

# 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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2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent-St. Gregory Palamas

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St. Gregory Palamas, one of the pillars of Orthodoxy, was born in 1296, probably to a noble Anatolian family in Constantinople. He and his brother went to Mount Athos in around 1318, and lived in Vatopedi and Esphigmenou Monasteries. Gregory also successfully persuaded his widowed mother, brothers and sisters to become take up the monastic life. With the en-

croachment of the Turks, he was forced to flee to Thessalonica, being ordained a priest there in 1326. Afterward, he took up the eremitic life at a mountain near Beroea, and eventually returned to Athos in 1331.

St. Gregory lived in very difficult times, for many heresies were creeping into the Church, and the Ottoman Empire was ever expanding, taking over Byzantine lands. In the early 1300's he wrote on the nature of the Holy Spirit, showing the errors of the Latin view while living at the hermitage of Saint Savas on Mount Athos. He became known as a preeminent theologian early in life, due to his many writings and for his beliefs on hesychasm.

St. Gregory is known as one of the great defenders of Orthodoxy and is most well-known for his defense  
*(continued p. 3)*

**\*\*St. Gregory Palamas Sunday\*\***

**\*Martyr Agapius & Companions\***

Epistle: Hebrews 1:10-2:3

Gospel: Mark 2: 1-12

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.*

## ***I've gone and caught God, by Vasilios Grillas***

*We should take communion from a one-time only spoon. There are so many illnesses going about! I go to church, but don't ask me to take communion. It's disgusting. All that saliva. Yuck! Children shouldn't be taking communion. Look at all the viruses there are around.*

And yet, you hear opinions like this expressed from the mouths of Christians. It's disappointing, but true, unfortunately. There's no need to make a count of the

number of Christians who hold such views. All we need to do is look at their expressions. These are people who want to have a relationship with the Church. But with what Church? Certainly not with the Church that's founded on the Body and Blood of Christ.

People often want the Church from their own personal viewpoint. They want a Church that fits in with what they can get their minds around. They want a Church that's cut

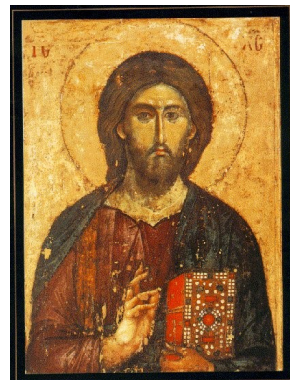
and dried to their own cloth. In this egocentric position, even the holy and sacred things of the Church are objectivized and don't escape the mental processes of these people, this mistake proliferates until it becomes blasphemy against the Holy Sacraments and the Body and Blood of Christ.

In times when illnesses, epidemics and global health problems occur, these voices and the positions of the people  
*(continued 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.





*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, 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.

**How we come to know God.**

What is most important about St. Gregory Palamas is his teaching about God's vision for our lives. Gregory taught that we cannot experience God through education, philosophy, intellectual discussion and debates. God is a person with whom we are to be in a relationship, not a topic to be discussed or facts to memorize.

He taught that God desires us to know Him, to experience Him, to share His life,

to become one with Him.

St. Gregory studied the Holy Scriptures, read the early Church Fathers and learned from his own experience on Mount Athos that it was possible to know and experience God in this life. This is what our Lord prayed for in His final prayer before His passion and death, that we share His life and become one with Him: May they all be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, so also may they be in Us. (John 17:21)

St. Basil the great write, "We know our God form his energies, but we do not claim that we can draw near to His essence. For his energies come down to us, but His essence remains unapproachable."

St. Gregory used the image of the sun to explain the relationship: it is impossible to approach the essence or the center of the sun but it is possible to experience the energy of the sun: its light and warmth. Gregory said that through hesychasm, men and women can experience the light of God just as the apostles experienced the light of God streaming through the Body of Jesus at His Transfiguration.

**I've caught God, (cont'd from p. 1)**

become more strident. The Church has suffered this persecution from within more times than enough. Its own children take arms against its sanctity and devalue the sacraments by reducing them to myths.

By an extension of this reasoning, even any assembly in the House of God, in churches, is judged to be dangerous. A crowd of people makes people think about public health and safety. That's the way the world thinks.

Fortunately, it's not how Christ thinks. Ten lepers approached Him and He didn't flinch. On the contrary, He engaged with them and gave them back their health. To be precise, He became personally and fearlessly involved with all the diseases of His time and healed the sick. He dealt with the corpses of the dead, even those that were decomposing after four days, and gave them back their life. No hesitation. No conditions. Boldly. In full. Without a second thought. Without any cringing. Without further consideration.

People don't want to act like that. More likely the opposite. And by this reasoning they want to justify whatever it is they think and they even try to alter Christ to fit their way of thinking. Really. When you're afraid that the Body and Blood of Christ might do you harm, when you think that the Chalice of Life is a test-tube full of germs and microbes, when you believe that the immortal Body of the Lord might be the cause of damage to your own body, when you claim that life-giving Blood of Christ might infect your own, then you're trying to transform Christ, blasphemously reconciling His holiness with sin, His incorruption with decay, His power with weakness and His immortality with death.

This is the reality of the fear that you might catch something from the Holy Chalice: an illness, a virus or a germ. The Chalice of the Church is the source of life and there is no way that it can become a means of depriving us of life or a cause for its abuse. It's the source of eternity and under no

conditions can it become a cause of the problems of the immediate present. For thousands of years now, people with leprosy, consumption, infectious diseases, hepatitis, people in the final stages of illnesses or in their last moments have made their communion from the same chalice and with the same spoon.

Yet no one can ever claim that the Holy Chalice was the cause of plague.

And yet, you will catch something from the Holy Chalice that will rid you of fear, petty worries and blasphemy. You'll catch something that'll make you holy, mighty and immortal, by grace. From the Holy Chalice... you catch God.



against the heresies of Barlaam. Gregory was asked to defend the monastic ways of the Holy Mountain from the charges of Barlaam, a monk of Calabria. Barlaam, influenced by the Latin church, believed that philosophy and human thought were the way to know God. He stated the unknowability of God in an extreme form, having been influenced by a reductionist interpretation of the writings of St. Dionysius the Areopagite.

Orthodoxy had always known, through the wisdom of the Holy Fathers, that prayer and fasting are the key to knowing God. Barlaam believed that the monks of Mount Athos were wasting their time in their prayers and fasting when they should be studying the great philosophers of mankind.

St. Gregory said that the Holy Fathers and the prophets had a greater knowledge of God, because they had actually seen or heard God Himself. He taught that modern ideas about human thought and reason had no place in the Church. When asked how it is possible to have knowledge of the unknowable God, he showed the difference between knowing God in His essence or person and knowing God in his energies or being. It became clear that one could not find God in the logic of this world.

He taught the Orthodox knowledge that it remains impossible to know God in His essence or person. However, with sufficient prayer and fasting and turning oneself over to God, through purification of one's soul, anyone can come to know Him in His energies and being.

The Barlaam heresies spanned many years and two phases. Due to acts of political power struggles in Constantinople, Gregory was imprisoned to prevent him from speaking the Truth. As the political struggle increased, his accusers multiplied because he would not yield to their heresies, and he opposed the new emperor due to the emperor's acceptance of the heresies.

When St. Gregory criticized Barlaam's rationalism, Barlaam replied with a vicious attack on the hesychastic life of the Athonite monks. Gregory's rebuttal was the Triads in defense of the Holy Hesychasts (c. 1338), a brilliant work whose teaching was affirmed by his fellow Hagiorites, who met together in a council during 1340-1341, issuing a statement known as the Hagioritic Tome, which supported Gregory's theology.

A synod held in Constantinople in 1341 also supported St. Gregory's views, condemning Barlaam. Later, in 1344, the opponents of hesychasm secured a condemnation for heresy and excommunication for Gregory, but the saint's theology was reaffirmed at two further synods held in Constantinople in 1347 and 1351. Collectively, these three synods in Constantinople are held by many Orthodox Christians and several prominent theologians to constitute the Ninth Ecumenical Council. Between the latter two synods, Gregory composed the One Hundred and Fifty Chapters, a concise exposition of his theology.

In 1347, he was consecrated Archbishop of Thessalonica, but the political climate made it impossible for him to take up his see until 1350.

During a voyage to the Imperial capital, he was captured by the Turks and held in captivity for over a year. He reposed in 1359, and was glorified by the Orthodox Church in 1368.

The second Sunday of the Great Fast is called the Sunday of Gregory Palamas in all Orthodox Churches. A full service was composed for his feast day, November 14/27, by the Patriarch Philotheus in 1368. St. Gregory's holy relics are kept in the Cathedral of Thessalonica.

### **God is light**

On the Second Sunday of Great Lent, we celebrate the memory of St. Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica. On this day, the Holy Church speaks to us about the mystery of light, which we must come to know, if we want to behold the Resur-



rection of Christ. St. Gregory of Thessalonica and the theological arguments of the fourteenth century connected with his name taught that the light of the Transfiguration is uncreated light. Refuting the heresies of the western theologians, this teaching reminded Christians of the words of the Scripture stating that God is light. By confessing God the Father and God the Son, Light from Light, true God of true God, we believe that God the Light created another light—the one described in the book of Genesis: "God said, let there be light." These dogmatic questions were not abstract speculation. It is wrong to look at them as simple theological or scholarly discussions that have no relation to our life. That would mean only one thing: that the light about which God speaks to us—the light in which there is no darkness—will remain unseen to us, and we do not regret or repent that we remain in darkness.

## Prayers for the Dead by Michael Bressem (pt. 2)

Many Protestants will counter if the dead are given another chance to draw nearer to Christ than 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).

Also consider the dead don't have the opportunity to do good deeds after they breathe their last breath. This is another reason it is important the living receive the gospel message (Matthew 11:20-24; John 9:4). However, though my child sitting in a prison cell doesn't have the opportunity to be a good citizen and reap the rewards thereof; yet my petitions to the warden, the parole board, or the governor may improve the chance my child will be given clemency. And if we, mere humans, have such compassion for others then how much more will God have compassion for us (Matthew 7:7-11)?

### Biblical Examples

The Old Testament passage most commonly given in support for praying for the dead is from 2 Maccabees 12:43-45. Judas led his army to pray for their fallen comrades that their sin may "be completely blotted out." A sin offering was also taken for the fallen, and "in doing so he acted properly and with honor, taking note of the resurrection. For if he were not looking for the resurrection of those fallen, it would have been utterly foolish to pray for the departed." Indeed, it is Jewish custom to pray for the dead even to this day. Known as a Kaddish in Aramaic, it is a prayer of sanctification in order that the deceased may still have the opportunity to be made holy.

2 Timothy 1:16-18 is a New Testament passage that can also be cited in support of praying for the dead. St. Paul prays Onesiphorus would "find mercy from the Lord." Onesiphorus is referred to in the past tense, as if deceased, and St. Paul doesn't extend his wish of mercy to anyone else in the household—those still alive (2 Timothy 4:19). Yet, perhaps more compelling than the above two passages is the fact Elijah prays, "O Lord my God, let the soul of this child come back to him," and then a widow's son is

resurrected from the dead (3 Kingdoms 17:17-24).

Jesus Christ also prayed to His Father before raising Lazarus from the tomb (John 11:41-44). Consider also when Christ sent forth His disciples He commanded them to "raise the dead" (Matthew 10:8) and that doing so would have necessitated prayer. An example of which is when St. Peter prayed for Tabitha and she arose from the dead (Acts 9:36-42). These are clear Scriptural examples of the efficacy of prayer for the deceased.

Sanctification doesn't happen instantly but is an ongoing process (2 Corinthians 3:18). There is no reason to assume the process ends with death because few people achieve sinless perfection (Matthew 5:48) in this lifetime. Therefore, it only makes sense we continue to pray for the departed in much the same way we pray for the sanctification of our living brothers and sisters (1 Thessalonians 5:23). From an earthly perspective, we tend to separate the living from the dead; but from a heavenly perspective, "He is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live to Him" (Luke 20:38).

### Church Tradition

There are plenty of examples that the early Church prayed for the dead. Tertullian (160-220), St. Cyril of Jerusalem (313-386), St. Ephrem of Syria (306-373), St. Basil of Caesarea (330-379), St. Ambrose of Milan (337-397), St. John Chrysostom (347-407) and many other Church Fathers make mention of praying for the dead. The Roman historian Eusebius (262-339) stated that Church priests offered prayers for the soul of the first Christian emperor, St. Constantine, after his death in 337. Since the early Church adopted much of the worship style of the Hebrew religion, it is natural that the Church would continue the Jewish practice of praying for the dead.

The first widely accepted liturgy of the Church, attributed to St. James, the stepbrother of Our Lord, gives a prayer for the dead. The priest beseeches God for the rest of all the righteous from Abel to this day that they may repose in God's kingdom, "in the delight of Paradise, in the bosom of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, our holy fathers, from whence pain and sorrow and sighing have fled away, where the light of [God's] countenance visits them and always shines on them."

Prayer for the dead is also found in other early Church manuscripts. The Church council of Gangra (358) in canon XX anathematizes anyone who thinks lightly of liturgical assemblies to honor the holy martyrs. The Apostolic Constitutions (380), an early clergy manual on worship, doctrine, and disciplinary practices, gives a prayer that God "may forgive every sin, voluntary and involuntary" and would be "merciful and gracious" to the deceased.

*(continued next issue)*

