldn't communication happen in the other direction, from God to the dead? This is exactly what did happen when Christ preached to the souls in hades.

Descent into Hell

St. Peter stated that Christ preached to the spirits in prison (1 Peter 3:19). It is believed many heeded that call and arose with Christ from the shattered gates of hell (Matthew 27:52-53). Some may think Christ only redeemed the Hebrew righteous men and women who died before the crucifixion of our Lord; however, it is the Tradition of the Orthodox Church that Christ raised all those who responded to our Savior's preaching in hell. In fact, many Orthodox hymn writers and theologians assert Christ emptied the prison of death. For example, St. Ephrem the Syrian (306-373) wrote using the voice of Sheol (death personified): "That Lamb filled the graves for me/ This one empties the graves that had been full / Blessed is He who has conquered me / And brought life to the dead to His own glory!" (Hymn 36).

In the West, St. Augustine (354-430), because he held to the idea of predestination, questioned whether any except the righteous before Noah's flood were delivered from the dead. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) later asserted only the Old Testament righteous were set free from hell. Aquinas' position became the official dogma of the Roman Catholic Church. In contrast, it is Orthodox Patristic Tradition that anyone who pleased God with their good works and who responded to Christ's gospel preaching in hell were raised from the dead. (For an extensive scholarly presentation of this subject read "Christ the

Conqueror of Hell" by Archbishop Hilarion Alfeyev.)

We tend to think of Christ's preaching to the dead in the past tense. However, the Orthodox Church believes Christ's salvation not only applies to a specific time in history but extends past and forward to all time. When we partake of the Eucharist, we do not symbolically re-enact nor merely remember Christ's sacrifice two millennia ago; rather, we mysteriously participate in an event that is eternally present. Is the same true of Christ's preaching to the dead in hades? The Orthodox Church doesn't take a dogmatic position that says "Yes," but She doesn't say "No" either. Whether the recent dead also benefit from Christ's preaching in hell is something God has chosen not to reveal to us.

What we do know is Christ's redemption of the deceased illustrates the great compassion of God, who "is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). God doesn't just extend His grace to the few "elect" as many Protestants believe, but He gives mercy to everyone, even perhaps to those who didn't have a chance to hear or fully respond to the gospel message while walking on this earth (Ezekiel 37:1-14?). This gives hope our deceased loved ones may still benefit from our prayers for them.

Many Protestants will counter if the dead are given another chance to draw nearer to Christ then that would diminish the fervency needed to heed Our Lord's command to "make disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 28:19).

Why should we concern ourselves with evangelism and missions if after death anyone could have their state improved by our prayers for them? However, this is like saying, "I don't need to teach my children to be virtuous Christians; they will get another chance to hear the gospel from a chaplain in the county jail after they

break the law." What compassionate parent would want their child to suffer even one day in the hellish nightmare of prison if it can be prevented? The imperative that we share the gospel is an act done out of love for humanity, than having the threat of blood being on our hands if we don't convince others to turn to Christ (as taught by some Protestants).

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