

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!

Volume 13 Issue 600

31st Sunday after Pentecost-Theophany of Christ

January 7, 2024



At this Great Feast of Theophany, we bring into the present Christ's holy Baptism into the waters of the Jordan. At first glance, the Feast of the Holy Theophany may appear to be solely the remembrance of Christ's baptism. Indeed, some non-Orthodox teach that we celebrate Christ's baptism solely that we may be obedient and "follow Christ's example."

But such a simplified understanding

of baptism belies a far greater and more beautiful divine truth and mystery revealed by God through His Church—a truth and a mystery so important for our salvation. For our Orthodox forefathers, Theophany was celebrated on par with the Nativity and at one time even joined with the Nativity and next only to Holy Pascha in significance.

Indeed, there are no fewer than 34 Scripture readings assigned to this Feast—so great is its importance, Christ's baptism is of so much significance to us, first, because God is revealed to us in this Feast—hence the name, "Theophany", *a manifestation or appearing of God*. God reveals Himself to us as Holy Trinity here. The Father speaks, declaring before the world, "You are My Beloved Son in Whom I am well-pleased" even as
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++ Sunday after Theophany ++

+Synaxis of St. John the Baptist +

Epistle: Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7

Gospel: Matthew 3: 13-17

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.*

A Conversation with your Soul, by Fr. Ioannichie Balan (part 2)

If they ask you for something, give it to them. If they tell you something, listen to them. If they send you somewhere, go there. If they call you, come. If they persecute you, go away. If they scold you, accept it. If they reproach you, be patient. Be to them as a slave, as a servant to all, and thus you will fulfill the law of Christ's love. Thus, you will become a good monk and a sincere servant.

Then pray for everyone, forgive everyone, humble yourself before everyone,

and speak to them meekly, do everything that you see is good for your brother, and don't do what you see upsets him. Thus, this is what I advise you: to continue on the path of your life with this sacred love for God and your neighbor, for only in this way will you be saved.

Obedience is closely connected with love. So, my soul, I advise you to be more obedient, more zealous in this holy service, strive for it with more love, and fulfill it with more humility. Be a good servant to everyone,

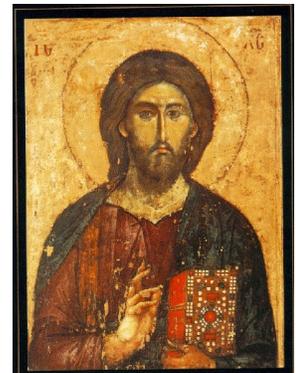
and be a Martha for this community, to everyone and to each one of them individually. Do not resist, do not grumble, but perform all obedience with love. It is your salvation.

It is only by obedience that you will be saved and enter Heaven, your sins will be forgiven, and you will dwell in Paradise. So strive, my soul, to serve everyone, to bring everyone peace and to be a sincere servant of the community of Christ. The Good God desired to take you from the world
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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, Larissa, Jack, Evan, Ryan, Anatoly, Alexey, Heidi, Mackenzie, Mike, Lisa, Jeff, Bonnalee, David, Carol, Norris, Debbie, Linda, Daniel, Michael, Abraham, George, Rochelle, Brianna, Tamam, Catherine, Liz, Chuck, Theresa, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

From St. John Kronstadt

When you are struck by other people's suffering, and the contraction of their souls, so that you are induced to pray for them with a pitying and contrite heart, pray to God to have mercy upon them and to forgive them their sins, as you would pray for the forgiveness of your own sins—that is, implore God with tears to pardon them; likewise pray for the salvation of others as you would pray for your own

salvation.

If you attain to this and make it a habit, you will receive from God an abundance of spiritual gifts, the gifts of the Holy Ghost, Who loves the soul that cares for the salvation of others, because He Himself, the most Holy Spirit, wishes to save us all in every possible way, if only we do not oppose Him, and do not harden our hearts." The Spirit Himself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered."

We often hear from others, or sometimes read in the works of others, what God has placed in our mind and heart, what we ourselves have cherished—that is, we often meet our favourite thoughts in others, and it seems to us as though they had been taken away from us, as though they had been new ones and formed our own exclusive property. Presumptuous thoughts! What? Is there not only one God, the Lord of all intellects? Is not His Spirit in all who seek for truth? Have we not one sole Enlightener, "which lights every man that comes into the world."

A Conversation with your Soul, cont'd from p.1

and bring you here. He so desired that you would be saved here, the Mother of God so desired that you would serve Her chosen ones who dwell in this sacred spiritual garden. Do not resist, do not grumble, do not run away, do not feel overburdened, do not lose heart, do not become less zealous, but with renewed and increased strength go to the holy battle for the rest of your life. Do so, and you will be saved by the prayers of your fathers.

Prayer. You will not be able to love God unless you pray to Him ceaselessly. You will not be able to obey unless you ask for help from above. You will not be able to cry, to know yourself, to begin a good undertaking and to humble yourself if you do not ask God for everything with holy prayer. *Ask, and it shall be given you* (Mt. 7:7), the Lord says. You will not be able to attain salvation unless you live only a life of holy prayer. You will not learn anything, you will not be able to do anything, you will not succeed in growing spir-

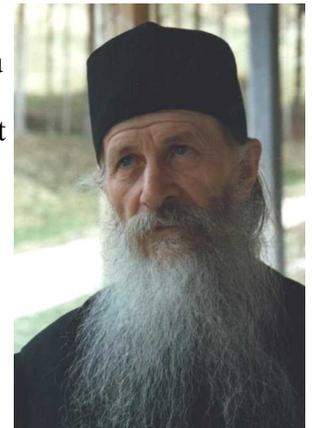
itually at all unless you pray without ceasing.

So, I advise you to be more zealous in prayer. As best you can, as you find it more useful and more peaceful, as you want—just pray all the time: on your way, in towns and villages, at obediences and in your cell, always pray. With your mouth, with your mind, out loud or in secret—always pray. Perform the Jesus Prayer, read the Psalms, read your prayer rule, Akathists, prayer services, canons, read what you can and what you want—just pray always and with great humility. Prayer is your nourishment in life, it will strengthen you in everything. It will bring down the dew of God's mercy and grace into your heart. So, do this, and you will stay alive by prayer.

Do not set yourself limits and laws—I do not force you to walk a more difficult path of prayer, where a lot of diligence and effort is required, because I know that you will not be able to cope with it, but I give you freedom: just pray always and with

humility.

Try not to let anyone know about your innermost prayer life. Do not forget that especially by standing attentively in the church and praying you will get a lot of comfort and peace. In addition to the Holy Liturgy, which you should never miss when you are free, stand concentrated at night services and you will gain enormous benefit. Bow, close your eyes, gather your mind, join your hands, come from the outside into the cell of your heart and stay there as long as you can, persisting in fervent prayer, and thus God will have mercy on you. Avoid cares and confusion so that you can pray purely and with feeling.



(continued next issue)

Homily on the Theophany of Christ, (cont'd from p.1)

the Holy Spirit descends upon Christ in the likeness of a dove, setting Christ on equal par with the Father and the Spirit.

Here at the Jordan, mystically present for us in the blessing of the waters we partake of this day, God reveals Himself to us as three in one, undivided yet distinct in Persons. Here, God shows Himself to be a relationship of love and perfect unity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father is here who begets the Word by Whom He speaks all things into being and proclaims them “good,” He who made the heavens and the earth and the waters in which He’s baptized. Here, the Father declares this truth to the whole world, revealing Jesus as His beloved Son. The Spirit is also here present, filling all things, and descending as a dove, ever proceeding from the Father.

Christ is not a messenger, not just a good teacher or example. If He is not also God, there is no renewal of our human nature, no “new Adam,” no salvation from sin and death. Who else can defeat sin and death and renew the race of man save Him who first created us, the very Word of God? As St. Athanasius writes in the 4th century, “It was in the power of none other to turn the corruptible to incorruption, except the Savior Himself, that had at the beginning also made all things out of nought: and that none other could create

anew the likeness of God’s image for men, save the Image of the Father” (On the Incarnation, XX)

Second, Christ God pours out His redemption, His love, His calling on our lives through this Feast, inviting us to be made anew in His image and likeness, the image of the Father. By entering into the waters of Jordan, it becomes the means through which we enter into the spiritual race of the new Adam, that Christ inaugurated by His Incarnation. St. Paul assures us, “as many of you as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:27), that is, have died to the old man and been raised to the new spiritual man in Christ: This is the water that Christ refers to when He says to Nicodemus in John 3:5, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”



Fittingly, the Jordan where Christ God is baptized is also the river that for Israel was the means of *temporal* rescue: Here Jacob crossed over to flee from Esau. Joshua commanded the priests carrying the Holy Ark to cross the Jordan so the Israelites could enter the Promised Land—and the Jordan parted for them as the Red Sea had for Moses when Israel fled Egypt. Here Elijah took his mantle, struck the water, dividing it, he and Elisha crossed as on dry land.

Now, Christ by His baptism, *sanctifies* this water. He makes it the means of *eternal* rescue and salvation for those who put on Christ and live out their baptism through repentance throughout their lives. Indeed, Creation itself is renewed here: All creation is sanctified by means of Christ’s Baptism, beginning with that most

basic element of His creation—*water*. It was the mystical waters that were separated to form the heavens and the earth. So, with the sanctification of water, all creation is renewed: The Creator, God the Word, has entered into it and it becomes what it first was and returns to its first beauty. It takes on a ‘spiritual’ attribute through its blessing and becomes the means through which God communicates His grace. By being born anew by “water and the Spirit,” Baptism and Chrismation, through this water made present at each baptism, we have the potential to become what God, in His great love for us, first created us to be—truly alive,

deified beings capable of growing in holiness and communion with the one God in Trinity.

We are preoccupied by so many things, so many cares that we think are so, so important. But here is the one thing needful—that we put on Christ in Baptism and then *live out* that baptism, growing in relationship and communion with the living God, glorifying Him with our lives. All that God created is good. As we live out our baptism, as we sanctify ourselves by this holy water, as we guard ourselves against further pollution and stain of sin, our light glows brighter, our love grows stronger, and all are affected, healed, changed, renewed, and invigorated who desire such change and continued growth and participation in the life of God the Holy Trinity. Behold: Christ has made all things new!

The Feast of Theophany and the Icon

Theophany-the Baptism of Christ-is celebrated on January 6. It is not to be confused with the Western holiday also called Epiphany which is a celebration of the magi presenting the baby Christ with their gifts. The word Theophany means "Revelation of God;" Theophany therefore marks the revelation of the Trinitarian nature of God when Jesus was baptized. Those who witnessed heard the Father's voice from Heaven, saw the Spirit descending upon Jesus, and could see Jesus in the flesh, whom God confirmed to be His Son with His voice.

The symbolism of the Theophany Icon is deep and rich. There is one particular part I want to focus on for this blog entry. Jesus is naked, or nearly so. Christ is purposely depicted with little or no clothing. But why is that significant?

All throughout the creation narrative in Genesis we see God creating and then saying it is "good." Man and woman were created together in God's image. They were both beautiful, and while they lacked physical garments, they were clothed in the glory of the "image" and "likeness" of God. However, when they fell into sin, they hid in shame until God brought them garments of skin to wear (which symbolizes the sinful tendency that now obscures our true nature).

Their natural beauty was transformed into an object of shame. Adam and Eve fell, and with them fell creation.

Now, enter Jesus Christ: he represents the second Adam (1 Cor 15). In shame and nakedness, Adam hid. Yet Christ comes in his majesty, both as God and man, both in glory and nakedness completely unashamed, representing the beauty of the undefiled human made possible through Him (and in the subsequent centuries, Christians were often baptized without any clothing, shedding the garments of the "old man" to die in Christ and be resurrected in Him). But why was Christ baptized if He had no sin?

While Christ was baptized in the Jordan River, it was really the Jordan and all of creation that was baptized in Christ. As Canticle Four of Compline of Theophany states, At Thine appearing in the body, the earth was sanctified, the waters blessed, the heaven enlightened, and mankind was set loose from the bitter tyranny of the enemy.

We see the beginning of a new creation in Theophany. Things are being set right. Christ has come not only to cleanse and restore mankind, but to adopt us as heirs into his Kingdom. And when we receive His glory, not only are we redeemed, but we draw all of creation with us into the final restoration. That is why "creation groans" in eager expectation, awaiting the glorification of the children of God. (Rom. 8)

A few other notes about the Icon: At the top the Holy Spirit is descending upon Jesus as a dove, the Holy Spirit is depicted in a Mandorla. In this manner, The Father, using His own pre-eternal and consubstantial and subcelestial Spirit as His finger, crying out and point from heaven, openly declared and proclaimed to

all that the one then being baptized by John in the Jordan was His beloved Son, while at the same time manifesting His unity with Him." (St. Gregory Palamas, Homily 60.15). St. John Chrysostom also emphasizes that the Gospels state the Heavens were opened, the Spirit descends upon us so that we can ascend with Christ and the Spirit to the Father in Heaven. For the first time since the fall of mankind, the Heavens were opened to us.

The angels on the right side are waiting to attend and dress him after the baptism is over. St. John the Baptist, while baptizing Jesus is usually turned away or looking at the Spirit descending upon Christ. This signifies that Theophany is

about elevating Jesus Christ. If this were an Olympic race, it would be as if the Old Testament (John the Baptist and all before him) were passing the baton to the New Testament (Jesus Christ and all of the saints).

There is an axe near John the Baptist, which reflects his warning that our lives must bear the fruit of the Spirit or else we will be removed. We cannot get comfortable or spiritually lazy. Jesus is not submerged in the water, for creation was baptized in Him, not vice versa.

Lastly, the strange little creatures riding fish at the bottom represent the Jordan River and the Sea, both fleeing at the sight of something much bigger and greater than themselves entering the water. As the Psalms say: Psalm 73:14 –Thou did establish the sea by Thy might, Thou did break the heads of the dragons in the water. Psalm 76:15 – The waters saw Thee, O God, the waters saw Thee and were afraid; the abysses were troubled. Psalm 113:3 – The sea beheld and fled, [the River] Jordan turned back.

