

## **IV - The Epistle Readings from the End of the Pentecostarion to the Beginning of the Triodion**

### **The Epistle to the Romans**

On most days of the year, when there is no Great Feast or important commemoration, the Byzantine Church reads the Scriptures continuously. The Epistles, beginning with Romans, are read one after the other from Pentecost to the beginning of the Holy Week.. Thus we are now at the start of the public reading of Romans in the Byzantine Churches.

The first printed Bibles did not attempt to put the Epistles in chronological order. They put the longest first and worked their way down to the shortest for each author. Romans is St. Paul's longest epistle but not his first. At St. Paul's death (c. AD 66) only one of our Gospels (Mark) had been written. His epistles are, therefore, the first surviving documents of the Christian movement.

In the first century AD there were long-established Jewish communities in all the principal cities of the Roman Empire. St. Paul's own plan on visiting such a city was to first preach Christ in the local synagogue. Inevitably some people accepted that Jesus was the Messiah and others did not. In AD 49 Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome. The Roman historian Suetonius suggested that this was because the Jews were so vehemently contending about whether Jesus was the Messiah. In any case, Jews returned to Rome after Claudius' death in AD 54. It was to the believers among them that Paul addressed his epistle.

### **Second Thursday after Pentecost**

#### **Christ, the New Adam (Rom 5:10-16)**

Matthew, writing for Jewish Christians, stresses that Christ is the new Moses. St. Paul is writing to the Church at Rome, where there is at least a sizable number of Gentile believers – perhaps they were even the majority. Paul bypasses Moses altogether. He rather points to Abraham and to Adam, our universal ancestor, whom he calls “*a type of Him who was to come*” (Rom 5:14). Both Adam and Abraham are figures who would be meaningful to both Jewish and Gentile believers.

Abraham, whose story is told in Genesis 11:26–25:10, is described there as blessed by God in a multi-cultural way, if you will: “*I will make you the father of many nations and I will increase you very, very much. I will make you into nations and kings will come from you*” (Gen 17:5-6). In the Middle East Abraham is still regarded as the ancestor of the Jews through his son Isaac and of the Arabs through his son Ishmael. St. Paul describes him as the father of all believers everywhere, because he trusted God to provide him an heir and to risk sacrificing that heir, Isaac, if God so willed.

Paul stressed that Abraham was not justified by God for keeping the Law of Moses (Abraham lived centuries before Moses), but for believing: trusting that God would fulfill His promises and provide for him. Rabbis after the first century AD, perhaps stung by Paul's reasoning, began to teach that Abraham had in fact known and practiced the Law in its entirety, despite the lack of evidence in Genesis or anywhere else.

St. Paul portrays Adam as our common ancestor whose legacy is sin and death. Yet he says that Adam was "*a type of Him who was to come,*" that is, of Christ. In the thinking of the early Christians and their Jewish contemporaries, a *type* in the Old Testament prefigured or foreshadowed events or aspects of Christ in the New Testament. Thus the Patriarch Joseph, a favorite son of his father, rejected by his own, betrayed for silver, and saving the world from famine was a favorite figure of Christ.

Adam prefigures Christ in that he had a heritage that touches every person throughout history. As the fourth-century bishop of Tarsus, Diodoros, explained: "Adam was a type of Christ, not with respect to his sin or his righteousness – in this respect the two men were opposites – but with respect to the effects of what he did. For just as Adam's sin spread to all men, so Christ's life also spread to all men." But where Adam's heritage was death, Christ's was new life. "*If by the one man's offence many died, much more has the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many*" (Rom 5:15). Both Jews and Gentiles had inherited death; both could inherit new life in Christ.

A New Moses for the Jews, a New Adam for the whole human race, Christ is truly "in all and for the sake of all" (Divine Liturgy).

## **Second Sunday after Pentecost**

### **Revealed Guidance and Conscience (Romans 2:10-16)**

IN HIS EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS St. Paul speaks of a distinction between Jews and Gentiles. Jews, he indicates, have the Law (the Torah), the record of God's revelation to Moses, as their guide, unlike the Gentiles. This does not make them superior or holier in any way, "*For there is no partiality with God*" (Rom 2:11).

In the selection read today St Paul affirms that "*everyone who works what is good*" – the Gentiles as well as Jews – can be just in the sight of God. While Jews lived in the midst of Gentiles throughout the Mediterranean world, strict Jews did not mingle with Gentiles. If a Gentile wished to join them – and some did – they would have to observe the entire Law, starting with circumcision, just as any observant Jew would do. Keeping the Law of Moses was the great – and only – sign that a person was living according to God's will.

Paul's teaching was very different. Observance of the Law of Moses was fine, but people could be pleasing to God by following what their conscience tells them is right for they would be following the heart of the Law (the Ten Commandments) without explicitly knowing it. As the third-century commentator Origen wrote, "The Gentiles need not keep the Sabbaths or the new moons or the sacrifices which are written down in the law. For this law is not what is written on the hearts of the Gentiles. Rather it is that which can be discerned naturally, e.g. that they should not kill or commit adultery, that they should not bear false witness, that they should honor father and mother, etc." (Commentary on Romans 1.228).

Paul here prepares the ground for his most important teaching: that it was acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah which made one a true member of God's People, be he Jew or Gentile. If a person believed in Christ, then it did not matter whether he was circumcised or not or whether he observed all the ritual practices of Judaism.

St Paul goes on to note that there are sinners and righteous people among both Jews and Gentiles. Sinful Jews "*will be judged by the law for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law who will be justified*" (Rom 2:12-13). Gentiles, "*who do not have the Law,*" (v.14) have another standard by which they are judged. Gentiles, who "*by nature do the things in the Law ... who show the work of the law written in their hearts,*" (v .15) are judged by whether their conscience is in accord with the way of God. "*In the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ*" (v. 16) Gentiles will be judged by the witness of their conscience.

The Lord Jesus' parable of the last judgment (Mt 25: 31-46) expresses the same teaching in story form: "*When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the Gentiles will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats*" (v. 31-32). Some are judged righteous because "*I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me*" (v. 35-36). While commentators usually stress the charitable basis of the judgment, the point of the parable is actually that the righteous Gentiles served Christ without knowing Him: "*Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You?*" (v.37). These righteous Gentiles were simply following their conscience, doing what they felt was right. But when a non-believer's conscience leads them to love God's creation as He does, then "*inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me*" (v.40).

### **What Is Conscience?**

The idea that there is something within a person which leads them to decide what is right or wrong is found in many ancient cultures. Conscience, as St Paul uses the term, comes from the thought of the Greek and Roman philosophers such as Socrates, Aristotle, Seneca and Philo. It is described as a sense of moral awareness or consciousness that enables a person to judge something to be ethically right or wrong.

Those with a well-developed conscience have a keen sense of right and wrong. People with no such beliefs may be amoral, even sociopaths with no principles governing their lives other than their own needs or desires.

Early Christian thinkers like St Clement of Alexandria and St Justin the Philosopher saw the truths in classical philosophy as preparing the Greeks to meet Christ just as the Torah did for the Jews. They saw the best of human thought as leading inevitably to the teachings of the Lord Jesus. This is why in many Byzantine churches frescoes depicting the pagan Greek philosophers were placed on the outer porches. Thus it was natural for St. Paul to use the philosophical term *conscience* when speaking about Greeks.

### **A Christian Conscience**

Christians are called to form their consciences, their sense of right and wrong, not from secular philosophy but according to the teachings of Holy Tradition. Thus, when Fathers like Sts. Ambrose, Cyril of Jerusalem or John Chrysostom instructed catechumens, they used as examples the Biblical figures who personified the virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice.

St Basil the Great developed a coherent system of Christian ethics in his works *The Judgment of God, Faith and Morals*. He, too, based his teaching on the Scriptures but not simply on isolated passages. The word of God, he insisted, had to be proclaimed all-inclusively so that people could correctly form their consciences. St Basil warned the clergy to be sure to preach the word of God in its fullness; if they omitted some necessary teaching they would be accountable for their hearers' transgressions.

For an Eastern Christian, that fullness is based, not on principles of philosophy, but on the mystery of our salvation in Jesus Christ. It consists ultimately in putting on what St Paul calls "*the mind of Christ*" (1 Cor 2:16) which we discover in the pages of the Gospels. We also understand this mind to be expressed in other elements of Tradition, the voice of the Holy Spirit in the Church. These include all the Scriptures as well as the creeds, the writings of the Church Fathers, the texts of our liturgy, the canons of the councils, the icons, and the witness of the saints.

### **The Mind of Christ Today**

The heart of the authentic Tradition – in contrast to mere custom – is marked by its continuity with the practice of the apostolic Church and by its agreement with the consensus of the Church's experience through the ages. Thus, for example, abortion has been condemned by the historic Churches since the first century. Similarly sexual activity between any except married couples has never been accepted in the Church. The unbroken Tradition is that God's purpose for sexuality is directed at something more than bodily pleasure. In such cases we cannot claim to be discerning the mind of Christ by picking and choosing those teachings of the Tradition which

suit us. Rather we are called to embrace the entire authentic Tradition which the Church has received it and passed it on to us.

Other issues seem to fall into much grayer areas where there is no clear or unwavering Tradition. Thus Christians can claim precedents for pacifism and for supporting the government or the armed forces in both Scripture and Tradition. Politics, the economy, the environment and social ethics are contemporary issues on which Christians often take opposing stands. As long as there is no clear teaching on such questions, Christians may take whatever stand is in accord with their conscience.

Some may not feel any guilt at supporting a free-market economy or open borders while others, who find these practices objectively wrong, would be morally guilty if they condoned them. The one person violates his conscience by endorsing such an act; the other person would not be guilty of sin for doing so.

The dilemma of conflicting consciences is a classic theme in Western literature. A recent example is *A Man for All Seasons*, the drama about St Thomas More who resisted King Henry VIII in his drive to separate the Church of England from Rome. When Thomas refused to endorse the king's plan, his friend the Duke of Norfolk advised him, "Oh, just come along and do it." Thomas More responded, "Oh, that's fine for you. Your conscience allows you to do that. And when you die, you go to heaven. And as for me, I go to hell." And Norfolk says, "Well, do it for friendship's sake." And he says, "When I go to hell, Norfolk, will you come with me 'for friendship's sake'?"

### **Third Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **The Hope of Glory (Rom 5:1-10)**

RECENTLY THE WEBSITE "Ship of Fools" reported the following list of support group meetings for the week at a Lutheran church in Ohio:

Mon – Alcoholics Anonymous

Tues – Abused Spouses

Wed – Eating Disorders

Thus – Say No to Drugs

Fri – Teen Suicide Watch

Sat – Soup Kitchen

At the Sunday service the sermon was "America's Joyous Future."

While America's future may be joyous, its present seems decidedly troubled. There are not enough days in the week to treat all the disorders plaguing our society: internet gambling and pornography as well as school shootings, being only the most recent additions to our "culture."

Many of these problems already existed prior to the 1960s, yet they did not seem as widespread or as troubling. People who grew up in the 1920s, 30s and 40s – despite living through the Great Depression and World War II – seemed better adjusted to life as they matured. Surviving these major world upheavals seems to have made people stronger and more at peace with their lives.

Writing in the January 3, 2011 *New York Times*. Benedict Carey summarizes a number of case studies of people experiencing hardship of one kind or another. He notes that people who have endured adversity often develop strengths to cope with future difficulties. Carey observes, “The findings suggest that mental toughness is something like physical strength: It cannot develop without exercise...”

Perhaps unconsciously this author is echoing St Basil the Great who observed, “For those who are well prepared, tribulations are like certain foods and exercises for athletes which lead the contestant on to the inheritance of glory.” Keeping fit and trim may entail discomfort, but lead to victory.

St Paul endorses this dynamic and even applauds it in his own life in his Epistle to the Romans where he writes that we “... rejoice in hope of the glory of God. And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Rom 5:2-4). He rejoices in the afflictions he has endured for the Gospel because they have led him to a serene confidence in God.

### **Through Tribulation to Perseverance**

St Paul discerns three movements in this journey toward serenity: the first being that “*tribulation produces perseverance.*” Paul – and many others since – endured beatings and imprisonment for Christ. They emerged with the conviction that God had been with them in the midst of their trials and that they had found in that realization the strength to continue serving Him.

Two millennia later an American Jesuit, Fr Walter Cizek described his journey through twenty years as a prisoner in the Soviet Union: “Across that threshold I had been afraid to cross, things suddenly seemed so very simple. There was but a single vision, God, who was all in all; there was but one will that directed all things, God's will. I had only to see it, to discern it in every circumstance in which I found myself, and let myself be ruled by it.

“God is in all things, sustains all things, directs all things. To discern this in every situation and circumstance, to see His will in all things, was to accept each circumstance and situation and let oneself be borne along in perfect confidence and trust. Nothing could separate me from Him, because He was in all things. No danger could threaten me, no fear could shake me, except the fear of losing sight of Him.

“The future, hidden as it was, was hidden in His will and therefore acceptable to me no matter what it might bring. The past, with all its failures, was not forgotten; it remained to remind me of the weakness of human nature and the folly of putting any faith in self. But it no longer depressed me. I looked no longer to self to guide me, relied on it no longer in any way, so it could not again fail me” (Cizek, *He Leadeth Me*, pp 79-80).

## **Perseverance Produces Character**

Character has been defined as the sum of those traits which make up an individual. People who are honest, principled, fair-minded and courageous are said to have a strong character. These qualities develop over time through, as St. Paul says, perseverance in the circumstances of one's life despite the hardships or trials that may be involved.

The need for conscious cooperation with God has always been recognized as essential for developing a Christian personality. In the Second Epistle of St Peter we read the following prescription for developing such a character: “...*add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (2 Pt 1:5-8).

The process by which we develop a Christian character is often not recognized in the wider society. It seems contrary to “normal” human growth because it involves rejection of some of our culture's values. We are not urged to persevere in difficult relationships but to abandon them. We are encouraged to be “free” rather than self-controlled. Yet it is precisely these uncommon virtues that produce a Christ-like quality in us. In the troparion often sung for saintly bishops we say, “You acquired greatness through humility and spiritual wealth through poverty.” By persevering in what seemed to diminish them in the eyes of the world they achieved greatness in the sight of God.

## **Character Produces Hope**

The final step in St Paul's dynamic leads us to hope, but hope for what? We hope in the possibility of our ultimate and complete transfiguration, in body as well as in spirit, at the resurrection. Later in Romans we read “*We also, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body, for we were saved in this hope...*” (Rom 8:23-24).

Commenting on this passage, Pope Benedict XVI wrote, “With this as our hope we can face our present: the present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey” (*Spe Salvi*, 1).

We profess this hope every time we recite the Nicene Creed: “I await the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.” We are sure in this hope based on the promise of God. May it remain with us throughout our lives, enlivening our faith and undergirding our sense of assurance in God's love.

## **Fourth Sunday after Pentecost**

### **When Romans Turned to Christ (Mt 8:5-13)**

IN SOME AREAS OF THE ANCIENT WORLD, like the eastern end of the Roman Empire and beyond in Persian territory, Jewish believers would remain as the dominant presence in the Church for many years. In other areas, such as in Rome, the opposite would be true. Gentiles came to dominate the Christian community even in St. Paul's lifetime.

Speaking to these Gentile Christians St Paul uses terms that may surprise us. "*For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness*" (Rom 6:19). How could St. Paul call the Romans, who gave the world law, philosophy and civil order "slaves of uncleanness"?

St Paul called the Romans – free citizens of the greatest city in the Mediterranean world – "slaves of sin." Their way of life was characterized by the worship of many gods (which the Jews would see as idolatry) and by sexual license, abortion and infanticide (which were all sinful to God-fearing Jews). All these practices were considered acceptable, even normal, in Roman society. There was no social stigma attached to any of them. People were free to engage in behavior which the Jews found demeaning and sinful.

Some of these Romans had become Christians and were now expected to put aside such behavior. St Paul, however, does not exhort them to be free, but now to be slaves of righteousness. Why would he insist that people exchange one kind of slavery for another?

### **Dependence vs. Independence**

Over the centuries Christians have explained Paul's teaching in two ways. One way stresses that human freedom is always limited – if not by outside forces then by our own weaknesses. It has often been said that there is always slavery in the midst of freedom. It just depends on which freedom you pick and which slavery you pick.

Many of us, for example, are tied unthinkingly to a particular way of thinking or doing things – such as making money at all costs – which can lead to unrighteousness. As long as we are tied to the earth for its own sake, we run the risk of chaining ourselves to the things of the earth, which may lead to all kinds of baseness and humiliation. Thus while patriotism is surely a virtue, excessive patriotism ("my country right or wrong") has led people to imperialism, colonialism and international terrorism ("might makes right"). Dependence on God is the only "slavery" that does not degrade us.

St Justin Popovich, the twentieth century Serbian theologian and confessor, offers the second explanation. He saw our relationship to God in Christ as the only true freedom. "In truth there is only one freedom – the holy freedom of Christ, whereby He freed us from sin, from evil, from the devil. It binds us to God. All other freedoms are illusory, false, that is to say, they are all, in fact, slavery" (St. Justin Popovich, *Ascetical and Theological Chapters*, II.36).

## **Choosing Righteousness**

The Roman Christians' moment of choice, according to St Paul, was in the past: they had made the commitment at their baptism. This is why St Paul could speak of them as "having been set free from sin" (Rom 6:18).

There are two distinct but complimentary movements at our baptism. The first involves our choice. We reject the dominion of sin and choose to unite ourselves to Christ. The second is the work of God who immerses us into the death and resurrection of Christ. Through this two-fold process we are freed from the power of sin and death. We are called to ratify our baptism every day by choosing righteousness as a way of life. This is sometimes a struggle, but we know it is possible for us because of our union with Christ.

When we are buried with the Lord in baptism, we are granted the joy of His new resurrected life. When we live conscious of His life in us our lives take on a heavenly and uplifted spirit. To paraphrase St. John Chrysostom, if we believe the Lord is risen, we should believe it about ourselves as well.

## **Slaves or Friends?**

In the Gospel, when the Lord was asked about freedom, He replied "*Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin. And a slave does not abide in the house forever, but a son abides forever. Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed*" (Jn 8:34-36). If, then we have been made free by our union with the Son of God who delivered us from the eternal power of sin and death, why does St Paul say that we should be slaves, rather than sons?

The answer is expressed clearly in the epistle: "*I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh*" (Rom 6:19). When St Paul began forming new Christians by speaking of freedom, he was often misunderstood. People thought they were no longer bound to any standards of behavior – they were "free." Paul did not dare tell people they were free – they were too immature to hear it. As he told the Corinthians, "*I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able*" (1 Cor 3:2).

St Paul then began using a different approach, as is evident in Romans. He does not contrast slavery and freedom, but contrasting their former slavery to sin to their Christian dependence upon God.

Later Christian writers spelled out St Paul's distinction of spiritual milk and solid food in a systematic way. At the earliest stages some believers relate to God as slaves to a master: they fear God and seek to avoid His punishment by keeping His commandments. Believers at a later level of spiritual maturity relate to God as an employee to an employer. They seek to please God and thereby gain a reward. They expect their devotion to be paid off in heaven.

The most mature believers are the children of God. They know the love God has for all mankind – indeed, for all creation – and they love Him as their Father. These are the believers who know that God calls them to communion with Him and they strive to become one with God. They are the “sons” who abide forever.

### **From Slavery to Freedom (Rom 6:18-23)**

WHEN WE THINK OF SLAVERY it is the experience of blacks in America which comes to mind. Africans targeted by commercial slave traders as ignorant savages were captured in raids, transported across the Atlantic and sold on the open market like livestock.

In the Roman Empire slavery was not tied to race as it was here. The first slaves seem to have been children sold by their own parents and enemy warriors and their families captured during battle. Debtors sold themselves into slavery to cover their debts. They could be freed if their family or friends paid off the debt or even as a reward for exceptional service. They might then enjoy the patronage of an employer, their former master or someone else recognized in a public ceremony.

This last example seems to have been the model of slavery St. Paul had in mind when he wrote of people set free from sin and become “*slaves of righteousness*” (Rom 6:16) through baptism. Incorporation into Christ was seen as delivering people from slavery and connecting them to a new Protector whom they would now serve.

### **Are We Slaves or Free?**

A popular name for men in the Arabic-speaking world (both Christian and Muslim) is *Abdullah*, the “slave of God.” the same term St. Paul uses here. Whenever we receive baptism, the Eucharist or a blessing we are called “slaves of God” as well. Perhaps to respect our sensibilities, the phrase is usually translated as “servant” or “handmaid” of God but in the original Greek it is the same word translated here as “slave” (*doulos*).

This concept may strike us as misguided – did not the Lord Jesus teach us that we are His friends, not His servants (see John 15:15)? Yet He also said that “*You are My friends if you do whatever I command you*” (John 15:14). The fact is that we are never completely autonomous – we are always serving someone or something. It may be our country, another person, or our greed. The apostles knew that the Lord had called them to an intimate relationship with Himself; a relationship in which they dedicated their lives to serving Him and His Father.

The fifth-century Syriac Father John the Solitary (commemorated on June 19) clearly expressed this paradox in a letter on the monastic life which has survived the centuries. “Be both a servant, and free: a servant in that you are subject to God, but free in that you are not enslaved to anything – either to empty praise or to any of the passions.

“Release your soul from the bonds of sin; abide in liberty, for Christ has liberated you; acquire the freedom of the New World during this temporal life of yours. Do not be enslaved to love of money or to the praise resulting from pleasing people” (St. John the Solitary, *Letter to Hesychias*, 25, 26).

For the Christian, then, freedom is the God-given ability to be ‘slaves of God’ rather than captives of sin. We are free, not from any obligation but from the fruitless effects of living apart from God. We can now bear fruit of holiness and, in the end everlasting life.

### **Freedom Takes Work**

In our day many people see freedom to mean an absence of obligation, an absence of laws or responsibility. To be free means to do whatever one feels like without restraint of conventions, or other people’s idea of what is right. This may be the freedom of the adolescent with an unexpected day off from school, but is it the freedom of the children of God, of those made after His image and recreated in baptism? Is freedom nothing more than the freedom to be lazy? Or does freedom have a richer meaning for the believer?

In his *First Homily on Ezekiel* Origen teaches that spiritually indolent people are actually rejecting their freedom. The freedom of the children of God means that we not paralyzed by the negative forces to which we may be exposed. We are able to get off the couch, as it were, to “make an effort, to toil, to fight, to become the artificer of your own salvation.” To those who are reluctant to alter their comfortable routines Origen asks, “Are you then reluctant to work – you who were created in order to create?”

According to the creation story in the book of Genesis we human beings are given the charge to make something of the earth, to be co-creators with God of our surroundings; and the first thing deserving our attention is our own character. We need not be swept along by a mediocre way of life: we can assert our true freedom by living as servants of God through a repentant way of life. In the Liturgy we repeatedly ask that we may spend “the rest of our life in peace and repentance,” but rarely make the effort to let that happen in our lives.

Many of us have become comfortable with a kind of spiritual inertia, content that we are not committing grave sins. We seem to be not doing anything at all, but in fact we have made a choice. In spite of the gift of divine life we have received, we have opted to give God merely a token of respect but to live most of our lives with little thought to serving Him. By not being His servants we have compromised our freedom.

Our lives seem to echo this hymn from the Lenten Triodion: “In the waters of Baptism, O Father, you have made me Your child. In Your great goodness, You adorned me with all the virtues. But by my own free choice, I have become enslaved to fruitless thoughts which have brought me down to poverty. Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me.”

## **Is Saying “No” the Height of Freedom?**

*Commenting on the teaching of Saint Maximos the Confessor, Pope Benedict XVI offered this reflection:*

“Saint Maximus tells us that – and we know that this is true – Adam (and we ourselves are Adam) thought that the ‘no’ was the peak of freedom. He thought that only a person who can say ‘no’ is truly free; that if he is truly to achieve his freedom, man must say ‘no’ to God; only in this way, he believed, could he at last be himself, could he reach the heights of freedom.

“The human nature of Christ also carried this tendency within it but overcame it, for Jesus saw that it was not the ‘no’ that was the height of freedom. The height of freedom is the ‘yes,’ in conformity with God’s will. It is only in the ‘yes’ that man truly becomes himself; only in the great openness of the ‘yes,’ in the unification of his will with the divine than man becomes immensely open, becomes ‘divine.’ What Adam wanted was to be like God, that is, to be completely free. But the person who withdraws into himself is not divine, is not completely free; he is freed by emerging from himself, it is in the ‘yes’ that he becomes free... It is by transferring the human will to the divine will that the real person is born; it is in this way that we are redeemed.”

*Church Fathers and Teachers: From St Leo the Great to Peter Lombard, p. 62*

## **Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**

### **Righteousness through Faith in Christ (Rom 10:1-10)**

LOS ANGELES DODGERS PITCHER Sandy Koufax raised many an eyebrow at the 1965 World Series when he refused to pitch at the opening game because it was Yom Kippur. He remains a model for countless observant Jewish athletes, debaters, spellers and other competitors who decline to practice or compete on the Sabbath, even if it means forfeiting a championship. As one Jewish teenager put it, “Shabbat is not at all voluntary and not something you can compromise on.”

Observant Jews do not see the Law as arbitrary but as the rational will of God for them. When the Hellenistic king Antiochus commanded the priest Eliazar to eat pork, the priest replied “*We believe that the law was established by God... He has permitted us to eat what will be most suitable for our lives, but he has forbidden us to eat meats that would be contrary to this*” (4 Macc 5:25, 26).

This fidelity to a religious Law is something many – perhaps most – in our society find hard to understand. Many observant Christians would not hesitate to participate in similar activities on a Sunday, even if it meant missing church. For many even shopping is a higher priority than worshipping, and they regularly skip the Liturgy to go to the mall.

Yet the Lord Jesus was just as adamant as any other observant Jew about keeping the Law. “*Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets,*” He insisted. “*I did not come to destroy but to fulfill*” (Mt 5:17). Unlike today much of the Law in Jesus’ day was made up of precepts concerning the temple and its worship. Christians taught that the Lord had indeed fulfilled the Law. He had come “*when the fullness of time had come*” (Gal 4:4). He was the great High Priest offering the new and perfect sacrifice, His own blood instead of the blood of animals. This is why St. Paul would say that Christ is the “end,” meaning the fulfillment of the Law.

Once the temple had been destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, Jews began to focus on the more personal precepts of the Law. Of the 613 precepts traditionally revered by Jews, 477 concern things like personal purification for worship, study of the Law, daily prayer and the like.

### **The Law and Righteousness**

Obviously as Christians we have our own religious practices: such as holydays, fast days, and rules about the mysteries. We keep them as best we can and encourage their observance by our young. In times of trial maintaining our prayer rule helps maintain our balance. As Christian activist and concentration camp survivor Corrie Ten Boom remarked, “We did not keep the Sabbath, the Sabbath kept us.” What, then, is different in the attitude of observant Jews to the Law and the Church’s attitude to its precepts?

The key is found in the concept of righteousness: the state of being holy, being one with God. For the observant Jew keeping the Law was the way to attain righteousness. As St Paul observed, “*For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, ‘The man who does those things shall live by them’*” (Rom 10:5). Spiritual life, for the keeper of the Law, comes from his observance of its commandments.

For the Christian, as St Paul insisted, righteousness does not come from the observance of precepts. It comes through Christ restoring our nature and making of it a new creation. We participate in His work through faith that He had truly renewed creation through His death and resurrection. As St Paul insists, “*...if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation*” (Rom 10:9-10).

Keeping our Christian precepts – for example, worshipping together on the Lord’s Day – is praiseworthy, but we do not observe them to *produce* righteousness in us; we do so to *respond* to the holiness that is granted us in Christ. We can spend all day lighting candles, venerating icons, praying and attending divine services – but if we do so to generate holiness in us, we have completely missed the message of the Scripture. We do such things in gratitude to God for what we could not do for ourselves but for what has been done for us in Christ.

In the Divine Liturgy as the priest prepares the Holy Gifts for distribution to the people he exclaims, “The Holy Gifts for the holy!” to which the people respond “One is holy, one is Lord – Jesus Christ...” We do not produce our own holiness. If we can be considered as “saints” or “holy ones” as St Paul described believers, it is because we have received a share in the righteousness of the one truly Holy One, the Lord Jesus.

### **Our Own Profession of Faith**

The first Christians made their climactic profession of faith in Christ at their entry into the Church. By virtue of this faith publicly professed – confessed with the mouth, in St. Paul’s words – they were baptized into Christ. The profession of faith is still recited just before baptisms. However, when the infant children of Christians became the greater number of people being baptized, the Nicene Creed, was also added to the Divine Liturgy so that we, baptized as infants, could profess our faith as adults and thereby join in the sacrifice of praise.

Increasingly local Churches are insisting that infants may only be baptized because of the faith of their parents, with the expectation that they be raised as Christians, allowing the seed of faith to mature in their hearts. People who bring their child to be baptized out of some social convention (such as to please grandma) are often displeased to be questioned about the state of their own faith. To clean the house of an infant’s soul and then leave it empty is an invitation to even greater evil, as Christ said (see Mt 12:43-45).

### **Faith and Baptism**

*In c. 350 AD St Cyril of Jerusalem preached a series of catechetical lectures to the newly-baptized which included the following:*

“After these things, you were led to the holy pool of Divine Baptism, as Christ was carried from the Cross to the Sepulcher which is before our eyes And each of you was asked, whether he believed in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, and you made that saving confession, and descended three times into the water, and ascended again; here also hinting by a symbol at the three days burial of Christ. ... And at the self-same moment you were both dying and being born; and that Water of salvation was at once your grave and your mother.

...

“O strange and inconceivable thing! We did not really die, we were not really buried, we were not really crucified and raised again; but our imitation was in a figure, but our salvation in reality....

“For in Christ’s case there was death in reality, for His soul was really separated from His body. There was a real burial, for His holy body was wrapped in pure linen; and everything happened really to Him; but in your case there was only a likeness of death and sufferings, whereas of salvation there was not a likeness but a reality.”

*First Mystagogic Catechesis, 4, 5, 7*

## Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

### Put On a Happy Radiant Face (Rom 12:6-14)

“THERE IS NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN!” (Eccl 1:9) When the author of these words wrote them back in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, he never thought that they would become a stock phrase in the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium AD, in a language that as yet did not exist. This and other Bible phrases like “A wolf in sheep's clothing” (Mt 7:15) or “Money is the root of all evil” (1 Tm 6:10) would be repeated by people who did not know they came from the Bible or the content in which they first were written.

Another such phrase which has entered our vocabulary poses an interesting question. “God loves a cheerful giver” (1 Cor 9:7) is easily remembered and understood, but is it so easily lived? Many people know that they ought to do “good works” or be generous, but do it reluctantly, out of a sense of obligation. From our earliest years we learn not to be selfish, yet we often secretly resent having to make room for another at our table or donate to yet another cause. Yet the Scripture repeatedly calls on us to develop a cheerful liberality in our dealings with others. We seem to always be asked to give, but find ourselves resenting that we never really receive anything in turn.

St John Chrysostom insists that we have already received inestimable blessings, gifts that we have not yet learned to cherish: “Who that is receiving a kingdom, has a long face? Who that is receiving pardon for his sins keeps frowning?” When we have the knowledge of God’s love for us firmly in our heart, then what to some may be a burden, to others is a joy.

In his Epistle to the Romans St. Paul encourages us to use whatever gifts we may have been given to build up the Church. He also indicates the spirit in which these gifts should be exercised. “[Let] *he who gives, [do so] with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.*” Those who share material goods are to do more than to share them; they are to be truly generous, to give from their heart. Those who lead are not simply to seek the honor of leader, but to do the often thankless work of a leader conscientiously. Those whose gift it is to minister to those in need are not to lord it over them or play the martyr but to be cheerful in their service.

St John Chrysostom confronted the paradox of those who did good deeds without those deeds proceeding from an open heart. “Why do you complain that you have given alms? Why do you grieve at showing mercy, and lose the advantage of the good you have done? For if you serve grudgingly, you are not being merciful but cruel and inhuman. For if you grieve, how shall you be able to raise up the sorrowful ... since nothing seems to men such a disgrace as to be receiving from others? By an exceedingly cheerful look ... you show that you are receiving rather

than giving, you will even cast down the receiver rather than raise him up. This is why he says, ‘He that shows mercy, with cheerfulness.’”

The epistle continues in the same theme: love, but without pretense. Do not simply pretend to love. Give preference to others and do it fervently. Rejoice, be patient, be steadfast. The burden of being a Christian seems to grow with every line. How do we attain a heart so open to God and His world that these injunctions no longer seem a burden?

### **Opening Ourselves to Others**

Often, like Charles Schultz’ character in Peanuts, we find ourselves saying, “I love mankind – its people I can’t stand.” Our abstract commitment to love is sorely tested when we come into contact with concrete examples of people who are hard to love. We retreat into seeing the world as “us” (those we like, whose company we enjoy) and “them” (everyone else). Is this the way life is meant to be lived?

The call to reach out to one another, to love one another is a burden to many Christians. To do so runs counter to the egocentric bent of our fallen nature. It has been said that we continually try to reconstruct around us the world of our childhood, where we were at the center. Then we either pulled things and people toward ourselves in order to possess them or we pushed them away to keep them from dominating us. Thus we often find ourselves trying to organize the world around us: the family, the parish, the organizations to which we may belong. At the same time we may be indifferent to others who are not of our family, our clan, our nationality or our social class. We may prefer to keep out of sight those who do not contribute to our perceived identity.

We can begin to deal with this aspect of our broken nature in ourselves by prayer. Repeatedly asking God to help us overcome our indifference to others will gradually produce an openness to those whom God has placed in our life. Reflecting on the Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian can help us to see the ways in which our passions stand in the way of being openhearted in our dealings with others. While this prayer is used liturgically only during the Great Fast, it may be an important part of our private prayers at any time.

*O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of sloth, despondency, lust for power and idle talk.*

We ask in this prayer to be delivered from the two extremes to which we may be prone. *Sloth* here represents the general feeling of indifference we may have to others and *despondency* points to joylessness that results when we try to live the Christian way of life. When we surrender to such feelings in the spiritual life we become like people suffering from depression who may go through the motions of living but find no joy in life itself.

The opposite feelings, *lust for power* and *idle talk*, represent our attempts to control others rather than to serve them. We may try to “help” others by telling them how they should be living or directing how they should be dealing with their problems. We try to be “elders” when we are still spiritual children.

*But grant unto me, Thy servant, a spirit of chastity (σωφρόσυνη/sōphrosunē), humility, patience and love.*

The second phrase gives us the virtues which we need to correct our fallen inclinations. The first of them, *chastity* and *humility*, are the opposite of lust for power. Chastity refuses to dominate physically or sexually; humility refuses to dominate spiritually or psychologically. Disinterested love is possible only when we no longer are trying to depersonalize others by controlling them.

The tendency to give up on ourselves and others is countered by *patience* and *love* (ἀγάπη/ agape). A parent endures the “terrible twos” or the “traumatic teens” only with these qualities. A friend and especially a brother or sister in Christ needs the same character to bear the burdens of others.

*Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see mine own faults and not to judge my brother. For You are blessed unto the ages of ages. Amen.*

It is so much easier, as the Lord noted, to see a speck in someone else’s eye than to see the log in our own. Rather seeing myself as a sinner and my brother as beloved of God makes the spaces that separate us from one another seem to vanish, bringing me closer to following Christ who the Lover of Mankind and the One who sees the absolute worth of each person as well. We see that He truly loves us to the very core of our being and that He loves “them” the same way.

### **Seventh Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **A Support Group for Our Weaknesses (Rom 15:1-7)**

THERE ARE SUPPORT GROUPS FOR EVERYTHING today. People gather in schools, hospitals and churches for a variety of purposes. Some groups exist to enable discussion of sensitive personal matters: physical illnesses, behavioral issues or family issues (e.g. domestic violence, sexual abuse, abortion, miscarriages, divorce, bereavement, single parenting, etc). Other groups focus on the needs of returning veterans, ideas for homeschoolers, job seekers – in short, for anything for which people and their families feel the need of help. Such groups may be facilitated by professionals who do not share the problem of the members (such as social workers, psychologists, or members of the clergy) or by volunteers who have personal experience in the subject of the group’s focus.

In a sense there have always been support groups without the name. In traditional societies the extended family generally served as the ultimate support group. People depended on their extended families as patterns and role models for the children and for young families. This worked well in ordinary circumstances; however people who did not or could not live by its norms because of their physical, emotional or moral conditions were often ostracized. Lepers come first to mind, of course, but there were others recorded in the Gospels: the demoniacs who lived among the tombs and the Samaritan woman who could only draw water at noonday, when everyone else had gone home. Our era has provided for situations such as theirs – and this is a great blessing for us – but the groups in our secular society do not meet all our needs.

## **The Church, an Extended Family**

The model Church community is also an extended family, meant to be a support group in which people assist those in greater need. As St Paul emphasized, *“We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me’”* (Rom 15: 1-3). The “strong” and the “weak” here refers to the maturity of a person’s faith. Paul saw “the weak” as those who had scruples about failing to observe the Law of Moses or about eating food offered to idols. He urges “the strong” to be sensitive to the feelings of their weaker brethren and not to dismiss their concerns haughtily or inconsiderately.

Under our present conditions, there are several groups who might be considered “the weak” and who should not be ignored by the Church. The parish as the extended family of faith is extremely important for helping these persons make and deepen their commitment to the Lord. The first such group is the young: children, adolescents and young adults. Canadian Orthodox Archbishop Lev Puhalo sums up their needs: “It is very important, therefore, that our parishes strive to be loving, joyous, Christ-centered extended families. Our children should always feel an atmosphere of warmth, love and joy in our churches. They should sense that they are loved, wanted, understood and highly valued. They should feel comfortable and at home in church. We should take great care to develop such an atmosphere and develop as many family activities around the church and the extended family of the parish as possible. Our church schools should be vital and take a central place in our planning.”

At a very early age young people absorb the consumerist way of life espoused by the media and endorsed by the “valueless” education of secular schools. Christian parents are hard pressed to communicate a Biblical lifestyle without appearing moralistic or at least “uncool.” They need the support of an extended family.

The values, concepts and ethos evident in our extended family units penetrate and help shape our young. They absorb ideas, ways of thinking and their world-view from the environment to which they are most exposed. The young need a deeper immersion into the extended family of the parish than has been the custom in recent years.

Furthermore, since peer pressures are great for pre-teens and teens, the peer influence of an extended parish family can be vital in helping to offset the peer pressures in public schools and neighborhoods.

This demands sacrifice on the part of the church – to make room in its structures and planning for the young. It also demands sacrifices on the part of parents – to make time for involving their children in their church’s ministry to the young. But as St. Paul noted in the text quoted above, such sacrifices are made in imitation of Christ who “did not please Himself” but identifies with the weak and lowly (us).

## **Those Seeking to Live Our Church’s Life**

Another group needing the support of the parish extended family consists of those who want more from the Church for their spiritual lives. Many of those who leave the Church say that they did so because they “were not being fed.” Some parishes gear their activities to the social set. They reduce their liturgical life to suit those who may be there under a sense of obligation rather than out of love. They all but abandon the Church’s calendar, transferring even the greatest feasts to Sunday instead of working to build attendance at their proper observances. Parish leaders need to identify those in their midst who are seeking more spiritual activity from their church and take steps to provide it.

### **Personal Spiritual Growth**

Most people in support groups which deal with addictive personality disorders (alcoholism, drug, gambling or pornography addiction) are encouraged to employ the Twelve Steps to extricate themselves from their addiction. These programs promote reintegration into society through regularly attending meetings, committed participation in a particular group, relating to a sponsor, and employing the Twelve Steps in daily life.

All these steps are in fact based on the life of the Church – regular assembly, spiritual fellowship, and relating to an elder. The Twelve Steps themselves are based on spiritual principles drawn from the ascetic Fathers of the Church – humility, obedience, repentance and love. In origin they were applied to dealing with our sinful condition. While people can apply these principles to deal with any kind of transgression or spiritual infirmity, by and large we do not do so. Confessors might do well to employ these “support group” techniques to help people deal with their inclinations to “*bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking*” (Eph 4:31) and any other passion stemming from our fallen nature.

### **Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **Not to Baptize but to Preach (1 Cor 1:10-17)**

WHEN WE READ the Acts of the Apostles we may feel that the Apostles had success after success. That wasn’t always the case. St Paul had the following experience in Athens, the intellectual capital of the Greek world, recorded in Acts 17:16-34. He was waiting for Silas and Timothy to rejoin him and continue their journey when, as the Scripture says, “...*his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols. Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the Gentile worshippers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there*” (v. 16, 17).

#### **Flee Idolatry**

For Jews the greatest uncleanness and lawlessness was idolatry, not believing in the one true God. Roman society was based on a religion of many gods and goddesses; for Paul that made it *de facto* unclean and lawless. And it led to “*more uncleanness.*” When we recall that devotion to “the protectress of Rome,” the fertility goddess Cymbele, involved intercourse with temple prostitutes we can understand how – at least as far as St Paul was concerned – idolatry begets immorality, making its followers “*slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness.*” Having been baptized, Roman Christians were now to be “*slaves of righteousness*” instead.

For St. Paul, righteousness was certainly not to be found in the idolatry of pagan Greece and Rome, nor in the observances of Rabbinic Judaism. While the Jews considered righteousness a matter of keeping the Law of Moses, St. Paul insisted that righteousness was found only through our relationship with Christ. The bulk of the Epistle to the Romans would elaborate this teaching. There, we are told, he encountered some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. “*And some said, ‘What does this babbling want to say?’ Others said, ‘He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign gods,’ because he preached to them Jesus and the resurrection*” (v.18). Epicureans believed in a form of materialism, denying any kind of “divine intervention” in the world. Stoics believed that the universe itself is god and its principles can be discerned by human reason.

These philosophers took Paul “...and brought him to the Areopagus [public square], saying, ‘*May we know what this new doctrine is of which you speak? For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. Therefore we want to know what these things mean.*’ For all the Athenians and the foreigners who were there spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing” (v.19-21).

### **The “Unknown God”**

The Scripture reports what Paul told them: “*Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, ‘Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: To the unknown God. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you*” (v. 22, 23).

Were the Athenians afraid of not honoring some god and thereby incurring his or her wrath? It seems that with this altar they were covering their bases.

Paul then tried to present the Gospel to them by refuting idolatry. “*God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things. And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being, as also some of your own poets have said, ‘For we are also His offspring.’*”

“*Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising*” (v.24-29). Many Greeks

would have agreed with Paul, seeing images of the gods as symbols at best. But he soon lost them when he said, *“Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.”*

*“And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, while others said, ‘We will hear you again on this matter.’”* So Paul departed from among them. However, some men joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them” (vv. 30-34).

### **The Wisdom of the Wise**

Paul was not very successful in Athens. When he had tried to use “wisdom of words” with the Greek philosophers, he had not succeeded. Perhaps it was the memory of this experience which prompted St Paul to write to the Corinthians, *“For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect”* (1 Cor 1:17).

St Paul came to make the cross the center of his message, as he indicated to the Corinthians, *“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.’*

*“Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men”* (1 Cor 1:18-25).

### **The Weakness of God?**

By ordinary standards, Jesus was a failure. He had been proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand but He ended up as a disgraced criminal. Unlike other condemned agitators, however, He did not revile His accusers or curse those who condemned Him to death. Rather He prayed for their forgiveness. He responded like the Son of the God who is love and compassion which He is.

The Lord Jesus proclaimed the message that, above all else, God is love. He proclaimed it, not just in words but by the way He responded to His enemies: in compassion and forgiveness rather than in judgment and condemnation. His “weakness” became our strength and our glory.

Over the next few centuries the lesson of the Cross – the weakness of God – began to defeat the Greek philosophers. Eventually leading figures, army officers and even philosophers, like St Justin, accepted the way of Christ, which led many to crosses of their own. The “weakness of

God” triumphed, not by clever words but by the senseless sufferings the martyrs endured in the spirit of Christ. As the third-century North African Tertullian wrote, “The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church,” as their peaceful acceptance of suffering led to the conversion of many.

### **St Dionysius – October 3**

“... that Areopagite, named Dionysius, who was the first to believe after Paul’s address to the Athenians in the Areopagus (as recorded by Luke in the Acts) is mentioned by another Dionysius, an ancient writer and pastor of the church in Corinth, as the first bishop of the church at Athens.”

Eusebius, *History of the Church* iii

O holy hieromartyr Dionysius, master of gentleness, measured in all things, clothed with a straight conscience as befits a priest, you drew ineffable truths from the Vessel of Election. You have kept the faith and completed a course equal to his. Intercede with Christ God that He may save our souls.

*Troparion*

### **Ninth Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **Tilling God’s Field (1 Cor 1:10-17)**

THE LARGEST GREEK CITY OF ITS DAY, Corinth was a kind of crossroads connecting mainland Greece and the Peloponnese peninsula to the West. It had two harbors and therefore a good deal of maritime and commercial activity. It contained a thriving Jewish colony; a number of the Jews expelled from Rome in AD 49 had made their way to Corinth (see Acts 18:2). There were believers in Jesus among them and Paul stayed with them, bringing the Gospel of Jesus to them, to the Jews at large and, when they rejected him, to the Gentiles.

When Paul left Corinth after 18 months there, he took his first collaborators there, Priscilla and Aquila, with him to Syria. It has been suggested that the departure of these pioneers paved the way for the dissensions that would attack the Corinthian Christians. Part of the community looked to the leadership of Apollos, its current elder. Others preferred the way things were when Paul was in charge and longed for the return of those days. Paul tries to end their conflict by stressing that both he and Apollos were only servants of the God who called them to believe. He challenged them with images meant to take their focus off the personalities of their pastors and put it back where it belonged: on the Lord.

Paul's first image is of the Church as a field, with the pastors as its farmers. "*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase*" (1 Cor 3:6). The second image is that of a building under construction: "*I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it.*"

Individual workers at a construction site know that the result of their labors is greater than any individual one of them has achieved. The final product – the structure – is their work plus the underlying vision of the architect. The builders work together to realize, not their own ideas, but the planner's concept of what the building should be.

### **When Visions Complete**

To this day local communities suffer when a change of pastors results in a change of vision. The vision may change because the circumstances have changed. Thus a parish made up of third-generation members who all know one another finds itself with an influx of new immigrants. The old neighborhood may change and the parish find itself amidst people who might be brought to the church were the church more open to them and their culture.

The vision may also change because the new pastor simply prefers things a certain way, a way that contrasts with the parish's existing practice. These may be small things, such as the new pastor wanting flowers behind the holy table rather than on it (or vice versa). They may be things that impact a larger number of people, such as when and where baptisms may be celebrated. Whatever the issue, the basic principle remains the same: what does the Architect want? Does what we want agree with what the Lord wants for His Church or are there other visions at work here? Do clergy and the parish council have conflicting visions of what the church should be? While we may think we are building the church with "*gold, silver and precious stones*" we may in fact be using "*wood, hay and straw*" (1 Cor 3:12).

### **Vision for a Local Church**

A healthy local church as described in the New Testament is basically one in which everyone is exercising the Royal Priesthood to which we have all been admitted through our chrismation. In it there should be two distinct types of service, which since the first Church in Jerusalem have been sacramentalized in the orders of presbyter and deacon (see Acts 6:1-6).

The first dimension is described in Acts 6:4 as "*prayer and the ministry of the word,*" essentially the ministry of the presbyter, but not limited to him. The traditional "spiritual works of mercy" are, in fact, all aspects of the priestly ministry of prayer and the word:

- Admonishing the sinner.
- Instructing the ignorant.
- Counseling the unsettled.
- Comforting the sorrowful.
- Bearing wrongs patiently.
- Forgiving all injuries, and
- Praying for the living and the dead.

In the church, the pastor's role is to insure that the members of the community have the opportunity to worship God and to prepare some of them to assist more actively in it as singers, altar servers, greeters, ushers, etc.

“The ministry of the word” includes all forms of proclamation: preaching, evangelizing, catechizing, and publicizing the life of the Church. Here, too, members of the community may be prepared to take part in these activities. As with the liturgical ministries, the priest's role is that of an enabler, “*equipping the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ*” (Eph 4:12).

In addition to prayer and the ministry of the word, serving one's neighbor has been an important task in the local Church since the beginning. The order of deacon was instituted to assume this ministry. The traditional “corporal works of mercy” are aspects of that ministry open to all, extending Christ's compassion to the needs of this world:

- Feeding the hungry.
- Giving drink to the thirsty.
- Sheltering the homeless.
- Clothing the naked.
- Visiting the sick.
- Visiting the imprisoned, and
- Burying the dead.

As the Church grew and acquired buildings and land, the deacons assumed care of these assets as well. There is an ever greater range of activities which can be developed under these umbrellas of serving one's neighbor and care for the material resources of the Church.

The Royal Priesthood can be exercised in a local community when:

- Opportunities to serve are afforded to all;
- Those who wish to explore these ministries are welcomed and encouraged;
- Those who seek to serve are trained to do so according to the norms of the eparchy.

### **What is the Vision of Your Church?**

When the vision of a local community and the pastor support the scriptural vision outlined above, it is likely that they will build with “*gold, silver and precious stones.*” But what if:

- There is an ethnic, social or economic clique dominating the parish?
- People don't want to serve but to be served?
- Those who do want to serve are excluded or made to feel unwanted?
- No one is willing to invest time to train or be trained for a particular ministry?

Then we can expect the results St Paul described: “*...each one's work will become clear*” (1 Cor 3:13), but we don't have to wait for “the Day” to reveal it. It will be obvious when people are not spiritually growing, when some people look for another church where there is a more vibrant spiritual life, when the young people in the community only show up for Pascha and family occasions.

Paul concludes his appeal to maintain unity with a warning: *“If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are”* (1 Cor 3:17). Factionalism in the church, pitting the followers of one leader against another, causing division where there should be an ever-deepening unity is a kind of sacrilege which cannot be ignored.

## **Tenth Sunday after Pentecost**

### **Fathering a Church (1 Cor 4:9-16)**

THE CHURCH AT CORINTH was a rather disorderly place. The members contested for authority and influence. They vied over roles in the service and turned their Eucharistic assembly into a first-century food fight. The Corinthians invoked the authority of St Paul, their founder, of Apollo, his successor, or of Peter to bolster their respective positions. The contention was so pronounced that St Paul refused to visit the Corinthians, limiting his contact with them to correspondence. We read all this in St Paul’s two epistles to that Church.

*“We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord (2 Cor 4:5), Paul wrote, insisting that his, the Corinthians, and that, he felt, should give him a special authority in that community. He described his unique relationship to them in this way: “Though you might have ten thousand tutors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me” (1 Cor 4:15).*

St Paul described himself as a father who had begotten the Church in Corinth, using the same word used to describe the relationship of God to His Son. The image of father calls to mind the act of bring into being, the quality of loving care, and a picture of the one who provides for the needs of his children. St Paul depicts himself as a father-figure to this Church rather than a ruler, urging them in love rather than issuing decrees.

Paul contrasts the image of father with that of tutor (in Greek, pedagogue). We are accustomed to nannies who assist mothers in caring for their children. Among the well-to-do in the classical world it was the father who entrusted his sons to pedagogues for their early education. In his Commentary on this epistle, Origen of Alexandria described St Paul’s use of these images in this way: *“The father is the one who sowed the seed of the Gospel in their souls; whereas the tutors are those who took over the raising of the newborn children to help them grow.”*

### **Does This Contradict Christ?**

As His ministry grew the Lord Jesus became increasingly critical of the religious leaders of the Jews. *“They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, ‘Rabbi, Rabbi,’ He railed. “But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on*

*earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Mt 23:6-12).*

Here Christ included the titles father and teacher as examples of how the Jewish leaders had distorted the relationship of spiritual guide or elder to disciple. In the Lord’s eyes, to be father or teacher does not imply superior status and honor but more committed service.

Many Protestants and Evangelicals point to this saying as proof that Catholics and Orthodox don’t follow the Gospel because they call their pastors *Father*. Many of the same people see nothing wrong with calling their pastors *Doctor* (teacher, in Latin). What are they missing?

When a human spiritual leader – whatever he may be called – takes on the role of being God’s intermediary to men he is usurping the place of Christ. We are called to follow the example of Christ the servant, the One who washes the feet of His disciples. Titles have nothing to do with this kind of service.

Over the centuries titles denoting superior status and honor have multiplied in all the Churches, but *Father* is not one of them. To be *Father* implies a relationship of love and care, not entitlement to “*the best places at feasts.*” To be called Father means that one acts like a father in the spiritual realm, “*equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ*” (Eph 4:12).

### **Calling Clergy *Father***

Use of the term Father as a religious title seems to have arisen first in Eastern monastic circles. The head of a monastery might be called *abba* by the members of his community. Later in the Greek-speaking Mediterranean *papas* became a clerical title. Both these titles are variant spellings of the word *Father* and entered the English language as *abbot* and *pope*. It was only after the fifteenth century that parish priests, and then all clergy, came to be addressed as *Father*.

In established English usage there are distinctions between a title, a style and a form of address. A *title* denotes the rank one holds (deacon, priest, archimandrite, etc.). A *form of address* indicates how one speaks to a titled person. In the Eastern Churches monks and deacons as well as priests are generally addressed as Father. A *style* is a descriptive (e.g. the Reverend, or the Honorable) used in talking *about* but *not to* a titled person. We sometimes find all these forms run together (e.g. the Rev. Fr. Archimandrite) in a kind of ecclesiastical overkill.

## **Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost**

## Offerings to God's Servants (1 Cor 9:2-12)

READERS OF ST PAUL'S EPISTLES are accustomed to his discussions of doctrine or moral issues. This passage, however, sheds light on an area of church practice – support for the clergy – and on Paul's own custom in that regard.

We know from the Acts of the Apostles that, in response to Christ's command, the apostles (the Twelve and others such as Ss. Barnabas, Silas, Timothy, and Titus) preached the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. We know little or nothing about how they lived.

We do know that these apostles went to cities where there were Jewish settlements and they first presented the Gospel to the Jews. In Acts 17, for example, we see how Paul and Silas "*came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. As was his custom, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures*" (Acts 17:2, 3). Paul converted some of the Jews and of the God-fearing Gentiles who worshipped with them. Through them they may have encountered other non-believers. St Luke says that "*Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women*" (Acts 17:4).

### How the Apostles Lived

The heart of Paul's instruction here is about the support which the apostles received. In most cases the apostles were supported by the Church which had sent them or the community to which they had brought the Gospel. Paul and his team seem to have been the exception: they supported themselves so that their hearers would not think they were preaching for money.

Paul brings this to the Corinthians' attention: "*If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more? But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ*" (1 Cor 9:11-12). Paul believed that he and Silas had the right to be supported by the Corinthian Christians but did not exercise it lest it be a stumbling block to the promotion of the Gospel.

Paul then articulated the principle by which the Churches have lived ever since: "*Don't you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and that those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel*" (1 Cor 9:13-14). Those who serve the Church should be supported by the Church.

### The Lord Has Commanded?

When St Paul sets forth his principle of support for the Apostles, he bases it on "*the Lord's command,*" but when did the Lord issue any such precept? In fact, we find it as a consistent principle in both the Old and the New Testaments.

When the priesthood was established in the days of Moses after the Israelites left Egypt the priests were allotted a portion of every sacrifice which anyone made to the Lord. As recorded in the Torah, the Lord commanded that "*This is always to be the perpetual share from the Israelites*

*for Aaron and his sons. It is the contribution the Israelites are to make to the LORD from their fellowship offerings*” (Ex 29:28). Priests were to receive their “salary” by taking a portion of every offering.

When the Israelites entered the Promised Land under Joshua, the territory was divided between eleven of their twelve tribes. The priestly tribe of Levi, the descendants of Aaron, did not receive any land. Joshua gave no land to the priests, “*since the food offerings presented to the LORD, the God of Israel, are their inheritance, as He promised them*” (Joshua 13:14).

St Paul sealed his argument with a maxim, also from the Torah. “*For it is written in the Law of Moses, ‘Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain’*” (1 Cor 9:9, quoting Deut 25:4). As it would be unfair to oxen to so restrict them that they could not eat the grain they were grinding, it would likewise be unjust to expect the servants of the altar to support themselves.

We find the same precept in the Gospel. When Christ sent out the Twelve to preach that the Kingdom of heaven was at hand, He told them: “*Provide neither gold nor silver nor copper in your money belts, nor bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor staffs; for a worker is worthy of his food*” (Mt 10:9, 10). They were not to go prepared to support themselves, but to rely on the support of their hearers.

### **In the Early Church**

In the Apostles’ era most people had much less in the way of material goods than we do. As they went from one place to another did they have more than one pair of sandals, one tunic and one cloak? Their cloak may have doubled as a blanket and their sandals as a pillow. In our society there are people in homeless shelters who have more than that!

Likewise the Church in the days of the Apostles had no property or material assets; its “wealth” was the poor orphans and widows entrusted to it by God. Any offerings collected went to them and to the servants of the Church.

By the third century this was beginning to change and, with the conversion of Emperor Constantine, the Church began to acquire buildings and properties. Clergy began to be paid by the state (ultimately by the taxpayer) and offerings of the faithful went to the adornment of the churches and the care of the poor.

### **In Our Church Today**

As our way of life has changed, so have our needs and the needs of our clergy. Besides their modest housing and salaries, they require health insurance and auto insurance. Each church building has utilities, fuel and maintenance costs, liability insurance and perhaps a mortgage. Where will this money come from?

In some countries in the “Old World” the state, endowments, or well-to-do benefactors assume these expenses. This is not the case here – and perhaps for the best. It is not in anyone’s best interest to believe that church support is someone else’s business. It is up to every believer to do his or her part. Thus the principle which the Lord gave to the Israelites who had just fled Egypt applies to us as well: “*No one is to appear before me empty-handed*” (Ex 34:20).

There is no one set amount which parish members are expected to give. Some people have significant disposable income, others are living on pensions. Large parishes have more potential donors, but also larger facilities to maintain or more clergy.

One rule of thumb to use in gauging the amount we should be giving to the Church and charity is to compare it with the amount we spend on TV and other forms of entertainment. Another is to reflect on St Paul's maxim, "*This I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully*" (2 Cor 9:6).

Those who support the Church responsibly can be assured of God's blessing as invoked by St Paul, "*May He who supplies seed to the sower, and bread for food, supply and multiply the seed you have sown and increase the fruits of your righteousness, while you are enriched in everything*" (2 Cor 9:10-11).

### **A Priest's Believing Wife**

ST. PAUL WAS UNDER ATTACK, not by Jews or Romans, but by some of those whom he had evangelized and who thought that they should be leaders in the community. Paul pointed to his own way of life in order to show them what leadership really is. St. Paul earned his own living while laboring as an apostle, living simply and without a family of his own. He compared his practice to that of the other Apostles including Peter (Cephas) and the brothers of the Lord (James, Jude, etc.) "*Do we have no right to eat and drink? Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas?*" (1 Cor 9: 4, 5)

Since then Paul's words have been invoked many times in discussions about a married clergy, although Paul was neither defending nor opposing the practice. He was simply describing his own way of life without making it a norm for anyone else.

The early Church clearly had a married clergy. When St Paul instructed his disciple St Timothy on how to set up a local community he gave him a number of principles to follow, including the following: "*This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil*" (1 Tim 3:1-7).

A bishop in the apostolic Church, as in any era, needed to be a man of virtue (temperate, sober-minded, etc.). But a bishop's role was seen chiefly as the father of a family; hence he should have the qualities of a good family man, manifested in the way he brought up his children.

## **Later Developments**

By the time of the First Ecumenical Council (325), there had been two major developments affecting the way clergy were chosen. As monasticism became more and more important in the life of the Church, the most committed Christians tended to be found among the monks. This led to the practice – and eventually the rule – that bishops be chosen from among the monks and later, by extension, the unmarried or widowed clergy. This remains the rule in all the historic Churches of East and West.

The second development, chiefly in the West, was that priests and bishops came to be seen more as servants of the altar than as fathers of the Christian family. It was natural then to require that they be “ritually pure,” as the priests of the Old Covenant had been.

As early as the fourth century councils in the West were requiring that “...the holy bishops and priests of God as well as the Levites, i.e. those who are in the service of the divine sacraments, observe perfect continence...” (Council of Carthage, Canon 3).

The Council of Elvira, Spain (c. 305) was even stricter: “It is decided that marriage be altogether prohibited to bishops, priests, and deacons, or to all clerics placed in the ministry, and that they keep away from their wives and not beget children; whoever does this, shall be deprived of the honor of the clerical office” (Canon 33).

An attempt was made to enact similar legislation at the Council of Nicaea, but it was not accepted. Nevertheless, the practice of mandatory clerical celibacy so spread in the West that Easterners felt the need to affirm the earlier tradition. By that time of the Quinisext Council of Constantinople (692) there was a direct contradiction between the ideas of East and West:

“Since we know it to be handed down as a rule of the Roman Church that those who are deemed worthy to be advanced to the diaconate or presbyterate should promise no longer to cohabit with their wives, we, preserving the ancient rule and apostolic perfection and order, will that the lawful marriages of men who are in holy orders be from this time forward firm, by no means dissolving their union with their wives nor depriving them of their mutual intercourse at a convenient time” (Canon 13).

To this day in most Eastern Churches married men may be ordained as deacons and priests but bishops must be taken from the unmarried clergy,

## **The American Controversy**

The two practices clashed when Greek Catholics from Eastern Europe began emigrating to America in the 1880s. They wanted their own Church and began bringing priests to serve them. Most of the Greek Catholic clergy in Europe were married and their presence here was opposed by the Roman Catholic hierarchy. The widely divergent Byzantine practices of the Greek Catholics were especially abhorrent to those bishops who wanted to eliminate all regional differences among the immigrants and Americanize the Church.

In accordance with the bishops’ wishes, Pope Pius X wrote an apostolic letter, *Ea Semper*, in 1907 governing the Greek Catholics in America. Chrismation was no longer to be conferred at

baptism and could now only be given by a bishop. No new married priests were to be ordained in America or to be sent to America. The rule on chrismation was ignored but the controversy over married clergy drove thousands from their Churches. It is said that over 160 parishes in the Orthodox Church in America alone were formed by former Greek Catholics.

In 1929 Rome's Oriental Congregation repeated the prohibition on married clergy in its decree *Cum Data Fuerit* causing more to leave their Church. The "Independent Greek Catholic Church" (now the American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese) was formed as a result.

After Vatican II some Eastern Catholic bishops in America began ordaining married clergy, but these actions were considered "irregular" until 2014, when Pope Francis abrogated these prohibitions.

### **Celibacy in the Church Today**

Celibacy has always been honored in the East where monasticism is so highly regarded. It is considered, however, as a grace, a charism given by God to some rather than mandated for all its clergy. Thus not only bishops but other clergy as well have been unmarried.

Many proponents of clerical celibacy see unmarried clergy as more suited to ministry, citing St. Paul: "*The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord. But the married man is anxious about worldly things, how to please his wife*" (1 Cor 7:32–33).

This has not been the experience in the Eastern Churches. For stable communities in traditional societies, the married priest has always functioned as St. Paul envisioned him, as the father of the Christian family. His wife, the *khouriyye* or *presbytera*, is his invaluable helpmate in ministry as in life. Particularly in the smaller Eastern communities in our country this model is certainly the most suitable.

## **Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost**

### **The Heart of Paul's Gospel (1 Cor 15:1-11)**

EVERY DEDICATED BELIEVER has one or two aspects of the Christian life as his/her chief focus. They may stress worship or service or repentance to one degree or another. They may be devoted to one or another prayer form or devotion: the Divine Office, the Jesus Prayer, the Eucharist. The Christian life embraces all these things and more – no one person can give equal weight to all of them in his or her life.

The same is true in terms of the message Christian preachers proclaim. Contemporary TV evangelists from the Protestant traditions, for example, may stress accepting Jesus as one's "personal savior," the recognition that we cannot save ourselves, that salvation comes through Christ alone. They may focus on "end-times prophecy," the apocalyptic imagery in the Bible, as the framework on which their preaching is built.

For St. Paul it was the death and resurrection of Christ which was the core of both his personal experience and his message. He himself encountered the presence of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and his conviction that Christ was alive formed the basis of all his future activity. But as Paul says in 1 Cor 15:3, faith in Christ's death and resurrection was not solely based on this encounter. It was also the message passed on to him through the preaching of the Apostles. He had rejected their message until it was confirmed for him personally in a way he could not refute. When he encountered Christ on the road to Damascus Paul became as much an eye-witness to the resurrection as the apostles were.

This passage in Paul is the only one in the New Testament to mention a similar appearance to James. We know from the Gospels (e.g. Mt 12:46, Jn 2:12) that Jesus' earthly family did not belong to the innermost circle of His followers. Now also an eye-witness to the resurrection, James would convert his family (by Pentecost they were in the company of the apostles) and would go on to lead the Church in Jerusalem and to write the New Testament epistle which bears his name.

The death and resurrection of Christ remains the cornerstone of faith for the Apostolic Churches. In the Byzantine Churches, for example, almost every week this mystery is observed in two ways; by fasting in remembrance of His death (Wednesday and Friday) and by celebration of His resurrection (Sunday), continuing the practice of the apostolic era. Because Christ is risen and life-giving we can see God completely imaged in Him and attain eternal life through Him. We can look forward to His return in glory and to our ultimate resurrection in Him. Ultimately our faith in the Church, the Eucharist, the communion of saints and our own deification only makes sense because of the resurrection.

With St Paul we say that the Church is the Body of Christ. But if Christ is not alive, then the Church is a corpse, a body without life or power. With Christ we affirm that in the Eucharist we partake of His Body and Blood and of the eternal life that is in Him. If Christ is not alive, the Eucharist is simply a play about the Last Supper. With the Church we assert that in Christ we are one with the communion of saints, united to God in the "communion of the Holy Spirit" (Divine Liturgy). If Christ is not alive, then the dead are simply dead and, as Paul says, our faith is futile and we are still in our sins. We believe that Christ is now in glory, not only as God but also in His humanity. As "*the first fruits of those who sleep*" He reveals our ultimate destiny: to participate in our humanity in His divine nature. If our Christian experience ends when we die, then "*we are of all men the most pitiable*" (1 Cor 15:19).

When many believers think of Christ they imagine Him preaching by the lake or walking through the fields of Galilee. They want to pinpoint what He actually said and did during his earthly ministry. But that Christ – the "historical Jesus" – is in the past. The risen Christ who lives now is the One seated at the Father's right in His human nature as "*the first fruits of those who sleep*," (1 Cor 15:20) the firstborn from among the dead.

In the Byzantine Liturgy, as the gifts are offered we remember the whole of Christ's saving work on our behalf: "...his cross, his tomb, his resurrection on the third day, his ascension into heaven, his sitting at the Father's right, his second and glorious coming." Our observances of Christ's earthly Pascha, his present and eternal glory in his human nature at the Father's side, his return at the end of human history all point to the reality that Christ lives. This is also the message of Byzantine church design. Our principal icon of Christ is not the Crucified, as in Western Churches, but the Ascended One who will return "as you saw Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

Because Christ lives in glory we can pray to Him and in Him. And we can look forward to sharing in his glory in our bodies, transformed through the divine life we have through Him.

### **The "Proto-Creed" of Christians**

TRADITION IS A DIRTY WORD in many modern circles. There it describes the old and, therefore, outmoded and undesirable today. In the historic Churches of East and West, however, it is an honored and revered term describing both the Christian patrimony and the continuity with which it has been transmitted in the Church. Eastern Christians in particular speak of "Holy Tradition," describing it as the voice of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

It is with this sense of reverence that St. Paul tells the Corinthians, "*What I received I passed on to you*" (1 Cor 15:3). Tradition is first of all something received, usually from the community elders (but not in St Paul's case, as we shall see). Tradition is meant to be passed on to others; otherwise it dies. Finally when we speak of *the* Tradition we are referring to the content which is passed down. In the case of St Paul here, it is the central faith of the Church: "*the gospel which I preached unto you*" (v.1).

The Apostle identifies that fundamental faith as belief in Christ risen from the dead: "...*that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared...*" (1 Cor 15:3-5). This, it has been said, was a kind of early creed identifying the first Christians as distinct from other Jews who did not see the Lord Jesus as the Messiah, the fulfillment of the prophets. In fact, however, St Paul insists that our faith in Christ is rooted in the Old Testament ("*according to the Scriptures*") and the experience of the Jewish people.

In his Homily 38 on 1 Corinthians, St. John Chrysostom described it like this: "...the sum of the gospels has its origin here: that God became man and was crucified and rose again. This is the gospel which Gabriel preached to the Virgin, which the prophets announced, and which all the apostles brought to the world."

The memory of Christ's death and resurrection is at the heart of our faith and our worship. Our weekly observance of fasting and feasting is a memorial of that death and resurrection. Our Wednesday and Friday fasting commemorates the betrayal, passion and death of Christ. Our Sunday, with its Divine Liturgy and eight-week cycle of resurrection hymns, brings the weekly observance to its glorious conclusion.

## The Apparitions of the Risen Christ

While we believe in Christ's resurrection, we know that no one actually saw Christ rise from the dead. The first visitors to His tomb found it empty "*but Jesus they did not see*" (Lk 24:24). This is why imaginative portrayals of the Lord rising from the tomb are not accepted in Byzantine iconography. This mystery is beyond our ability to perceive it. Our icons of the Resurrection depict the visit to the empty tomb or the effect of Christ's death: the victory over Hades instead.

The first Christians' belief in Christ's resurrection was based on the testimony of those who subsequently saw Him alive. In 1 Cor 15, St Paul lists a number of those eye-witnesses whose testimony is the source of our faith: "...*he appeared to Cephas and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the Apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born*" (vv. 5-7).

**Cephas (Peter)**– The Gospels according to Luke and John speak of Peter running to the tomb "*Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened*" (Lk 24:12). He did so in response to the news of the empty tomb brought by the women: "*It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the Apostles*" (Lk 24:10). Why do these women – whom our Church reveres as myrrhbearers and even "equal to the apostles" not figure in Paul's list?

St Paul sought to demonstrate the resurrection by appealing to competent and credible witnesses. In the Jewish practice of the time, however, the witness of women was not acceptable in Jewish courts. As the Jewish historian Josephus said, "Let not the testimony of women be admitted, on account of the levity and boldness of their sex." (Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 4.8.15). If the word of the myrrhbearers would not have been convincing to St Paul's audience, it suggests that they were primarily converts from Judaism. The Gospels, however, were written to bring the message of Christ to the Gentiles and so the evangelists present the women as the first witnesses to the Resurrection.

**The Twelve** and **The Apostles** – After mentioning Christ's appearance to Cephas, St Paul lists His manifestation to "the Twelve," that is, Andrew, James, John, Thomas and the rest. The Gospels speak of the Lord coming to them in the "upper room" on the evening of Pascha, an event which we commemorate at paschal vespers. There are several other appearances to the Twelve after the Resurrection mentioned in the Gospels.

The first question we encounter here is, Why does St. Paul speak of "the Twelve" when Judas had killed himself and Matthias was not selected to join the others until after the ascension. Should he not have said "the Eleven"? That is what we find in Mark 16:14: "*He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table...*" It has been suggested that St Paul is not counting heads here but referring to these closest collaborators of the Lord in the way that the first Christians knew them. The Twelve, then, is not a literal number but the designation of an office.

We find something comparable in our Pentecost icon. The Spirit is depicted as descending on the Twelve – but one of them is St. Paul who was added later! The Twelve in the icon represent the historical Thirteen – the original eleven plus Matthias and Paul.

The mention of the Twelve in v. 5 is followed by a reference to “all the apostles” in v. 7. Christ selected not only the Twelve but, as we read in the Gospel, “...*the Lord appointed seventy others also, and sent them two by two before His face into every city and place where He Himself was about to go*” (Lk 10:1). While the West generally speaks of them as “disciples” not apostles, the Eastern Churches follow Paul in speaking of the Apostle Barnabas, the Apostles Jason and Sosipater, and the rest.

**James** – In the Gospels the Lord’s blood relatives seem leery about His prophetic ministry, even goading him to prove Himself. “*If You do these things, show Yourself to the world. For even His brothers did not believe in Him*” (Jn 7: 4.5). Yet after Pentecost we find James as the leader of the Jerusalem Church and others of the family active among the believers. Perhaps it was this appearance to James which converted the family to Christ.

**The Five Hundred Brethren** – There is no other mention of such an appearance in the Scriptures. We do read of the Lord telling the women, “*Go and tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me*” (Mt 28:10). This may refer to the relatives of the Lord mentioned above or to His followers from Galilee, some of whom had followed Him into Judea.

**Paul Himself** – St Paul lists his own encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (see Acts 9:1-9) as a revelation of the resurrected Lord. As he earlier wrote to the Galatians, “*The gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ*” (Gal 1:11, 12). He did not see the empty tomb – he saw Christ Himself.

### The Risen Lord in the Church’s Prayer

O never-fading Light, we offer You this evening worship for in the fullness of time You filled the world with light, Your flesh mirroring your splendor. You went down to Hades, dispelled the darkness and made manifest to all nations the light of the resurrection. O Lord, Giver of light, glory to You! (*Sunday vespers, tone five*).

Through his life-giving hand Christ our God, the Giver of life, has raised the dead from the valley of gloom. He resurrected the human race since He is Savior, resurrection, life and God to all. (*Sunday kondakion, tone six*).

The whole of human nature which You assumed has been glorified by Your resurrection, O Jesus, which grants our bodies incorruption. Wherefore, seeing this sign in the relics of Your saints, we cry with compunction: Alleluia. (*Resurrection Akathist, kondakion 9*).

**Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

### **The Church in Your House (1 Cor 16:13-24)**

ST PAUL WROTE MOST OF HIS EPISTLES to communities rather than individuals. Often, however, he would end an epistle by extending greetings to people whom he knew in that community and from people known to them. Among the latter mentioned in 1 Corinthians are Priscilla and Aquila “*and the church that meets at their house*” (1 Cor 16:19).

We first meet this couple in Acts 18 where we are told, “*Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them*” (vv 1-3). They became close friends of St Paul and left Corinth with him when he continued his travels. “*Paul stayed on in Corinth for some time. Then he left the brothers and sisters and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila*” (v. 18).

Their journey to Syria would take them down the coast of Asia Minor where there were several Christian communities. It seems that Priscilla and Aquila remained in Ephesus, half-way to Syria. St Paul greets them at the end of his Second Epistle to Timothy, who was in Ephesus at the time.

The Jews, expelled from Rome in AD 49, were allowed to return in the year 54. Priscilla and Aquila seem to have returned to Rome at that time. In his Epistle to the Romans St Paul greets them as “*my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life*” (Rom 16:3-4).

### **The Church in Their House**

We learn from St Paul’s Epistles that, both in Ephesus and in Rome, the local gathering of Christians assembled at the home of Priscilla and Aquila. During the age of persecution in the Roman Empire there were no church buildings as we know them; Christianity was illegal so believers met in private homes.

St Paul does not specify what the believers did there, but the description of the first Christians in Jerusalem probably applies everywhere in the first century: “*They continued steadfastly in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers*” (Acts 2:42). As Jews, Priscilla and Aquila probably attended prayers in the synagogue but gathered Christians in their home for the breaking of bread and to hear the apostles’ teaching.

When and where Christianity was tolerated, the Church not only met in homes, it acquired houses for community use. In the twentieth century such a house-church was excavated in the ruined Syrian city of Dura-Europus. This house-church, dating from the third century, was extensively decorated with frescoes much like later Byzantine churches. It even had a separate

room dedicated as a baptistery: a pattern which would be employed once church buildings became common.

## **Every Home a Church**

In the first centuries AD the home was the usual meeting place of the Church. In later centuries it came to be seen that the Christian family was itself a Church, a “domestic church.” St Paul taught that the family was an image of God the Father and His family: the Son and all those who in Christ have become adopted children of God: “*I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named*” (Eph 3:14-15). The Church is the heavenly family, uniting all who are in Christ to the heavenly Father. In the same way a Christian family takes its identity (its “name”) from God. It is formed by God at the Mystery of Crowning and is the place where family members are meant to encounter God and help one another draw closer to Him.

In our Eastern tradition, because the home is the icon of the Church, the home *becomes* a domestic church. The Mystery of Crowning is where the domestic church is consecrated. It is not just a coincidence at a wedding, as the bride and groom circle the sacramental table, that the same hymns are sung as at an ordination when the priest-to-be is led around the holy table. As we read in *A Guide for the Domestic Church*, published by the Melkite Eparchy of Newton, a wedding in the Christian East is “an ordination for service in the domestic church. Husband and wife are called to a unique sharing in Christ’s priesthood by their holy crowning. Their home is their church with a little ‘c’.”

Now a church is known not so much by its architecture or its interior design but by the function it plays, the activities it nurtures. A church must be hallowed by the blood of gracious sacrifice, perfumed by the incense of fervent prayer, echoing God’s word and re-echoing man’s response in humble adoration. Anything less and we have Shakespeare’s “bare ruined choirs”.

Our mothers and fathers must rediscover their role as priests of the home and exercise their sacramental powers: the father by blessing his children and the food that nourishes them, by preaching the most eloquent of sermons by the nobility of his conduct; the mother by enabling her family to celebrate the fasts and feasts of the year and by her tending of the light burning before the icons. The children, too, should learn to assume roles in the domestic church as soon as practicable: they can help read the daily Scripture passages and assist in the preparation of the foods proper to our tradition.” *A Guide for the Domestic Church* offers specific suggestions on implementing many of these practices over the course of the year.

Another useful resource for living as a domestic church may be found online at [www.melkite.org](http://www.melkite.org). Download the “At Home” kits for each of our Church’s fasting seasons (“Great Fast at Home,” “Apostles’ Fast at Home,” etc.) for reflections, prayers and activities you can use to keep the spirit of these seasons alive in your house church.

## **Pass On Your Family Traditions**

As the passing on of Holy Tradition is one of the main tasks of the priests of the wider Church, so too passing on of the family story is an important role for parents, the priests of the domestic church. Parents should tell family stories with a sense of appreciation, remembering the good things from their own growing-up years as well as the stories they heard from their parents and grandparents. If you have never done this before, sit down some evening and make a list of these stories and lessons as well as the lessons you want your children to learn from them.

.working in your lives: If, with St. Paul, “*We know that in all* in both the good and bad events of our lives to bring us to where we are in our life now. And so we can tell our stories with a sense of destiny: that God has been at work in our family and is still working, calling us to grow in His love and service. As God worked in the past to bring us to this place in the same way He is preparing us for something else.

### **Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **Sealed with the Spirit (2 Cor 1:21-2:4)**

AT THE BEGINNING OF THIS SECTION from 2 Corinthians read at today’s Divine Liturgy we read, “*Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee*” (2 Cor 1:21-22). To what is he referring?

How are we anointed and given the Holy Spirit?

What does it mean to “be sealed”?

How is the Spirit a “guarantee”?

#### **What is a Seal?**

For most of Western history people did not have the self-stick envelopes we do today. Letters and documents were sealed with hot wax. Usually a stick of wax was heated and allowed to drip onto the document to close it. Then a sign such as the image on a ring was dipped into the wax before it hardened. This served two functions: to insure that the missive could not be opened by just anyone and to authenticate it as coming from the person whose image was used.

Because the seal was a material substance placed upon a document, a material substance came to be used to represent the Holy Spirit as the seal on our relationship with God. This substance was not wax, but an especially fragrant ointment called chrism or myron, a rich blend of oils and aromatic spices. Prepared and blessed by bishops, it is then distributed to their churches for local use.

The newly-baptized are marked with chrism to show that they are “in Christ,” united to Him in His death and resurrection through baptism, and have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them. *All who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ*, we sing, echoing St Paul (Gal 3:27). This sealing we have come to call *chrismation*, the anointing with Chrism.

Although this terminology is not regularly employed in the West, Pope John Paul II used it to describe this mystery when addressing pilgrims in 1998: “The seal of the Holy Spirit therefore signifies and brings about the disciple's total belonging to Jesus Christ, his being always at the latter's service in the Church, and at the same time it implies the promise of divine protection in the trials he will have to endure to witness to his faith in the world.”

### **How is the Spirit a Guarantee?**

In the New Testament we find the Holy Spirit bestowed in a number of ways. The Father bestows the Spirit on Christ in the form of a dove at His Baptism and on the apostles in the form of fiery tongues at Pentecost. Christ bestowed the Spirit by His word alone on the evening of His resurrection. In Acts 10 we read that the Spirit descended upon Cornelius and his household even before they were baptized, without any human intervention.

By and large, however, this bestowal of the Spirit comes about after baptism as a “sign” or “guarantee” that the Lord is truly working in the heart if the one so anointed. What has happened here is miraculous, it affirms, and it is of God.

### **Anointing – an Ancient Rite**

Anointing with this special oil – Chrism or Myron – came to be considered the sign of being set apart very early in the history of Israel. The first Chrism was made by the prophet and Lawgiver, Moses, according to directions given him by God (Ex 38:25 LXX), and used by him to consecrate the Tabernacle and anoint Aaron for service as High Priest. All subsequent prophets, high priests and kings over Israel were likewise chrismated, as was anything or anyone reserved exclusively to the service of God or to a life of holiness. At a certain point all priests were anointed in a similar way, setting them apart for the service of God.

In Christ these first anointings given under the old Law was fulfilled: “*God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 10:38). He is the one truly anointed – set apart – for the mystery of salvation, but His anointing is invisible – done by the Holy Spirit in the mystery of the Trinity.

Contemporary scholars have noted that all the material anointings with oil in Jewish practice are paralleled in the New Testament Church. As Moses consecrated with holy oil the Tabernacle in which the tablets of the old Law were kept, so also the Christian temple is sanctified with Chrism. The walls, the holy table, the sacred vessels are consecrated in this way. When a hierarch consecrates antimensia (the principal cloth on the holy table) and even icons he does it by anointing them with chrism.

## **The Anointing of Priests**

In the Western Church candidates for holy orders are anointed with chrism, recalling the anointing of priests in the Old Testament. In the Byzantine Church this is not done; instead it is in chrismation that all of us are anointed with chrism to be members of the royal priesthood.

When the chrism is blessed the hierarch says this prayer:

“By the coming of Your holy and adorable Spirit, O Lord,. Make of it a garment of incorruptibility, a perfect seal that imprints on those who receive Your divine bath the right to bear Your godly Name and that of Your only-begotten Son and Your Holy Spirit so as to be known as members of Your family,... becoming Your own people, Your royal priesthood, Your holy nation stamped with the seal of Your spotless chrism.”

The prayer lists three effects of this anointing:

- 1) The right to bear the name Christian – we are “other Christs” (“other anointed ones”);
- 2) We are members of God’s family, His holy people;
- 3) We are His royal priesthood, set apart to lead and represent the world in the worship of its Creator.

## **A Visible Mark**

In the Church’s prayers this anointing is described as a visible mark, or even as a garment, highlighting its visible character. When any of the above items are anointed, a visible mark is left: the sign of the cross, declaring it sanctified. When a person is anointed with the sign of the cross, the same is true: a visible mark is left. This too is in imitation of Old Testament practice. The high priest was anointed with the Hebrew letter *tav*. Studies have shown that this letter in the time the Biblical text was first written was in the form of a transverse cross, some-what like our letter X. This mark was also inscribed on the plaque the high priest wore.

Sometimes, at the baptism of infants, we see the newly-baptized then dressed in a cute little suit or fancy white dress. The color is right but the cut is wrong! The white garment given at this mystery is nothing other than the white robe worn by clergy in the altar: the stikharion. It is the basic garment of the priesthood worn by servers and clergy of every order. That it is given at chrismation reminds us that we all share in the common priesthood of the faithful, able to join together with others in the Church to offer the mystical sacrifice in union with our Great High Priest, the Lord Jesus.

## **Dominating or Working Together?**

A FEW YEARS AGO an Orthodox priest quipped, on being ordained a bishop, that his spiritual life had been challenged as never before. “You put me on a throne, dress me up like the Byzantine emperor, call me ‘Master’ and expect me to be humble!”

When the Ottoman Turks conquered Constantinople in the fifteenth century they named the Ecumenical Patriarch as “Ethnarch” of the Greek *millet* or nation. Each non-Muslim group under Ottoman rule (eg Armenians, Copts, Jews, etc.) was considered a subject “nation” and had its own national leader. It was at that time that the Ecumenical Patriarch took on some of the old emperor’s regalia. In time other patriarchs, metropolitans and bishops did the same. They started wearing crowns, being called “most eminent lord” and assuming all the trappings of state still used today. One temptation confronting Church leaders, then, was to see themselves as civil rulers rather than churchmen.

When St Paul was writing to the Christians of Corinth in the first century such magnificent trappings were unknown. This did not prevent some Christian leaders and their followers from putting on airs. In the Apostle’s First Letter to the Corinthians he criticizes the divisiveness in their community: “...*there are quarrels among you,*” he wrote. “*What I mean is this: one of you says, ‘I follow Paul’; another, ‘I follow Apollos’; another, ‘I follow Cephas’; still another, ‘I follow Christ’*” (1 Cor 1:11-12).

Christians – both clergy and laity – still succumb to this temptation when they attach themselves to one or another important person to show themselves as superior to others, confusing greater responsibility with higher status and honor.

St Paul confronts such attitudes with the principle he spells out in 2 Corinthians 1:24. “*Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm.*” He contrasts “*lording over*” others in the Church with “*working with*” others to assure a joyful spirit in the community. Church leaders are not meant to dominate from above but to lead from within the community they serve.

### **Clericalism and Laicism**

A frequently cited example of domination in the Church is clericalism, where all responsibility in the parish is in the hands of the clergy while the laity is expected to simply “pray, pay and obey.” Similarly parish clergy complain that people from the bishop’s office tell them how to run their parish while bishops point their finger at higher-ups who interfere in their diocese! There is often the feeling among Christians that leadership in the Church means domination rather than cooperation.

The troublemakers in Corinth were not the Apostles, Paul or Cephas; they were the followers who stirred up antagonisms in their name. Similarly many Churches have suffered from what has been called “laicism,” where groups of parishioners attempt to dominate the parish and exclude others or limit their participation, perhaps on ethnic lines. Sometimes the parish “elite” have felt that the priest is merely their employee, supposed to do their bidding. Others have resented the bishop for enforcing diocesan policies (particularly financial ones) on their parish. How often do parish bigwigs pressure the priest to bend the rules for them or their relatives? It is not only clergy who may try to dominate the Church.

Church life as envisioned in our Tradition calls for a model different from either clericalism or laicism. It presumes that laity working together with clergy of all ranks –bishop, priest, deacons,

chanters, etc. – each fulfilling their proper function. None of these roles is simply an honorific. Each of them is, first and foremost, a service to the Body of Christ, the Church, and therefore to the Lord Himself.

In the past the parish clergy were the only educated members of the community, particularly in villages and rural areas – perhaps the only parishioners who could read! They were the acknowledged leaders in the community, the keepers of good order. In the parish their word was law.

Today, in many if not most parishes, the priest is not the most educated person in the community, except in religious matters. The laity are recovering their rightful place in the life of the Church. In an attempt to involve more laypeople in Church life, however, some clergy have put men and women in leadership positions without proper training. A parish council member or a catechist who has not been trained in the Tradition or in the vision of our Church will not be able to contribute positively to the Church's mission. Their secular education may make them leaders in their own fields, but they may remain children in their understanding of the Church and its ways. A yearling lamb does not make a good shepherd.

### **The Smell of the Sheep**

Since becoming Bishop of Rome, Pope Francis has encouraged important churchmen to lead from within rather than remaining at a distance from their flock. He told an archbishop whom he had just appointed papal almoner (charity director) not to sit in an office writing checks but to go out to the streets and serve the needy found there. Shepherds, he insists, should smell of their sheep because they are in their midst.

The pope's injunction forces Church leaders to ask, "Where are the sheep to be found?" In some places they may congregate in coffee houses or the local pub – the shepherd's place would be there with them. In many parts of our society the sheep rarely stray from in front of the TV or the computer. Shepherds have gone there as well, whether by visiting homes or making a presence for Christ in the media. Some suburban churches have opened chapels or stalls in their local shopping malls because that's where the people may be found.

### **Sheep Know the Difference...**

The movement toward greater lay involvement in the Church has led some parish priests to live so much like their parishioners that people might not know that they are priests at all. Some avoid any type of clerical dress in their desire to be "one of the boys." For others their parish life consists in rounds of meetings rather than in leading people in prayer.

Sheep, however, know that their shepherd is not just another one of the sheep. They would be frightened if the shepherds started acting like sheep. Similarly Christian laypeople know that their priest has a different calling than they do. They should be able to detect in their pastors a greater commitment to prayer and the service of the Church as well as to fellowship with their parishioners.

### **A Model Shepherd**

St John of Kronstadt served as a priest in a big city parish near St Petersburg in Russia from 1855 to 1908. He came to be known throughout the Russian Church for his devotion to the holy mysteries. He served the Divine Liturgy daily, unusual outside monasteries, and often heard confessions for hours on end. It was the witness of his prayer life that made people throughout Russia recognize him as “their” shepherd. One observer described the effect of serving the Liturgy on St John: “An extraordinary spiritual joy, extraordinary peace and heavenly rest, extraordinary strength and power were now reflected in each trace of his features. His face was as if glowing, was as if giving off some sort of light.” As St John himself said, “I die when I am not celebrating the Liturgy...”

### **Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **The True Glory of God (2 Cor 4:6-16)**

THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST was manifested to Moses on Sinai in great power. The prophet Elias, trusting in the Almighty One, called down fire from heaven to consume his offerings. The leaders of Israel, seeking to glorify this God of power and might, built one temple after another. Jews flocked there on the great feasts to experience the presence of their wondrous God.

Then there came One from Galilee, far from the Holy City and its splendors, to proclaim the Kingdom of God. He surrounded himself with a few fishermen, who would be joined by tax collectors, partisans, and an assortment of people whom He had healed of various diseases. He proclaimed that the Kingdom of God was at hand and then ushered in that kingdom in a way that even His own followers could not comprehend: the way of the cross.

Pilate and the Jewish religious leaders ridiculed Jesus’ claims to kingship. When the charge against Him – the “King of the Jews” – was placed over His head on the cross it was done in mockery. But God’s power is not a matter of thunder and lightning; rather it is the power of love overcoming hate. That is why the cross set up on Holy Friday in our churches displays a title different from the one written by Pilate. Christ on the cross, we proclaim, is “the King of Glory.” The cross is the throne of love, seat of the kingdom of love. We reverence the cross but often do not comprehend the power in it.

As Christ predicted, His first followers would go from place to place in the then-known world “fishing for men.” They went to the major cities of the Roman Empire and beyond where Jews had settled. These hubs of civilization had their established religious centers: synagogues, temples, altars. The apostles did not “compete” by building larger temples or more elaborate altars. Instead of the power of these established religions they had only the Gospel, and that in

what St. Paul called “earthen vessels” (2 Cor 4:7): a few unremarkable provincial tradesmen, harassed and persecuted, who claimed that Jesus had risen from the dead.

As the cross replaced the temple as the center of the Holy City of Jerusalem so too the One whom the apostles preached replaced the gods of the Roman pantheon. In time temples became churches and even the great city of Rome would take pride in the tombs of the apostles and martyrs, rather than those of its emperor-gods, as the source of their true life.

### **The Treasure We Have Inherited**

History is filled with tales of the offspring of great leaders or heroes who squandered the inheritance they had received. Some saw themselves as great because their ancestors had been great, when in reality they themselves were weak and selfish. Their unworthiness soon became evident to all. Thus the son of St. Vladimir the Great has become known to history as Sviatopolk the Accursed.

We are the spiritual heirs of Peter and the other Apostles. Our Churches are the daughters of the Apostolic Churches whose missionaries left their homelands to introduce new people to the Gospel or to preserve the faith of people wandering in alien lands. We have become so comfortable in our inheritance that we may take this treasure of divine life as ours by right.

In our contemporary age we have even come to communicate with God in a casual – and ultimately superficial – way. We are so at home in the church that we have ceased to see it as holy ground. Unlike Peter, who shrank in fear when confronted by the Holy One, we often think, “Well, we should see God’s power manifested too!” As the Apostles bargained with Christ, “Show us the Father – that will be enough for us” (Jn 14:6) and like the scribes and Pharisees, whom Christ called “An evil and adulterous generation” (Mt 12:38-39), we seek for a sign – a healing, a vision, a miraculous icon – “that we may believe.” After all, we’ve heard it all before and are unmoved.

When Peter first encountered the power in Christ’s love he recoiled out of his own sinfulness. He deeply felt his own unworthiness to be such a direct and personal recipient of God’s favor. And he was right: he was not worthy that God should intervene in his life. But Peter had yet to learn the depth of God’s compassion for His creatures. God does not give us “what we deserve,” but what His love ordains. He does not abandon us to a hell of our own making: He leads us through it to Himself. God’s purpose for Peter was that he be a “fisher of men” and worthiness had nothing to do with it. Divine grace, as it is described in the Byzantine ordination services, “heals what is infirm and supplies what is wanting.”

When God works marvelously in people’s lives – as He still does today – it is for the same reason that He worked with Peter: to prompt us to repentance. When Peter was unexpectedly confronted with Christ’s love in power, he repented and turned his life in a new direction. All of us, like Peter, are unworthy of the gifts we have received: even the very gift of life itself. But the

love of God covers the nakedness of our weaknesses and ushers us into the inner chamber of communion with God through the mystery of Christ among us.

This is the foremost marvel and a very great example of the power of God: that an earthen vessel has been enabled to bear such a great brightness and to hold so high a treasure. Admiring this, [St Paul] said, “*That the greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves,*” alluding to those who gloried in themselves. ... He used the term “earthen” alluding to the frailty of our mortal nature, and to emphasize the weakness of our flesh. There is no better example of our frailty than earthenware; it is so easily damaged, dissolved by variations of temperature and ten thousand other things. ... As he said in another place, “*My power is made perfect in weakness*” (2 Cor 12:9).

St John Chrysostom, Eighth Homily on 2 Corinthians

### **Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **A People Brought Together (2 Cor 6:1-10)**

SINCE THE SIXTH CENTURY the ordinary Western calendar has used the birth of Christ as its main point of reference. Years before His birth are designated BC (before Christ) while those since are termed AD (the year of the Lord). Secularists today prefer to use the terms “Common Era” (CE), and “Before the Common Era.” Their reluctance to mention Christ does not change the fact that our era is the era of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Scriptures and the Fathers use many images to describe the work of Christ for us: His incarnation, death, resurrection and second coming. In 2 Corinthians St Paul gives us a crucial way of speaking about the work of Christ. He calls it Christ’s ministry of reconciliation, the bringing together of disparate beings. When we hear the word “reconcile” we think “quarrel” but that is only one level of meaning for this term. More basically reconciliation is the bringing together of parts that are essentially different, that we would not expect to find together. In this sense St Paul says that in Christ mankind is reconciled to God. The human and the divine, essentially different, are now one. Human and divine are one in Christ’s own person; human and divine are one through Christ as we share in the divine nature (*theosis*).

In the same way Jews, chosen by God for a purpose stood in contrast to all peoples outside Israel, the “others” (Gentiles). Jews saw themselves as set apart from the Gentiles for God. A host of practices reinforced that separation. Some insisted that Jews and Gentiles could not eat together, visit one another or even associate with one another for the sake of their witness to the true God. In contrast St. Paul says that Jew and Gentile are now one when Jew and Gentile

believe in Christ. In Christ there is no longer a question of “the other;” humanity is a “new man” brought together by the One who stretched out His hands to the entire human race on the cross.

Reflecting on the mystery of Christ as reconciliation leads us to certain conclusions for our own lives. St Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are living in the age of salvation, when this bringing-together is being accomplished, and that they cannot live carelessly so as to receive this grace in vain. They – and we – are become a reconciling people, bring others together in the light of Christ who is the life of all.

The first place in which we are called to build unity is in the Church, which defines itself as “one.” Paul repeatedly tells his communities to avoid controversies, to always put others first. He sets a principle that we should always defer to the weaker brethren who might be scandalized by our otherwise legitimate actions. In 1 Cor 8-10 he notes that food ritually offered to idols may be eaten because the idols are nothing, but if this scandalizes weaker brethren he would rather never eat meat again. Paul clearly would rather be together than insist on being right.

As we look around our churches we see people with a number of different backgrounds: men and women, young and old, native and immigrant. And we see people with a wide variety of personalities: some attractive and some off-putting. As the time for Communion approaches we would do well to look around the church at those with whom we will share the Eucharist, to pray for them and to ask that we may become more open to one another in the communion of the Holy Spirit. In the Ektene (Insistant Litany) we pray formally for our community: the clergy, our church workers, the singers and everyone present with us. These same concerns should find a place in our heart as well.

### **The Unity of the Holy Churches of God**

In the Great Litany we pray repeatedly for “well-being of the holy Churches of God.” The Church is more than our congregation and exists on several different levels. As people who have been brought together in Christ and thus been given a “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18), we are to reach out to other congregations and eparchies to express our unity with them in Christ. Many jurisdictions have the practice of dedicating one day each month to pray for their sister congregations throughout the diocese and for other dioceses in their particular Church. As we approach the Eucharist seeing the others in our congregation we can also see – in our mind’s eye – our fellow believers across the country and across the world and pray for them.

If our spiritual vision is keener we can look even farther and see all the Eastern Churches with whom we have a special affinity: Catholic and Orthodox, Greek and Syriac, Coptic and Chaldean. We can bring them with us also to the Eucharist and pray in spiritual fellowship with them. We can unite with those Churches suffering persecution or the hardships of war and with those seeking to establish themselves in new homes throughout the world.

With many of them we are not in full communion: we cannot share the Eucharist together. We can, however, pray in spirit with all of them for the day when our union will be complete. This prayer by Russian Orthodox theologian Sergius Bulgakov may be especially appropriate here: “You called all Christians to draw near and partake of Your Body and Blood. But our sin has

divided us and we have no power to partake of Your holy Eucharist together. We confess this our sin and we pray You: forgive us and help us to serve the reconciliation, according to Your will.... Give us the spirit of wisdom and of faith, of daring and of patience, of humility and of firmness, of love and repentance..." Those who celebrate union with God in Christ are meant to be united to one another.

Finally we can look even further and see the Great Church of the West and the innumerable groups that have broken apart from it since the great separation of the Reformation. Some of these groups, initially divided out of concern for fidelity to the Gospel have wandered far from that Gospel today. We pray for them as well, that distress at their divisions may lead them to seek union with one another in the spirit of Christ.

### **The Church Beyond Our World**

Around us on the walls of our churches we see icons of the Theotokos and the saints. These are not decorations, but reminders that the Church includes all who have been baptized into Christ, the dead as well as the living. In some traditions people go from icon to icon when they enter the church, greeting and reverencing all the saints before taking their place among the worshippers. In the Church we are brought together with the saints of all ages; let us be sure to honor them as our elder brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Church beyond our world includes not only the formally glorified saints but all those who have died in Christ. In the Divine Liturgy we ask that God remember them as "those who have fallen asleep before us in the hope of resurrection to eternal life." Our spiritual ancestors are just as much a part of us as our physical ancestors: they have passed on to us the life in Christ. In the Ektene we particularly remember the founders and benefactors of our parish, those whose work in our community have made it possible for us to worship here today. Seeing the depth of our prayers for them may inspire those who come after us to pray for us as their spiritual ancestors when we have joined the Church beyond our world.

## **Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – Sunday of the Canaanite**

### **A True Temple of God (2 Cor 6:17)**

"O HEAVENLY KING...present in all places and filling all things." We begin most of our liturgical services with these words, proclaiming the universal presence of God in His creation. We know that God is the source of all things but we also believe that it is God who upholds all things in being by His life-giving presence. "*In Him we live and move and have our being,*" as St. Paul reminded the Athenians (Acts 17:28). Were God not present to our creation, it would simply cease to be. In a real sense, then, all creation is a temple in which we can encounter its Creator.

The earliest acts of worship recorded in the Book of Genesis took place outdoors. The fabled patriarchs Noah (Gen 8:20), Abraham (Gen 12:8; 22:9), Isaac (Gen 26:25) and Jacob (Gen 28:18) all built altars and set up memorial stones outdoors to recognize God's presence and offer

sacrifices to Him. With Moses, however, Israelite worship moved “indoors.” The portable tabernacle which accompanied the Israelites from Egypt and its successor, the temple at Jerusalem, became the concrete proclamation of God’s unique presence to them delivering them from slavery.

The temple did not only represent God’s presence in creation; it also affirmed His abiding relationship with the Israelites as His chosen people. God could be found in nature, to be sure, but especially in His relationship with the people among whom He dwelled. The signs of His covenant with Israel – the tablets of the Law, the jar of manna and the rod of Aaron (see Numbers 17:1-11) – were enshrined in the temple as evidence of His love.

When Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians and the Jews were exiled, these relics of the covenant disappeared. The temple was rebuilt but the holy of holies was empty, merely the sign of what had been.

### **Jesus Is the Temple**

In John’s account of Jesus driving the merchants and money-changers out of temple, the Lord says to the indignant Jews, “*Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.*” John, and the first Christians, interprets this to mean: “*He was speaking of the temple of His body. Therefore, when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the words which Jesus had said*” (Jn 2:19, 21-22).

With the Incarnation there was a true Temple of God’s presence in the midst of Israel once again. Jesus of Nazareth was the temple in whom the Word of God had taken up His dwelling. The Lord Jesus is “*the One greater than the temple*” (Mt 12:6) built by men, because He the living temple provided by the Father for us.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all speak of the temple veil being torn in two from top to bottom at the death of Christ. The veil, which separated the holy of holies from the rest of the temple, was the sign of man’s inability to enjoy a full relationship with God. Christ’s presence has made God fully accessible to us. As Christ told His disciple Philip, “*Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father*” (Jn 14:9).

### **The Church a Temple**

“*We are the temple of the living God*” (2 Cor 6:16) writes St. Paul about the Church. Some manuscripts of this epistle say “*You are the temple...*” In either case it is clear that St. Paul was not speaking of a church building: there were none yet. Christians met for worship in homes. He wrote about the community of believers itself: that the Christian community was a holy place of communion with God.

The Lord Jesus had declared that He would be present in a gathering of His followers, however small: “*For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them*” (Mt 18:20). Because He was fully man Jesus was one of us; because He was also fully God His union with our humanity could transcend the limits of one earthly body. He could be embodied in the assembly of His followers.

St Paul adopted the image of a human body to describe the organic unity of Christ and the Church: “*as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. . . . Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually*” (1 Cor 12:13, 27).

In the same vein St Paul writes to the Colossians, “*He is the head of the body, the church*” (Col 1:18). The Church – the assembly of believers – is united with Christ its head as one body. This is why we can speak of the Church as a temple – because it is one with Christ, the living temple of the glory of God. As Christ in His humanity was the living temple of God, so the Church as His body is God’s living temple today.

In the past century it has become increasingly possible to graft skin, transplant organs or re-attach severed limbs onto a human body. As St. Paul taught, becoming organically united to the body of Christ was possible even in the first century AD. We are organically one in Christ by means of the “grafting” of baptism. “*For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit*” (1 Cor 12:13). Baptism unites us to the body of Christ, making us members of the living temple of God on earth.

### **Consequences of Being God’s Temple**

After setting forth the Church as the temple of God, St. Paul draws the following conclusion: the Church should be separate from the pagan culture around them. He quotes two of the Hebrew prophets, Isaiah and Ezechiel: “*Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you*” (2 Cor 6:17).

The Jerusalem temple and everything in it was consecrated, set apart from profane purposes and devoted solely to the service of God. The Church, the living temple of Christ, should be as well, particularly in regard to the ethics and behavior of the secular culture. Some later Christians, like the Amish, set themselves apart by their dress or speech. The second-century *Epistle to Diognetus*, however, shows how early Christians lived out Paul’s teaching. “For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity.... They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all...” (*To Diognetus*, V).

Many Christians in the past hundred years have sought to appeal to their contemporaries by adapting popular language and music in their worship and endorsing popular morality in their ethics, accepting divorce or abortion, and even “blessing” same-sex marriages. Christians seeking to be the temple of God, faithful to the Scriptures and the rest of Holy Tradition, should recall how Christ chastised the Jews for bringing the secular world into the temple: “*And He said to them, ‘It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a ‘den of thieves’*”(Mt 21:13). Secularizing God’s temple invariably makes it a den of thieves.

## **Distraction or Deification?**

God, who sustains and upholds all things, is present in the Church, the Body of Christ, and also in each believer, the adopted children of God (Eph 1:5), in a unique way. He has made His home among us, making both the Church and each believer a “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16).

Christians since the time of St Paul have reflected on what this unique status might mean in practice. At times this belief has led Christians to assume a sense of superiority to others, similar to the Jewish understanding of themselves as a “chosen people.” But, as Christ said in the context of Israel, simply being a member of God’s People doesn’t automatically make one godly. *“Do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones”* (Mt 3:9).

Yet St Paul, who had no such idea of Christian supremacy, did not hesitate to quote the prophet Isaiah’s injunction that believers should separate themselves from other people and cleave to the Lord instead. In particular he applied this stricture to marriage: believers should not be “yoked” (married) with unbelievers (2 Cor 6:14).

## **Separate from Others?**

At various times in Christian history groups of believers have physically separated themselves from society lest they be adversely affected by it. But Paul himself recognized that, while believers could not avoid contact with non-believers, nor should they, there is a line of separation between those who are in Christ and those who are not.

As believers our lives should be anchored in the presence of God among us and our calling as members of the Body of Christ. Knowing that we are always in the presence of God prompts us to worship – not just occasionally but regularly. Our place as members of His Body urges us to mutual love and service as a way of life. Worship and love are the only lasting aspects of human existence which transcend every other aspect of daily life.

In our society, where most people do not have to work day and night to earn a loaf of bread, we have an abundance of leisure time. Theoretically this should free us for a greater degree of worship and service than our ancestors were able to pursue. Each of us knows, however, that we devote much more time and energy to entertainment every day than to worship and mutual love.

Through TV, commercial music, video games, professional sports, etc. the pursuit of entertainment dominates our superficial popular culture. Many people have become so enamored of big-name athletes and entertainers that they seem to live vicariously through them without thought to the values they represent. Providing diversion from the real business of living – worship and mutual love – is big business and millions of advertising dollars are spent persuading people that entertainment – be it grand opera or soap opera – should be the focus of

our lives. Reducing our worship time to a Sunday Liturgy while we allow TV to take over our every free moment for the rest of the week is simply a parody of the Christian life.

Believers must separate themselves in their hearts from any attitudes or practices of those around us when they divert us from our true goal of union with God. If we seek to live a fuller life of faith we need to distance ourselves from the ongoing pursuit of diversion and devote more of our precious free time to the pursuit of deification.

### **Separate from False Values**

Christians should be particularly wary of the vehicles of our popular culture in which the values of our modern secular society are often enshrined. The businesses which dominate these industries often promote questionable financial and sexual behavior as well as conspicuous consumption through celebrity worship. We should not hesitate to distance ourselves from these values and from those around us who promote them and entertain themselves with them.

### **What's Left for Us?**

The Church has the responsibility of providing ways for believers to live their Christian life to the full. Fortunately it has been doing this for upwards of 2000 years. Our contemporary parishes must find workable ways to make these traditions accessible to us the way we live today.

***Enabling Worship*** – All the Eastern Churches have a rich liturgical life in addition to the Sunday Liturgy. The daily cycle of feasts and fasts can nourish our Christian life from Sunday to Sunday. Parishes can provide greater access to these observances by:

- Resisting the trend of transferring feast days to Sundays. Recover the connection between the liturgical year and parish fellowship meals
- Forming a synodion of people (one or two readers will do) who will be responsible to insure weekday services on a regular basis.
- Taking the opportunity these services provide to introduce people to the true giants of humanity, the saints and other notable Christians, who can inspire deeper faith in us.
- Training believers to read the daily hours and compile on their own so that, even when they cannot gather together, they can pray with the Church.

***Enable Love and Service*** – Too often fellowship in churches is limited to the after-Liturgy coffee hour and service is restricted to making donations to the projects of others. Parishes can help people make personal acts of love by:

- Supporting wholeheartedly the efforts which others make to enhance your parish's worship, education, fundraising and other programs.
- Networking parish seniors and others on their own with families for fellowship. and help with daily tasks (shopping, etc.)
- Encouraging parishioners to provide hospitality to neighbors in need of companionship.
- Joining other churches in service projects in your community.

When we join others for worship or in expressions of mutual support in ways like these we are distancing ourselves from the concerns and preoccupations of our commercialized society which has no interest in promoting the things of God. Spending our free time in the Body of Christ leaves us no time for “the idols of this present age.”

### **Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **The Giver of All Good Gifts (2 Cor 9:6-11)**

HOW MANY TV CHANNELS can you access – 300, 400, more? How many do you actually use? How fast can your car travel – 150 mph? How fast do you actually drive? Does your Smartphone have more apps than you’ll ever use? Manufacturers design their products based on the conviction that people want more than they really need. As humorist Will Rogers said back in the 1920s, “Too many people spend money they haven’t earned, to buy things they don’t want to impress people they don’t like.”

This dynamic, called consumerism, has been known for over 100 years. As more people became financially able to buy more, do more, and travel more “conspicuous consumption” became a way of life for an increasing number of people, particularly in Europe and America. The great symbol of this phenomenon, at least in the U.S. has been “Black Friday,” the day after Thanksgiving, when people descend on stores in a Christmas Shopping frenzy to grab the latest thing before it’s sold out.

Pope Francis has repeatedly denounced a way of life devoted to conspicuous consumption, contrasting it to a Christ-centered way of life. “The encounter with the living Jesus, in the great family that is the Church, fills the heart with joy, because it fills it with true life, a profound goodness that does not pass away or decay.

“But this experience must face the daily vanity, the poison of emptiness that insinuates itself into our society based on profit and having (things), that deludes young people with consumerism,” he said before thousands in St Peter’s Square.

“Young people are particularly sensitive to the emptiness of meaning and values that surrounds them. And they, unfortunately, pay the consequences.”

Critics have accused the pope of introducing socialism or even Marxism into Church teaching. In fact, the anti-consumerism he espouses may be found in the New Testament and even in pre-Christian philosophers.

#### **How God Provides**

St Paul sets forth his “Christian economics” in 2 Corinthians 9:8 – *“God is able to make every gift abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an*

*abundance for every good work*". The first plank in his three-fold approach is to recognize that *God is able to provide for us*. We often emphasize our own contribution to life, forgetting that our talents, our abilities, our very existence comes from God. As we read in the Epistle of James – and repeat regularly in the Divine Liturgy – “*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights...*” (Jas 1:17). We are, to be sure, co-creators with Him by virtue of our creation in His image; but there is nothing good wrought by our hand apart from Him.

Secondly, God provides for us in a specific manner. He provides for us *all sufficiency in all things*. In other words, He guarantees that we have *everything we truly need*. Third, He guarantees us *an abundance*, over and above what we need, but for a specific purpose: *for every good work*. We have enough for what we actually require and even more, for the purpose of doing good.

### **What Do We “Need?”**

St Paul’s economics are easy to understand in principle, but we find ourselves with a lot of questions when we try to apply his teaching. When does “need” – I must have – become “excess” – I can use or I want? And is it good for me to have everything I want and can afford?

We recognize the negative effects on our body if we eat or drink to excess. But there are even more serious effects on our soul. Our physical cravings can lead to a psychological dependency: the feeling that I can’t live without X, Y or X. Overeating leads to overweight, physical discomfort and illness; overdependence on material things leads to psychological unhappiness and spiritual emptiness.

Philosophers throughout the ancient world recognized this apart from Christianity. Lao-Tzu, the fifth-century BC Chinese author of the *Tao Te Ching* said it this way: “To know you have enough is to be rich.” The first-century Roman philosopher Seneca noted, “*It is not the man who has too little, but the man who craves more, that is poor.*” Another Stoic philosopher, Epictetus, Himself born into slavery, had so freed himself from dependence on the material that he reportedly said in AD 55 that, “*Contentment comes not so much from great wealth as from few wants.*” *These pagan philosophers would likely have agreed with the Lord when He said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man [i.e. one dependent on his material wealth] to enter the kingdom of God.”* (Mk 10:25; Lk 18:25).

### **Enough vs. Abundance**

St. Paul is clear: the purpose of any abundance we may be given is for doing every good work. Do you have more than you need? Don’t look to add to your holdings – you will simply be frustrating God’s purpose for your life. As the Prophet Isaiah warned those who build their life around making more than they need, “*Woe to those who add house to house and field to field...*”

*their many houses shall be desolate” (Is 5:8, 9). Wealth, it must be said, is not wrong. Not using it according to God’s plan turns it – and us – aside from God and His way.*

Even this is a principle that non-Christians and non-believers of every kind have espoused. This is evident in the way people have made their own the saying “Live simply, so others may simply live.” Non-Christians have attributed it to Mohandas Gandhi, the Indian nationalist or to Henry David Thoreau, the nineteenth-century American Transcendentalist thinker. Roman Catholics have found it in the writings of Mother Theresa of Calcutta or in the teachings of their first American-born saint, Elizabeth Ann Seton. The idea is clearly easy to accept, but demanding when we try to put it in practice.

One help for those who might try to devote their abundance to the doing of good is the teaching of St John Chrysostom. He reminds us that God’s purpose in commanding almsgiving is not only for the sake of the recipient. It is also, if not primarily, for the donor. The recipient of alms receives physical sustenance but the giver of alms grows in his or her spirit, imitating the Giver of all good gifts.

### **St John Chrysostom on Almsgiving**

We are given time by our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ for the seeds of almsgiving to fall upon our hearing. Christ has given us the sower to imitate. He sowed his seed on good earth and from it reaped a hundred fold. Hear the message proclaimed by his action.

Behold, the lovers of God, the lovers of honor, and the lovers of the poor are all gathered together as in an arena – God is standing by, receiving the little money given by the lovers of the poor and granting them in exchange the kingdom of heaven. I beg you, let none of us forfeit this grace. Let none of us neglect this great and world-transcending gift for the sake of a little money. I entreat all of you: with diligence let us purchase the kingdom of heaven.

*First Homily on Almsgiving*

### **Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **Transforming Hardships into Good (2 Cor 11:31-12:9)**

ST. PAUL THE APOSTLE IS THE MOST TOWERING FIGURE of the first century Church. Much of the Acts of the Apostles is devoted to telling his story and his own writings account for more than 30% of the entire New Testament. He was directly involved in Christian communities throughout

the Mediterranean world. It was those communities which collected his writings and preserved his memory for generations to come.

Paul wrote little about himself but what he did write gives an insight into not only his own development but the spiritual life of countless saints in the Church throughout its history. In 2 Corinthians chapters 11 and 12 we see the way Paul looked at important events of his life. He introduces this section by giving us his understanding of what he personally contributed to these events: “*If I must boast,*” he writes, “*I will boast of the things which concern my infirmity*” (2 Cor 11:30).

### **The Thorn in the Flesh**

Paul does not boast of his mystical experiences, however; he boasts of something quite opposite, “*A thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me...*” (2 Cor 12:7), from which he at first sought to be delivered. Christians have speculated ever since as what this thorn might have been. The answers suggested have ranged from recurring physical, mental or spiritual afflictions to the constant opposition of the Jewish leadership to his ministry.

It seems to have been a chronic physical infirmity, but of what kind we are not told. Paul asked to be delivered from it – God said “No” and then gave the reason: “*My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.*” (12:9).

In any case, knowing the specific nature of this thorn would be like knowing the length of Jesus’ nose. It is no more central to the meaning of Paul’s teaching than Jesus’ physiognomy mattered to His life and work. The Scripture ponders, not the nature of the thorn, but what it meant in Paul’s life. It additionally suggests what such an affliction might mean in ours.

We see the meaning Paul drew out of this affliction in the last phrase of this verse, “*... lest I be exalted above measure.*” Here was a man marked out by God for a special service. Christ appears to him, he sees with the eyes of the heart the depths of the wisdom of God in remaking us according to His image. He successfully makes disciples wherever he goes. He has what we might call a most fulfilling ministry. Yet there’s this thorn that keeps popping up.

People who attract a following – preachers, politicians, personalities – are often thwarted by their own sense of self importance. Pride leads them up a pinnacle of material or emotional highs – “my work, my memorial, my status” – before casting them down to disgrace. Once we believe that we are the source of our strength or success, we have taken the first step toward the cliff edge. Paul was spared that by his thorn. He saw himself as a person harassed by something he could not control. He was not tempted to make himself an idol.

Yet Paul did not believe that God was chastising him. He did not see his thorn as God’s doing – it was “a messenger of Satan” – but it was his occasion for seeing the presence of God as overriding and eclipsing the pain of the thorn.

## **Recreating Our Thorns**

People pray, sometimes for years, that their recurring problems be taken away. “No matter what I do, this thing keeps coming back. What am I doing wrong? Maybe there’s something else I should be doing.” So we pray for healing or deliverance from this thorn and nothing happens. We are not healed or delivered and we don’t know why.

At first Paul prayed, as we often do, that the thorn be taken away. The Lord Jesus likewise prayed in the garden that the cup of His suffering be taken away. In both cases God’s answer was “No! – my grace is sufficient for you” (see v. 9). Paul expresses this response as a clear leading from God and builds his understanding of God’s work on it. Paul approaches suffering and hardship from his understanding of Christ as Messiah and transforms our reaction to it. In the Old Testament suffering was often seen as God’s punishment for failure to do His will. This was the understanding of the apostles before the resurrection. When confronted with a man born blind their query was, “*Who sinned – this man or his parents – that he should be born blind?*” (Jn 9:2) Jesus’ response was swift – none of them sinned, but God would be glorified.

Many Jews understood that when the Messiah came He would take away all the hardships and sufferings we endure as children of Adam. That did not happen with Jesus so, they reasoned, He was not the Messiah.

Our apostolic faith, however, is that the Messiah did not come to free us from our human condition but to assume it and transform it. Christ did not eliminate death. He first assumed it and then emptied it of its power. Christ assumed our human nature and transfigured it in His own person. Now He extends that transfiguration to those who are united to Him in His Body, the Church. His Holy Spirit, dwelling within us, enables us to transform our circumstances, manifesting signs of His presence and purpose for us.

Paul’s thorn in the flesh became his way of seeing God freeing him from pride. God did not take away this thorn but emptied it of its power, using this “messenger of Satan” to bring Paul to a deeper level of spiritual maturity, Satan notwithstanding.

## **God Works in All Things**

The teaching Paul drew from his experience is best expressed in his Epistle to the Romans. “*We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to His purpose*” (Rom 8:28). People of faith trust that God’s love is stronger than any hardship, and that awareness of His love works together with our hardships to bring about good. We often do not see the good, but those who truly love God trust Him to make it known to them in time.

Many believers have looked back over their lives and seen that God was at work even in their sins to bring them to Him. They may have put aside a static or rote relationship with God for life in “the real world” only to come to God in a more mature way later on.

Sometimes we never see the good that results from our thorns; yet the person of deep faith trusts that God is at work nonetheless. The following prayer from an edition of the spiritual classic, *Unseen Warfare*, expresses something of that sentiment. “I thank You that You have often, even without my knowledge, saved me from catastrophes which threatened me and delivered me from the hands of my unseen enemies.” I may want something, even something good, and not see that it’s dangerous to my spiritual life.

Paul saw that Christ’s work in the world is not to remove thorns but to enable us to meet them with the loving presence of God. When we are more aware of that divine presence than of our hardships, we can understand how Paul – beset as he was by his thorn in the flesh – could say, “*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*” (1 Thess 5:16-18).

Have you suffered any evil? But if you will, it is no evil. Give thanks to God, and the evil is changed into good. Say as Job said, “Blessed be the name of the Lord for ever.”

For tell me, what such great thing have you suffered? Has disease befallen you? Yet it is nothing strange. For our body is mortal, and liable to suffer. Has poverty overtaken you? But possessions are things to be acquired, and again to be lost, and remain when you have departed. Is it plots and false accusations of enemies? But it is not we that are injured by these, but they who are the authors of them. ... for he has not sinned who suffers the evil, but he who has done the evil.

St John Chrysostom, Tenth Homily on 1 Thessalonians

## **Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost**

### **Let Down in a Basket: the Escape from Damascus (Gal 1:11-19)**

ST PAUL’S CONVERSION STORY IS TOLD several times in the New Testament. In Acts 9: 1-18, for example, we read of Paul’s extraordinary experience of encountering the risen Christ. The Lord reproached Paul for persecuting Him in His followers. When he finally arrived in Damascus he was baptized and began preaching the Jesus was the Son of God (v.20). This so disrupted the Jewish community, which was expecting Paul to confound the followers of Christ, that they turned on him. Presumably they so convinced the pagan governor that Paul was a threat to the

peace of his city that he had guards posted at the city gate to seize him. He could escape in a basket only because he was inordinately short.

Another man might have boasted about being chosen to experience Christ in such an immediate way or of being chosen to proclaim Christ to the Gentiles. Paul's encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus was extraordinary, life-changing and critical in the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. Yet Paul does not even mention it here – he “boasts” of his puny stature that helped him escape from the city.

People in the contemporary world go to increasingly great lengths to change aspects of their appearance of which they are ashamed. Whole industries such as cosmetic surgery and fitness centers have grown up because people feel themselves inferior because of their appearance. Had Paul been too proud to admit that he was a pipsqueak he may not have made it out of Damascus!

Paul doesn't talk about the great spiritual experiences he had been granted. When he writes of being caught up into Paradise, the place of God's glory, he does so anonymously: “I heard about someone who...” It is too easy to become so focused on such occurrences become ends in themselves. Instead of leading us to God, they take us away from Him. In another passage he tells what he really takes pride in: “*But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*” (Gal 6:14).

### **Asceticism: Death to the World**

St. Paul's image of being crucified to the world would find repeated expression in the writings of Christian ascetics in both East and West. Those who seek to love God are continually urged to put to death anything which would deflect that love to something else. Anything to which we may be attached and in which we might take pride – our possessions, accomplishments, even our memories, our reputations and convictions – can deflect our focus from the One we seek to love. By gradually putting these things aside, the ascetic strives to sharpen his or her ability to concentrate on God. As we become less and less drawn to the things of this world we become more and more single-minded in our attachment to God. We die to the world and, in the words of the popular Greek monastic adage, “If you die before you die, then you won't die when you die.”

### **St Paul and Continual Prayer**

Ascetics strive to lessen their attachment to material things through fasting and almsgiving and to their psychological self-reliance through humble obedience. They seek to fill the void created by these interior deaths through prayer. Here again we find that the inspiration for this dynamic is St. Paul. In a few simple phrases he outlines a program for refocusing our lives on the Lord: “*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*” (1 Thess 5:16-18).

When we begin to see that everything around us is nothing other than a gift from God, we begin to develop an attitude of joyful gratitude. We come to value material things less for themselves than as the work of God in our lives. To the extent that we practice a form of unceasing prayer such as the Jesus Prayer we turn our mind more regularly to God. At first we concentrate on Him during the set times which we set apart for the prayer, Little by little the prayers becomes second nature to us we find ourselves focusing on Him in the midst of our other activities as well.

### **Leaving Attachments Behind**

“Abraham set forth without wondering curiously ‘What does this land look like, that Thou wilt show me? What is awaiting me there?’ He simply set out and *departed as the Lord had spoken unto him* (Genesis 12:4). Do likewise. Abraham took all his possessions with him, and in that respect you ought to do as he did. Take everything you have, your whole being with you on your wandering; leave nothing behind that could bind your affection to the land where many gods are worshipped, the land you have left.

Tito Colliander, *Way of the Ascetics* 18

### **Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **Letting Christ Live in Me (Gal 2:16-20)**

WHAT DID ST. PAUL MEAN when he wrote, “*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me*” (Gal 2:20)? How was he crucified with Christ? In the sacramental sense, he was “crucified” the same way we were: through baptism. In this mystery the death and resurrection of Christ are mystically represented. We are buried in Christ when we are immersed (buried) in the water. We are resurrected with Him when we are raised up out of the font.

This is not simply an attempt to paint a picture of Christ’s burial and resurrection. These events, like the incarnation, the ascension and all the mysteries of Christ’s work for us are neither abstract ideas nor even moments from the past. They are, to be sure, historical events which happened once in time, but which possess all the power of eternity. Their effect exists in “God’s time,” which is not limited to our earthly limitations of space or the passage of days. Through the holy mysteries – especially baptism and the Eucharist – we are able to connect with the saving events of the incarnation. We do not simply think about them as past, we unite with them as ever-present in what they have accomplished: our union with God in Jesus Christ.

In Acts 9 we read that Paul was baptized in Damascus by Ananias three days after his life-changing encounter with Christ. His attachment to the Law of Moses died as a result of that encounter. He had always been a religious man, but until that time his religious energy was focused on keeping the precepts of the Torah. Paul's reliance on the Law died when he encountered Christ. His energy was now focused on preaching Christ crucified and risen as the way to God for all, Jew and Gentile. As he wrote in Galatians 2:19, "*For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God.*"

## **Dying to Self**

But Paul did not simply say, "My reliance on the Law has been crucified" but that "*I have been crucified...it is no longer I who live.*" In this he seems to be responding to the call of Christ recorded in the Gospels: "*If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me*" (Mt 16:24). A follower of Christ, then, should be prepared to imitate the Master's way of life.

Paul depicts the Lord's fundamental act of self-denial, the incarnation, as setting a pattern for our life. "*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men*" (Phil 2:5-7). Paul lived in imitation of this as he went about the Roman Empire preaching Christ but assuring his own livelihood so that he would not seem to be in the preaching business.

Serving others in the spirit of Christ was quickly seen as an important, perhaps the primary, way of letting Christ live in the believer. The image of Christ washing His disciples' feet was imitated liturgically in Christian history and is practiced in all the apostolic Churches to this day. The head of the community (bishop, abbot, pastor) washes the feet of those he serves as a reminder that all leadership in the Church should be viewed as humble service.

## **Personal Asceticism**

Paul first died to the Law that he might live in Christ. He and, the other apostles and countless servants of the Church through the ages died to themselves to serve the Church after the manner of Christ. But there is also a way in which every believer is called to die to oneself. Further in the Epistle to the Galatians St Paul specifies this death as "death to the flesh": "*Those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires*" (Gal 5:24). His list of the passions of the flesh runs from adultery and fornication to contentiousness and jealousies. His definition of "flesh," then, is not limited to what we might call the physical but also to what we might label as psychological or emotional. The common denominator to Paul's list is the ego. To be Christ's, for Christ to live in us, we must deal with the distorted ego of our fallen human nature.

The average, well-meaning Christian often envisions the Christian life as attending church services and keeping the commandments as best he can. However the average, well-meaning

Christian rarely if ever has an experience of the God whom he worships. Those who have experienced God's presence in their lives are generally those who have attempted to cleanse their hearts from egotistical desires and passions.

According to the nineteenth century Russian theologian St Theophan the Recluse, the spiritual life takes work. "An instantaneous prayer life is impossible. You must make a strong effort to control your thoughts, at least to some degree. Prayer does not come about as you expect—by just wishing for it, and, suddenly, there it is. This does not happen." In another place he wrote, "The chief reason why so few people attain to full Christian perfection is exactly their reluctance, through self-pity, to force themselves to deny themselves." He calls our reluctance to take up the cross "self-pity:" It's too hard to pray and fast regularly, to work on my failings day after day, to put up with so-and-so. What would he have thought of our lifestyle, dedicated to the pursuit of happiness as it is?

Dying to one's self through fasting and humility draws away the curtain of our egos, as it were, and allows us to see the deeper reality of our existence. When we are constantly striving to focus on the image of Christ in us rather than on the cravings of our "flesh," we awaken to our true nature and realize that God truly does dwell within us. When that happens we appreciate that Paul's statement, "*It is not I who live...*" is not mere rhetoric. It is the true meaning of our existence revealed in fact.

### **A Spiritual Warfare**

*St John of Kronstadt was a charismatic parish priest in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia. He so exemplified the life in Christ that his cathedral – built to hold 5,000 – was packed for Liturgy every day. On the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his ordination in 1903 he described his taking of the cross:*

"Once ordained a priest and pastor, I soon learned through experience ...how many infirmities, weaknesses, and sinful passions there were in me, how strong a hold the prince of this world had over me, and how I had to struggle hard with myself, with my sinful inclinations and habits, and conquer them, so as to be as far as possible invulnerable to the arrows of the enemy.

"The spiritual warfare began, and with it watchfulness over oneself, sharpening of spiritual sight, teaching oneself uninterrupted secret prayer and invocation of the all-saving Name of Christ.

"In this warfare I have come to know the immensity of God's long-suffering to us; for He alone knows all the infirmity of our nature... He has surrounded and continued to surround me everyday with the joys of salvation from sin in peace and expansion of the heart. The divine mercy which I have experienced and the perpetual nearness to me of the Lord confirm me in the hope of my eternal salvation and in that of those who follow and hear me."

## Bringing Christ to the Nations

WHEN TODAY'S THEOLOGIANS DISAGREE, it is usually in the pages of some scholarly journal, perhaps as an unflattering review or in a volley of articles. All very professional and civilized.

Things were different in the first century AD. When St. Peter came from Jerusalem to Antioch he found that the Christian community included a mixture of native Jews and Greeks, many of whom were probably proselytes. They believed in one God, followed the morality of the Jews, but were not circumcised. Nor did they observe the Torah's laws about food or ritual purity.

At first, Peter ate with these Greek believers, an action which was forbidden to Jews. They could not eat with Gentiles. Rigorous Jews, like the Pharisees, believed that tenacious observance of the Torah assured their identity as God's chosen people by setting them apart from the Gentiles.

When some Jewish believers came from Jerusalem, St Peter and the Jewish Christians of Antioch stepped back out of fear and would no longer eat with their Gentile fellow-Christians. St. Paul's reaction, as he describes it in Galatians, was direct: "*I withstood him to his face, because he was wrong*" (Gal 2:11).

St. Paul, the ex-Pharisee, was clear in his reasons for not enforcing Jewish law: we know, he taught, "*that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but by faith in Jesus Christ*" (Gal 2:16). The observances of the Law were no longer what identified God's People: acceptance of Christ was. Paul observed the practices of the Law when among Jews, but only as devout customs. They were not the identifying mark of God's People and they did not generate holiness (righteousness) in anyone. They did not connect us to God – only Christ did that – and there was no reason to separate from believers who do not observe the Law of Moses.

### **"Then What About Sin?"**

First-century Jews were taught that the way to deal with sin is to offer a sacrifice in the Temple. But to do that, a person had to be ritually pure (eat only kosher food, not mix with Gentiles, etc.). So if Christ's followers did not keep the Law, how could they offer sacrifice and be free of sin?

Paul's response seems odd to us. When Christians sin, he seems to say, it is not because they are followers of Christ. But – and here is his point – if I try to go back to the Law I am bypassing Christ and in that "*I make myself a transgressor*" (Gal 2:18). And here St. Paul is certainly speaking of his own experience: "*I died to the Law that I might live to God*" (v.19).

He had given up his allegiance to the Law of Moses once he realized that the only true Source of divine life was Christ. To go back to the Law would be to deny Christ.

Many Jews today observe these laws in order to hasten the Messiah's coming. St Paul would have something to say on this.

## **Consequence: Union with Christ**

The first-century controversy over the place of the Law in Christian life would only be of historical interest today except that it prompted St. Paul to think through the issue with a result that touches our faith today.

The result of his thinking is found in the next verse: *“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”* (Gal 2:20). St. Paul teaches, here and elsewhere, that the Christian has an *organic* union with Christ: *“Christ lives in me.”*

St. Paul was not promoting a sentimental idea of being emotionally close. He was insisting that the believer and Christ were really one. In Romans, 1 Corinthians and Ephesians he would use the image of the body to stress this organic union we have with the Lord and, as a result, with one another. In Colossians, he teaches that, because of this union, we can legitimately hope for eternal union with God: *“To [the believers] God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory”* (Col 1:27).

## **A Union Formed at Baptism**

Later in the Epistle to the Galatians St. Paul would provide the Church with an understanding of how the Christian becomes one with Christ. *“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ”* (Gal 3:26-27). With these words – which we sing at every baptism – St Paul describes the beginnings of this union in images we make concrete at every baptism: immersion (baptism) and “putting on” the baptismal garment.

In Gal 2:20 we saw St Paul say *“I have been crucified with Christ.”* When we read his Epistle to the Romans we see when that happened for him (and for each of us): *“do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life”* (Rom 6:3).

St Paul understood that, with our immersion into the water of baptism, we are joined to Christ who died and was buried for us. We are joined to His resurrection by the way we live.

St Paul spoke of having *“the Mind of Christ”* (1 Cor 2:16), viewing all things the way Christ would. And he was not alone. We find the same idea in 1 Peter 4:1,2: *“Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, that we no longer should live the rest of our time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.”*

And so what matters for us, according to the apostles, is:

- 1 – That we are united to Christ, having been joined to Him through baptism;
- 2 – That we are called to reflect that union in the way we live; and
- 3 – That doing so connects us to God both in this life and after death.

## **Twenty Second Sunday after Pentecost**

### **“Nice” Is Not Enough (Gal 6:11-18)**

IN OCTOBER, 1936 THE COVER of *The Saturday Evening Post* displayed a drawing by Leslie Thrasher depicting a Friendly Neighborhood Butcher and a Sweet Old Lady weighing her purchase at the butcher shop. The Friendly Butcher and the Sweet Lady were each trying to tip the scale in their own favor! The point was clear: no matter how Friendly or how Sweet, each of us is touched by the desire to put ourselves first, ahead of the next person. Even People Like Us, no matter how Nice we may be, are all subject to the dictates of our fallen nature leading us to sin.

### **The Old Creation**

The Biblical vision of creation is found in many books of the Old Testament: the Psalms, the Wisdom literature and, most extensively, in the book of Genesis. In this view there are two dynamics at work: God’s and man’s. God’s all-embracing love seeks to share existence, to share something of Himself as much as possible. God, the One who truly is, shares His being simply that other things might be. The Wisdom of Solomon summarizes this teaching: *“For he created all things that they might be: and he made the nations of the earth for health: and there is no poison of destruction in them, nor kingdom of hell upon the earth”* (1:14).

Of all the things that share God’s existence, one – humanity – comes closest to reflecting the Creator. The Book of Genesis teaches that mankind was created to mirror God: *“God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them”* (Gen 1:27).

Human beings alone were created in the image of God. There is a part of the human person that is literally not of this world. Human beings are possessed of an intrinsic worth which is unique in creation. But, as we know, the story doesn’t end there.

From the beginning mankind’s relationship with God has been characterized by disobedience. Our relationships with one another have been marked by entrapments, recriminations and murder. Eve entices Adam, Adam blames Eve, Cain kills Abel and on it goes. The result is that the human race, created in God’s image, is bound by sin and subject to death and corruption. Adam drank the *“poison of destruction”* and all are ill as a result.

### **The New Creation**

The New Testament speaks of a “new creation,” creation made new in Christ. Christ’s relationship with His Father is described as one of obedience, in contrast to Adam’s

disobedience. He is the new Adam who is not bound by sin. He voluntarily takes up the cross but is no longer subject to death or corruption. He changes the experience of death in Himself.

On Holy and Great Saturday the vesper hymns describes this from the viewpoint of Death itself! *“Today Hades groans: ‘My power has vanished. I received One who died as mortals die, but I could not hold Him. With Him and through Him, I lost those over which I had ruled. I had held control over the dead since the world began; and lo, He raises them all up with Him!’ O Lord, glory to Your Cross and to Your holy Resurrection!”*

The Church Fathers would teach that whatever Christ touched was transformed. As St. Gregory of Nyssa would say, Christ healed the effects of the fall of humankind in the same way as He healed the sick in his earthly ministry – simply by His touch.

Christ “touched” the human race by becoming man. He began the transformation of humanity into the new creation which St Paul proclaims has come: *“If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!”* (2 Cor 5:17).

In terms of God’s People this “new creation” meant to St Paul that the old division between Jews and Gentiles, between circumcised and uncircumcised no longer mattered. Belonging was no longer about being of this or that race, nation, clan or family. What mattered was Christ and being *“in Him.”* Some sociologists think that this approach accounted for many Greeks and Romans joining the Church in its earliest days. Many of them had been sympathetic to Judaism and embraced its monotheistic faith, but did not join the Jewish community because that would require that they sever relations with their families. They would not be able to eat with uncircumcised people, for example. But, according to Paul and the Church which espoused his teachings, *“Neither circumcision nor un-circumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation”* (Gal 6:16).

### **Touching Christ**

By becoming human Christ touched the human race and made it possible for us to be part of the new creation. As individuals, the first step in our transformation is an *organic* one: being physically joined to Christ in His Body, the Church. We first “touch” Christ by being buried and rising with Him in Baptism. Hence St Paul – and the Church ever since – proclaimed: *“All of you who have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ”* (Gal 3:27).

In his *Great Catechism* St Gregory says that, as baptism is to the soul, so the Eucharist is to the body. In baptism, Christ “transforms what is born with a corruptible nature into a state of incorruption” (*Great Catechism* 33 [84]). In the Eucharist, Christ “disseminates himself in every believer through that flesh, whose substance comes from bread and wine, blending Himself with the bodies of believers, to secure that, by this union with the immortal, man, too, may be a sharer in incorruption.” Our bodies are touched by the transforming presence of Christ.

. With the likeness to God in us restored through Christ, we are enabled to continue our transformation by addressing the deficiencies in our likeness to God through the ongoing *conscious* step of imitating Christ in our way of life. “We recognize both the true and the apparent Christian by what they reveal in their actions,” Gregory writes. “The characteristics of

the true Christian are the same we apply to Christ. We imitate those characteristics we are able to assume, while we venerate and worship what our nature cannot imitate” (*On Perfection*).

God’s nature is infinitely removed from ours, but – as St Gregory teaches - it is possible for us to use Christ’s human life as a model for our own. Becoming like God as revealed in Christ does not happen instantaneously; it begins in us by fits and starts. If we persevere, we continue in this process through the rest of our life. Living “in Christ” gradually becomes second nature. Even then this journey is not over. For St Gregory the process of perfection is unending: “This is the real meaning of ‘seeing God:’ never to have this desire completely satisfied”.

Adam and Christ stand for two different ways of being human (1 Cor 15:45, 49). From Adam we inherit our physical life: we bear “*the image of the man of dust*” In the new creation we “*shall bear the image of the heavenly Man,*” Christ risen from the dead.

### **Twenty Third Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **The Walls of Separation (Eph 2:4-10)**

Elsewhere we are told that one example of the healing brought about by Christ’s death and resurrection is that the dividing wall of separation, which had set the Jews as God’s People apart from the Gentiles (see Ephesians 2:13-14), has been demolished. Now all who are united to Christ through baptism are one in and with Him, whatever their background. And so the great sign put forth here of living the new life in Christ is the way we accept everyone on the basis of their baptism, not because they are of this nationality or social status, but because “*Christ is all in all*” (v. 11).

Christians have become increasingly aware of the walls separating peoples in the name of God. The walls constructed between Catholics of various Churches or ethnic origins have largely been dismantled. In the early twentieth century Christians began looking at other Christians, not as enemies to be defeated but as brethren to be embraced and the ecumenical movement was born. Some of these contacts – such as between Catholics, both Eastern and Oriental Orthodox or the Church of the East – have borne fruit. Dialogues with Protestants, which at first seemed more productive, have been largely derailed over issues of theological and moral relativism. And while there are still Christians who avoid any contacts with members of other Churches or communities, others have come to value what possibilities do exist for common witness, especially in secular or anti-Christian environments.

While not based on any common faith in Christ, dialogues have developed with non-Christians as well. Encounters between Christians and Jews have been more cautious and easily stalled over questions of anti-Semitism and support for Israel. Interaction between Christians and Muslims has been overshadowed to a great degree by the anti-Christian activities of certain Islamic fundamentalists who see Western political intervention in the affairs of their countries as signs of

Christian imperialism. Yet even here, people of good will can chip away at some walls of separation. In the wake of the New Year's Day bombing at a Coptic Orthodox church in Alexandria, prominent Muslims, including arts and entertainment figures and the two sons of President Husni Mubarak, attended Coptic Christmas services. Millions of Egyptians changed their Facebook profile pictures to the image of a cross within a crescent, symbolizing "One Egypt for All". Around the city, banners went up calling for unity, depicting mosques and churches, crosses and crescents, together as one.

Through repentance, then, we continue to be healed today. When we put to death the old man in us we come to cherish the new life we have been given and to see in others that, known or unknown to them Christ is in them as their Source and final end.

### **Twenty Fourth Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **Christ the Chief Cornerstone (Eph 2:14-22)**

THE CHURCH, IN THE TEACHING OF ST. PAUL, IS "*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone,*" (Ephesians 2:20). What seems wrong with his image?

In our experience a cornerstone is an ornamental piece, inscribed with the name of the building, the date of construction, perhaps the names of those responsible for it. A cornerstone may have images carved on it or adhering to it. It may have holy relics or other artifacts encased within it. It may be beautiful, but it is strictly ornamental. If that is what St. Paul is implying, then Christ is an ornament of the Church rather than the reason for its existence.

In classical architecture, however, the term we translate as "cornerstone" had a very different meaning. A cornerstone (or foundation stone) was the first stone set in the construction of a masonry foundation. It might not even be visible above ground, but it was all-important to the construction of the building. All other stones in the foundation would be set in reference to this one, determining the position of the entire structure.

This type of cornerstone gives meaning to St. Paul's image. The building is set upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. But the foundation is set upon the very basis of the entire structure, the foundation stone or cornerstone, who is Christ.

#### **Who Are the Apostles and the Prophets?**

Different commentators have identified these figures in different ways. While all agree that the apostles are, first of all, Peter and Paul with the rest of the Twelve, the Eastern Churches also include the four Evangelists and the seventy disciples who first preached the resurrection to the world. It is their message – whether oral or written (the New Testament) – on which the community of believers rests.

Some have said that “prophets” here refers to the great persons and events of the Old Testament in which we find the prophecies of the coming Messiah. Others have identified the prophets with those charismatic figures of the Church who have manifested the continuing presence of Christ in His Church by the gifts of the Spirit which they have received.

In either case, the image is true: the Church rests upon the witness of those who have known the mystery of God’s plan in the Old Testament, the New Testament and the life of the Church – all of which rest upon the foundation stone, Jesus Christ.

### **A Stone Rejected**

The Lord Himself used the image of the cornerstone when alluding to His own role in the plan of God. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all report that on the eve of His passion Jesus quoted Psalm 118:22-23. “*Have you never read in the Scriptures,*” He asked, ““*The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the LORD’s doing and it is marvelous in our eyes*”” (Mt 21:42). From its earliest days the Church saw this psalm verse as a prophecy of Christ – He is the Stone rejected by the builders (the leaders of Israel) whom God chose to be the very foundation of His new people, the Church.

Builders would reject a stone for several reasons: it was misshapen, it was flawed, or it was just too unattractive for the work at hand. This image of the rejected stone calls to mind a similar image in the prophecy of Isaiah which we have come to describe as the Suffering Servant: “... *there were many who were appalled at him – his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness*” (Is 52:14). “*He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.*” (Is 53:7-9).

The rejected stone would be restored; his suffering was not the last word. Isaiah tells us: “*See, my servant will prosper; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted*” (Is 52:13). Both Isaiah’s prophecy and the psalm’s image of the chief cornerstone, rejected and exalted would be proclaimed by the first Christians as indicators of Christ’s voluntary passion and resurrection.

### **The Foundation Stone in Jerusalem**

Visitors to Jerusalem cannot but be impressed by the Dome of the Rock, an elaborately tiled Islamic shrine at the heart of the Old City. It is as its name suggests a dome erected over a rock, in this case what is believed to be the foundation stone of the ancient Jewish temple of Jerusalem. This stone is considered the holiest site in Judaism, the spiritual junction of Heaven and Earth. Jews traditionally face it while praying, in the belief that the Holy of Holies in the Temple was built over this rock. After the Islamic conquest in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, the conquerors built the dome over this shrine.

Curiously enough, the dome erected over this rock is inscribed to Jesus – proclaiming Him as God’s “prophet and servant, Jesus the Son of Mary.” Thus the site believed by Jews to be the foundation stone of the temple is dedicated – by Muslims – to Christ, the living stone, whose sacrifice offered in Jerusalem is the eternal oblation which includes and surpasses all the oblations of the Old Testament.

### **Christ the Living Stone**

Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord *is* gracious.

Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, “Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious; and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame.” (Is 28:16) Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone,” and “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense” (Is 8:14). They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed.

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light: you who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.      *(1 Peter 2: 1-10)*

### **From Tabernacle to Living Temple (Ephesians 2:19-22)**

THE IMAGERY OF THE TEMPLE runs through the Scriptures and the Church’s Tradition, especially in the Christian East. Several of those images are presented to us during these days, offering us the opportunity to reflect on the Temple in the thought of our Church.

#### **God Dwells among the Israelites**

The first temple described in the Old Testament was not a temple-building. It was the tabernacle or portable shrine set up by Moses in the wilderness (c. fourteenth century BC).

In its fullest form the tabernacle consisted of a large tent, called the Holy of Holies because it contained the Ark of the Covenant which held the tablets of the Law given by God to Moses. In front of the Holy of Holies stood an altar for burnt offerings and a laver in which the priests washed their hands and feet before offering a sacrifice. The courtyard in which these objects stood was surrounded by curtains mounted on poles.

#### **God Dwells in Jerusalem**

When King David conquered Jerusalem and established his capital there (c. 1000 BC), he had the Ark brought to the city (see 1 Chron 15). King David wanted to build a permanent temple for God in Jerusalem but God did not permit it, as David reported to his people: “*Hear me, my brethren and my people: I had it in my heart to build a house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and for the footstool of our God, and had made preparations to build it. But God said to me, ‘You shall not build a house for My name, because you have been a man of war and have shed blood’*” (1 Chron 28:3). Instead it was left to David’s son, Solomon, to build the temple of Jerusalem.

In 962 BC, a time of peace in the region, King Solomon began the construction of the Temple on a site chosen by his father. David’s site, Mount Moriah, was the place where Abraham had once prepared to offer up his only son in obedience to God (see Gen 22). Seven years later Solomon dedicated the completed temple and had the Ark of the Covenant brought into its Holy of Holies.

Solomon’s temple is described in some detail in the Epistle to the Hebrews: “*Then indeed, even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary. For a tabernacle was prepared: the first part, in which was the lampstand, the table, and the showbread, which is called the sanctuary and behind the second veil... the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holy of Holies, which had the golden censer and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which were the golden pot that had the manna, Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; and above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat*” (Heb 9:1-5).

The temple signified Israel’s continuing communion with God, expressed in its round of daily and festal sacrifices. “*...the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people’s transgressions*” (Heb 9:6-7). Solomon also provided a place in the temple for non-Jews, the Court of the Gentiles, “*that all peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear You, as do Your people Israel, and that they may know that this temple which I have built is called by Your name*” (1 Kgs 8:43).

The temple remained the center and heart of Israel for the next three centuries, even though the rulers and people frequently strayed from faithfulness to their God. Finally in 586 BC Jerusalem was overrun by the Babylonians. The Jews were deported, the temple was destroyed and all its treasures taken off to Babylon, never to return.

## **The Second Temple**

After fifty years in captivity the Jews were freed by the Persians who conquered Babylon. Many returned to Jerusalem and in time rebuilt the temple. The second temple was completed in 349 BC and became the center of restored Jewish life. While the Jews were back in Jerusalem, they were not politically independent so the temple became the sole embodiment of Jewish identity. But since the Ark and other God-ordained vessels had disappeared, the Holy of Holies was left empty. As a result several Jewish groups, like the Essenes, refused to acknowledge the second temple without the “real presence” of the Ark.

King Herod the Great renovated and enlarged the second temple in AD 19, covering the façade of the Holy of Holies with gold and white marble. He also added a great plaza around the temple to accommodate the vast number of pilgrims who celebrated the Passover and other feasts in Jerusalem.

The football-stadium sized temple with its courtyards and outbuildings could not fail to impress visitors, including the Galilean fishermen and tradespeople who accompanied Jesus. *“As [Jesus] went out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, ‘Teacher, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here!’ And Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another that shall not be thrown down”* (Mk 13:1-2).

### **Living Temples**

Before the Jerusalem temple was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, it had been eclipsed as God’s dwelling place on earth by the incarnation of the Word. Christ is the new and living temple of God on earth. As He told the Pharisees who criticized Him for healing on the Sabbath, *“One greater than the temple is here”* (Mt 12:6). Through Christ God has communicated Himself to mankind and also through Christ we can reach out to God as our heavenly Father.

In that the Theotokos was the dwelling place of Christ in her womb, the Church also calls her the temple of God. This image is employed particularly on the feast of the Entrance of the Theotokos (November 21). In the words of the kondakion, *“The most pure temple of the Savior, the precious bridal chamber and Virgin, the sacred treasury of God, enters today into the house of the Lord, bringing with her the grace of the divine Spirit.”*

The Church itself, in that it is the Body of Christ, is His dwelling place on earth. As St Paul told his Gentile followers in Ephesus, *“you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit”* (Eph 2:19-22).

Finally our church building is an icon proclaiming that Christ, incarnate of the Virgin and the Head of His Body, the Church, is for us what the temple of Jerusalem once was for Jews. The pot of manna is fulfilled by the Eucharist, the Torah scroll by the Gospel Book and the rod of Aaron by the cross. The cherubim, the menorah and the censer now flank the Holy Table instead of the Ark. The impenetrable temple veil is now made transparent by the icons and we come in and go out freely, as children of the Father and priests of the New Covenant.

### **Twenty Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **Being in the One Body (Eph 4:1-6)**

“THERE IS ONE BODY AND ONE SPIRIT, ... one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all...” (Eph 4:3-6). St Paul insists here on the unity required of Christians because they all share alike in the one Body, the one Spirit, etc. How could there be division when the Body of Christ is one?

This is a question which has plagued the Church since its earliest days. It first surfaced as a problem for Church order in third-century Carthage (near Tunis today), capital of the Roman Exarchate of Africa. After some 40 years of peace a new emperor, Decius, began persecuting Christians anew in AD 250. Most Christians in Carthage offered sacrifices to the gods of the state out of fear for their lives, and others bought fraudulent testimonials that they had offered sacrifices, although they had not done so. When peace returned in AD 251, some sought to reconcile all those who returned immediately; others demanded signs of repentance over a lengthy waiting period.

### **How Is a Divided Church “One”?**

Rival groups, not in communion with each other, were formed over the issue. Then the question arose, “What is that other group? Is it the Church? Do its sacraments have the grace of God?” St Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage, said “No” – they are outside the Church. He wrote, “For if they shall see that it is determined and decreed by our judgment and sentence, that the baptism with which they are there baptized is considered just and legitimately in possession of the Church also, and the other gifts of the Church; nor will there be any reason for their coming to us, when, as they have baptism, they seem also to have the rest.” Accordingly St Cyprian insisted that those coming to the Church from one of these splinter groups be rebaptized.

St Stephen, the Pope of Rome, had a different approach. He espoused the teaching of St Augustine that “the Holy and Sanctifying Spirit still breathes in the sects, but in the stubbornness and powerlessness of schism healing is not accomplished.” And so, he insisted, heretics should be reconciled by the laying on of hands, not baptism. At first Stephen insisted that the Roman position was normative; after Stephen’s death, his successor, Pope Sixtus II let the matter drop.

### **The Church Re-examined**

Several events in recent history contributed to the Churches revisiting the question of Church unity. The twentieth century Russian Orthodox theologian, Fr. Georges Florovsky, was the first to propose a new middle ground. “It is impossible to state or discern the true limits of the Church simply by canonical signs or marks,” he wrote. “In her sacramental, mysterious existence the Church surpasses canonical measurements. For that reason a canonical cleavage does not immediately signify mystical impoverishment and desolation. All that Saint Cyprian said about the unity of the Church and the sacraments can be and must be accepted. But it is not necessary, as he did, to draw the final boundary around the body of the Church by canonical points alone.”

Vatican II marked a new appreciation of other Christians. In their discussion of the Church the council fathers employed a new term to restate the Augustinian position: “The one Church of Christ ... *subsists* in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him, although many elements of sanctification and of truth are

found outside of its visible structure. These elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward catholic unity. (*Lumen Gentium*, 1: 12, 13). To “subsist” means to “be,” to “have existence” and so the fathers taught that the Catholic Church is where the one Church of Christ is to be found. Yet, they said, many elements of sanctification and truth” are found outside it.

The chief ecumenical experience of the bishops at Vatican II was with the various Protestant denominations. Clearly the above statement refers to that context. Most Protestants, for example, have baptism. Not all, however, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. All Protestants have marriage but not many consider marriage a sacrament.

When formal dialogs began with the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches, the explanation in *Lumen Gentium* proved inadequate. The International Orthodox-Catholic Theological Dialogue issued this statement instead: “Catholics and Orthodox once again consider each other in their relationship to the mystery of the Church and discover each other once again as Sister Churches. ... On each side it is recognized that what Christ has entrusted to his Church – profession of Apostolic faith, participation in the same sacraments, above all the one priesthood celebrating the one sacrifice of Christ, the apostolic succession of bishops – cannot be considered the exclusive property of one of our Churches.

“It is in this perspective that the Catholic Churches and the Orthodox Churches recognize each other as Sister Churches, responsible together for maintaining the Church of God in fidelity to the divine purpose, most especially in what concerns unity” (Balamand 12-14).

Thus the mystery of the Church “subsists” in each of the historic, Apostolic Churches in relationship to one another in a communion of love. While some “elements of sanctification and truth” are found in Protestant denominations, the mystery of the Church subsists fully in the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. The reason for the difference is that during the Reformation all Protestant groups rejected one or another of the sacramental building blocks of the Church such as the Eucharist, Confession, and the priesthood.

St Paul insisted that we are meant to remain one. The experience of the past century shows us that we must work to restore our fractured unity as well. Fraternal respect, cooperation in confronting secularism, and respectful study of one another’s beliefs have replaced anathemas in Church life.

### **The Sister Churches**

Currently there are four communions of Apostolic Churches: Churches which have existed since the beginning of Christian history and which share the same basic faith despite a multiplicity of expressions. They are:

***The Catholic Communion*** – comprising the Roman (Western) Catholic Church and the various Eastern Catholic Churches.

***The Eastern Orthodox Communion*** – the various Byzantine Orthodox local Churches (Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Cyprus, Russia, Rumania, etc.) They look to the seven ecumenical councils we celebrate in our liturgical year.

***The Oriental Orthodox Communion*** – the Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Indian and Syriac Orthodox Churches. They recognize only the first three ecumenical councils.

***The Church of the East*** (Assyro-Chaldean) – the Church of the ancient Persian Empire.

In the last 60 years Rome has issued agreed statements with each of these communions to affirm a common faith in the fundamentals of Christian belief.

### **Striving for Parish Unity in the Church**

EVERY CALLING HAS A CODE of conduct – written or unwritten – which sets out the principles for functioning ethically in that vocation. Some professional standards set limits to govern the practitioner’s exercise of his or her craft while others outline directions or indicate ideals to which the professional should aspire.

As Christians we have general standards of behavior, such as the Ten Commandments, and standards of belief, such as the Nicene Creed. We also have particular norms for believers in specific circumstances, such as clergy or spouses. In the Epistle to the Ephesians St Paul indicates a basic norm for a Christian community: the first rule for living as Church. To be “*worthy of the calling with which you were called*” (Eph 4:1), a Christian group must “*endeavor to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*” (Eph 4:3).

#### **Mutual Submission**

Preserving this unity takes work – we must “endeavor” or strive to attain this goal. It cannot simply be assumed. People are often astonished to find that someone has left their congregation. After all, we stood or knelt together, we lined up for the Eucharist or to kiss the cross together. We were one – weren’t we?

Communal practices – ritual gestures, using offering envelopes or pledging in fundraising campaigns do afford us a measure of unity, but while people may be united in these practices they may be divided in other fundamental ways.

St Paul (writing before there were pledge cards or parish newsletters) indicates that the quality of the interpersonal relationships in a community is the first basis for its unity. If I sense that you ignore me or look down on me, will I want to exchange signs of communion with you? Kissing

an icon or worshipping at the Liturgy express our vertical relationships in the Church – to God or the saints – but living in the Body of Christ involves horizontal relationships as well – to fellow parishioners, those in our eparchy and in the wider Church.

Horizontal relationships in a Christian community, Paul writes, should be characterized by two main qualities: humility and long-suffering. Humility in this sense is expressed in “*lowliness and gentleness*” (Eph 4:2), a virtue continually acclaimed in the New Testament. In the Cantic of the Theotokos (Lk 1:46-56), sung daily at orthros, God is extolled for “*regarding the lowliness of His handmaiden*” (v. 48) and praised as the One who “*puts down the mighty from their thrones and exalts the lowly*” (v. 52).

Christ Himself confronted the relationships of believers in Israel. He criticized the Pharisees for loving “*the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues*” (Mt 23:6) and counseled guests to take the last place rather than the first before the host gives their place to another. When we are tempted to seek preferential treatment or control of even small things in Church, we might well reflect on these passages.

Long term relationships in a parish also demands that we be “*long-suffering, bearing with one another in love*” (Eph 4:3). Some people are simply not going to change. They cannot or will not see that their behavior might offend others. We must simply bear with them if we value unity with them, “warts and all.”

### **Diversity in Unity**

Paul goes on to say that those who strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the Church do well to recognize and respect the variety and purpose of the Spirit’s gifts in the Church. In Eph 4: 11 he indicates that there are various levels of leadership such as apostles, pastors and teachers. They have these gifts, not to occupy the best places at feasts, but “*for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry*” (Eph 4:12).

There have always been a number of ministries in our Church exercised by laypeople: in worship (as chanters and readers), in education (as teachers of children and youth), in the arts (as builders and iconographers) and in administration (on community and administrative councils). In times when the clergy may have been the only literate members of the community they often exercised these ministries as well as those proper to their orders. However in our world today this is no longer appropriate. With sufficient training Church members are capable of exercising all these traditional ministries as well as modern ones such as parish web masters. Ignoring the gifts of parishioners is another way to destroy people’s commitment to their Church.

It is the role of the clergy, according to St. Paul, to see that their believers are afforded the training necessary for service. Ministry of one form or another is the calling of all the faithful, but responsible exercise of ministry presumes that the faithful are willing to be trained and that the pastors and teachers provide the necessary training.

In some cases local clergy can personally “equip the saints” in their parish for works of ministry. A pastor or deacon, for example, may train young men to serve at the altar. They may engage the services of an experienced chanter to train people in church singing or an effective youth worker to train others in this work. In other cases it is the wider circle of “pastors and teachers” – the bishop and his presbyters – who are called to provide more specialized training, equipping people to be clergy or catechists in local parishes. The emergence of on-line courses from seminaries and diocesan ministries can make distance learning an option for training in these roles.

True unity in the local Church as envisioned in this epistle presumes that “the saints” do what is necessary to assume the service to which they are called. It also demands that they respect the gifts and ministries given to others. Higher clergy should not infringe on the roles of one another; rather they should provide the training necessary to improve the quality of their service. Professional teachers build unity, not by boycotting the classes of inexperienced catechists, but by offering their services as master teachers.

Twice at each Divine Liturgy the priest prays that the holy gifts be given to us “*for the communion of the Holy Spirit.*” By coming forward to share in the Eucharist we are expressing our desire to deepen our communion with God, but also with one another. We are echoing the priest’s prayer in the Liturgy of St Basil, “*Unite all of us who share the one Bread and the one Cup to one another in the communion of the Holy Spirit.*” By the mutual respect we show one another and by our commitment to serve the Church in ministry we back up our prayer with action.

## **Twenty Sixth Sunday after Pentecost**

### **Walking in the Light (Eph 5:8b-19)**

CONTRASTING OPPOSITES WAS a popular rhetorical device during the time of St Paul. The Lord Himself used the method, usually contrasting concrete things such as new wine and old wineskins or the plank in one’s own eye vs. the speck in one’s brother’s eye. He pointed to those who would be first vs. those who would be last in the Kingdom of God. “*Many are called but few are chosen*” He noted, and this became a kind of refrain commenting on Gospel incidents (e.g. Mt 20:16).

When St. Paul wrote to communities where believing Jews and their converts often tended to maintain their allegiance to the Law while accepting Christ as the Messiah, he focused on the contrast between those who found their salvation in keeping the Torah (Law) and those who

found it by believing in Christ. But Christ alone, Paul insisted, is the source of our salvation and only through faith are we joined with Him.

Not having to keep the Law made some people think that they could do whatever they wanted. Paul responded with another contrast: that between flesh and spirit. “*The Law is fulfilled in this one word, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’*” (Gal 5:14), he affirmed. Our fallen passions – the flesh – push us to abuse our neighbor instead through sexual immorality, hatred, selfish ambitions and the like. But living in the Spirit produces love, joy, peace and the other characteristics St Paul calls “*the fruit of the Spirit*” (Gal 5:22-23).

### **Darkness and Light in St. Paul**

When Paul writes to the Ephesians he speaks of darkness and light to contrast a life lived in ignorance of God vs. a life illumined by the knowledge of God. When people are “*alienated from the life of God*” they walk “*in the futility of their minds*” (Eph 4:17-18) like pagans. Separated from God, they try to figure things out on their own and that inevitably leads to disaster: epitomized, in Paul’s words, by lewdness and every kind of excess.

St. Paul included idolatry as another example of our futile self-determination. Of course, actual idolatry was practiced in the ancient world for centuries, dying out in some places only in the fifth or sixth century. But St John Chrysostom, commenting on this passage, said that, for those who claim to worship Christ, idolatry may mean something else. Giving service to our passions, he argued, is actually worship of Venus, the goddess of love; allowing wrath to absorb us is actually worship of Mars, the god of war. You more truly worship by your deeds and practices than by your rituals, he insisted, and this is the higher kind of worship! (Homily 18 on Ephesians).

St Paul has been criticized for singling out sexual immorality as the height of godlessness. Paul, they say, saw licentiousness as the gravest sin, worse than any other. Note, however, that Paul only starts by focusing on promiscuity. He then goes on to include all kinds of behavior which, he teaches, are equally incompatible with the life in Christ. He names untruthful speech, unresolved anger, theft, and unseemly language as signs of – and here he introduces another contrast – the old man (vs. the new man created according to God).

It is perhaps the moralizing of some Christians in earlier days rather than St. Paul which is responsible for our ignoring unresolved anger or lack of mutual love while focusing of sexual morality. It may be argued, however, that, our sexual failings are, in fact, weathervanes indicating our need for self-satisfaction at all costs.

Nowhere is this more obvious than in the Church when lust and greed drive its members, including their leaders, to turn their backs on the light. Then we see the chilling force of Christ’s own words, “*If the light that is in you is darkness, how great must it be*” (Mt 6:23).

## **Christ as Light in St John**

The contrast of light and darkness here concerns our ethical behavior; elsewhere in the New Testament this imagery suggests something more. In the First Epistle of St John we read, “*This is the message which we have heard from Him [Christ] and declare to you: that God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all*” (1 Jn 1:5). There is something about God’s very being that can be described as light.

Later in the same epistle we are told that “*God is love*” (1 Jn 4:8). The Fathers came to see this love as the expression of the eternal relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and, by extension, between the Trinity and all creation, particularly mankind. In a similar way they came to see light as the expression of God’s holiness, especially in the flesh of the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, with His holy transfiguration on Mt. Tabor as the preeminent experience of that light in His flesh.

## **Baptism as Illumination**

The Fathers regularly spoke of baptism as the mystery of illumination whereby we are filled with the light of Christ. In *The Life in Christ* St. Nicholas Cabasilas writes, quoting St. John Chrysostom, “From our baptism, our soul, purified by the Spirit, is more resplendent than the sun. Not only do we contemplate the glory of God, but we receive again its luster. Just as pure silver, when exposed to its rays, completely sparkles – not only by its own nature but due to the brightness of the sun – so the soul, purified by baptism, is made brighter than silver, receiving from the Spirit the ray of glory such as to possess a proper brilliance such as only the Spirit can communicate. . . . That which Moses bore on his forehead, the saints bore in the depths of their souls, but with far more brilliance. . . .”

## **The Taboric Light**

This baptismal radiance is so commonly obscured in us by our subsequent acts of sin and neglect that we see Cabasilas’ words as hyperbole, exaggeration. Yet it is this very light which iconographers seek to portray by depicting haloes in the icons of the saints.

In addition we have numerous examples of a tangible light – called the Taboric light, in other words, the light experienced on Mt. Tabor – not only in the souls of certain saints, reflecting their union with Christ the Light, but in their bodies as well. Perhaps the most famous of them is St. Seraphim of Sarov, whose disciple, Nicholas Motovilov, described the event in detail.

The recognized saints of the Church are not the only ones to reflect this light. The twentieth-century Romanian elder, Fr Dumitru Bejan tells how in the late 1960s he saw, unobserved, two old monks who always stayed behind in church after Matins. “After everyone had left they would lie outstretched on the floor of the church in the form of the Cross and begin to pray with tears to the Savior, asking for mercy, forgiveness, and absolution of sins. . . .As Fr Dumitru

watched them pray, to his amazement he saw a translucent flame of light rise and intensify over their heads. Seeing this flame of the grace of the Holy Spirit manifest, Fr Dumitru fell to his knees and joined the two elders in prayer” (Balan, *Shepherd of Souls*, p. 140-141).

## **Twenty Seventh Sunday after Pentecost**

### **The True *Jihad* (Eph 6:10-17)**

ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISTS HAVE MADE the term *jihad* (struggle) a militant concept in our contemporary world. Their idea of struggling is contending to submit the world to God (as they understand Him).

The idea of a spiritual struggle long predates Islam, however. In the Epistle to the Ephesians St. Paul uses very martial terms to describe the struggle a Christian should expect to face. Fundamentalist warfare – whether Islamic, Leninist, Maoist, Crusader or any other ideology – seeks to change the face of the world usually with violence. Christians seek to “*fight the good fight*” (2 Tim 4:7), to be sure, but it has nothing to do with the external conquests and exploits. The Scriptural idea of spiritual warfare refers to the inner struggles of the Christian seeking to make his or her own the newness of life (cf. Romans 6:4), as realized in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

### **A New Creation**

A number of Church Fathers over the centuries urged Christians to “become what you are” or to “be what you have become.” In baptism, they affirm, we have been made anew. We are a “*new creation*” as St. Paul insists (2 Cor 5:17), brought through baptism into the new life of sharing in the divine nature. The imagery of baptism repeatedly illustrates this: we die and are raised to life, we are reborn in the womb of the Holy Spirit, we strip off the old man and are clothed anew in Christ. We are victorious in Christ, but we are still struggling in a spiritual warfare, seeking the defeat in our own lives of the enemy whom Christ has conquered.

Once more St. Paul helps us understand the terms of our struggle. “*If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things of the earth*” (Col 3:1-2). “Things of the earth” in this passage has been explained to mean anything that distracts our minds or steals our hearts from the communion with God of which we are possible. The spiritual life aims to help us reintegrate these dimensions of our makeup in an order that reflects the new creation.

Our fractured nature does not easily adapt to this new reality. While our spirit may be united to Christ through this mystery, our soul and body find it much easier to be attached to the earth. Physically and psychically we are “of the earth.” Our bodies are drawn to bodily pleasure and convenience. Our minds and wills are drawn to satisfying our ego. The spiritual warfare in which we are to engage is the attempt to liberate these aspects of our nature from the world and live them in a way that is harmonious with our baptismal union with Christ.

## **Engaging in This Unseen Warfare**

St Paul uses two images to describe the spiritual warfare. One is military – the “*armor of God*” (Eph 6:11); the other is athletic. “*For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood,*” he writes, “*against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age...*” (v. 12). The aim of wrestling is to keep standing against the assaults of the foe. Wrestlers use different offensive and defensive maneuvers in their combat. What “maneuvers” does the Christian athlete have to assist in the struggle?

An important offensive move in this struggle is fasting, simply because the temptation to self-absorption is one of the Enemy’s strongest holds deployed against us. We do not fast because certain foods are bad. There is nothing wrong with eating meat or dairy products. Fasting from them at regular intervals is a kind of tool to help liberate our minds and hearts from so “needing” these things that all our energies may be focused on meeting these false needs.

Each of us knows other things besides food that we feel are indispensable in our life: comfort, entertainment, fashions. A Christian athlete may find the desire to please God be defeated by the desire to accumulate (money, titles, books, jewelry). This is why it is helpful to stand back from these things from time to time, to ask if I really need what I want, or to reflect on what I expect to get out of this outfit or show or trip. I may surprise myself to find that I can survive quite nicely without what I once thought I needed. As the Lord says, we only “need” God – if we focus on Him the rest will be given us (See Mt 6:33).

Another offensive weapon in the spiritual warfare is almsgiving. A person may fast or live simply and find a joy in the money saved, whether it be change in a jar or interest on an IRA. Just as no food is forbidden, neither is wealth. The problem may be in what we do with it. The temptation we need to fight here is that of finding security in possessions. Training ourselves to give things away effectively counters this temptation.

There are always groups and individuals seeking our help. Churches may have particular charities they encourage members to support. There are also hands-on ways of sharing what we have. Every community has its elderly struggling to get by, sometimes sacrificing food to afford medication. In some places people are encouraged to set aside a portion from their family meal for the church freezer, to be given to such people whose needs may not be obvious, but are real nonetheless.

## **When We Are Tempted**

One of the more popular spiritual books in the last few hundred years is called *The Unseen Warfare*. Originally written in the sixteenth century by a Roman Catholic priest, Lorenzo Scupoli, it was translated and adapted extensively in the eighteenth century by the Greek saint Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain and then in the nineteenth century by the Russian ascetic, St. Theophan the Recluse. The book details how people may find themselves in this warfare at different times in their lives. It is available in English in all these versions.

These writers note that when we are tempted to any kind of self-indulgent behavior, a certain dynamic is at work. We need to master the defensive maneuvers required to combat these assaults. In the most common description on this dynamic, temptations begin with:

**A Suggestion** – A thought pops into our mind to buy this, watch that, or respond angrily to someone. In the words of St Theophane the Recluse, *"The enemy has a law—not to begin suddenly with a passion but with a thought, and to repeat the thought often."* We can dismiss it as an idle thought and move on. Or we can hold on to the thought and

**Consider It** – Should I or shouldn't I? What happens if I do this or not? The more we consider a temptation, the more we are likely to agree to it. We can still say "no" but it's getting harder.

**Consent to It** – This is where I become accountable for that thought. This is what the Lord calls sinning in one's heart (see Mt 5:28).

**Become Captive to It** – I decide that this action is acceptable. I do it and justify it in my mind.

**Become Addicted to It** – I do it repeatedly without questioning it because "that's the way I am." The destructive passion has taken control of my life.

In the first two phases I am still in the contest; in the third I am down on the mat. In the fourth and fifth phases the contest is over.

## **Twenty Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

### **Knowing the Will of God (Col 1:12-18)**

MANY OF ST. PAUL'S EPISTLES begin with an introduction combining greetings to the community he is addressing and to individuals he knew in that community. As in the Epistle to the Colossians, the introduction may include prayers of thanksgiving that the Gospel has taken root there as well as prayers of intercession for the members of that local Church. These introductions provide us with models of prayer for our sister Churches and for our own local community as well.

Paul's prayer for the Colossians begins with verse 9 of chapter 1: *"For this reason, we also – since the day we heard it – do not cease to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding."*

What does it mean to be filled with the knowledge of His will? St Paul is not talking here about God's will for one or another individual. Rather he is speaking about the great plan of God for the restoration of creation, for which the Incarnation is the linchpin. To know the will of God is to know the depth of His compassion for His fallen creation: a compassion which does not balk at setting aside for a time the splendor of His rightful place on what Scripture calls *"the throne of the majesty on high"* (Heb 1:3) to come as one of us, sharing our broken human nature. *"For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell and by Him to reconcile all things in*

*Himself by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross” (Col 1:19-20).*

To know the will of God is to know deeply – as a guiding force in our lives – that Christ God and His creation have been brought together again. This is “*the mystery which has been hidden from ages and generations but now has been revealed to His saints: ... Christ in you, the hope of glory*” (Col 1:26-27).

While God’s will is for the restoration of all creation, His will for human beings is that they “*may be partakers of the divine nature*” (2 Pt 1:2) through Jesus Christ, united to God through Him. In the words of St. Ignatius of Antioch and so many others, “God became man so that man might become god.”

### **Knowing That You Are the Church**

St Paul then turns his attention to practical questions concerning the Church. Many people in our society have come to understand “the Church” to mean its leaders, the clergy. Even practicing believers talk about “the Church” when they mean the hierarchy. In effect they place themselves outside the Church when they speak this way, relegating themselves to the status of spectators, clients, or even customers.

The nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard described this kind of church in terms of the ordinary Lutheran worship experience of his day. Kierkegaard said that in church the clergy and the choir are the actors, God is the prompter giving the lines and the people are the audience. In reality, he affirmed, it is the people who are meant to be the actors. The clergy and the choir are the prompters (“Let us pray”) and God is the audience.

That the people of God are the “actors” not the audience points out another dimension to the will of God which we must know: all believers are meant to affirm by their actions their conviction that we are called to union with God. This happens first of all in the liturgical assembly where we are to be more than spectators, “*teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord*” (Col 3:16).

St. Paul’s vision of the Church in this epistle is focused, not on distinctions of rank or function but on mutuality: the Church is one body with Christ as its head (see Col 1:18, 24), a theme developed further in other epistles. In his vision believers are called to bear with one another, forgive one another and pray for one another, thus building up the Church as one body.

Our unity in the one body to which we have been called is first of all experienced in the local parish. As we look around the church at those worshipping with us we find countless opportunities to support, through prayer and interaction, those whom God has placed in our lives. Through prayer for those around us and by the way we relate to one another before or after the

service we can demonstrate that love for our local parish which St Paul calls “*the bond of perfection*” (Col 3:14).

We can extend our support for one another through the week as well. A custom which some have found helpful is to take your parish directory and so divide the list of names that in the course of one month you are praying each day for five or ten of your fellow parishioners. Making such a commitment is one way of responding to St. Paul’s injunction, “*Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving*” (Col 4:2).

### **Praying for the Wider Church**

The Christian family has been likened to a series of concentric circles. Beyond the local community we see the other parishes which make up our eparchy as well as the parishes of other eparchies in the community in which we live. Beyond them we see the other eparchies of our nation or our patriarchate. Praying for several in turn not only benefits them but deepens our feelings of connection to these fellow believers for whom we may pray.

We may be moved to pray in a particular way for the suffering Churches throughout the world. There seem to be few countries in Asia or Africa today where Christians are not in constant danger on account of their faith.

As a result of hardships in their homelands, Eastern Christians have been scattered around the world in search of peace for themselves and their families. In response their Churches have journeyed with them, at first to support them in their time of need, but then to make with them a new frontier of witnesses to their particular traditions. Thus today we find Coptic churches in Australia, Syriac churches in Sweden and Malankara churches in Texas! We do well to pray for these “diaspora churches” that they may prosper as loving witness to the diversity of the apostolic traditions nourished by them for centuries.

When we think of missions we often imagine primitive peoples receiving the Gospel for the first time. There are still peoples all over the world whose Churches are in the early stages of development or whose economic environments compel them to continue seeking the support of more prosperous Christians. Missionary churches form another category of fellow believers in need of our intercession.

## **Twenty Ninth Sunday after Pentecost**

### **Preparing for Glory (Col 3:4-11)**

CHAPTER THREE OF ST PAUL’S EPISTLE to the Colossians begins with this enigmatic statement: “*For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God*” (Col 3:3). The questions it raises are obvious: when did we die and how is our life hidden with Christ?

## **Baptism as Death and Resurrection**

Many Christians, particularly in the Eastern Churches can answer the first question. We died with Christ in baptism. The passage from the Epistle to the Romans read at every baptism in Byzantine churches includes the following teaching, “*Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?*”

*Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life”* (Rom 6:3, 4).

Baptism is our personal union with the death and resurrection of Christ through which the ultimate power of Death was destroyed. At our baptism this burial is graphically represented when we are “buried” (immersed) in the baptismal water. Our resurrection is represented when we are raised up out of the water. What cannot be depicted, of course, is the effect of our baptism: our life in Christ, hidden in God.

The life of the risen Christ is indescribable, but images help us to appreciate what it might mean. In his Catechetical Sermon on the Resurrection St John Chrysostom gives us a glimpse into some aspects of this hidden life. “All of you, enjoy this feast of faith: Receive all the riches of His loving-kindness. Let no one bewail his poverty, for the universal kingdom has been revealed. Let no one weep for his iniquities, for pardon has shown forth from the grave. Let no one fear death, for the Savior’s death has set us free... O Death, where is your sting? O Hell, where is your victory? Christ is risen, and you are overthrown. Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen. Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice. Christ is risen, and life reigns. Christ is risen, and not one of the dead remains in the grave. For Christ, being risen from the dead, has become the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

St John Chrysostom mentions three aspects of resurrection life we have received:

1. *Forgiveness of sins* – “Let no one weep for his iniquities, for pardon has shown forth from the grave.” When we are baptized our sins are forgiven. Future sins can be forgiven in the Church to which Christ entrusted this gift.
2. *Freedom from death* – “Let no one fear death, for the Savior’s death has set us free.” The heart of Death is the rupture of communion with God. Death of the body cannot break that unity for those who are living their baptism.
3. *All that is His is ours* – “Let no one bewail his poverty, for the universal kingdom has been revealed.” Our “wealth” as heirs of the kingdom includes the general gifts of the Spirit (wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, piety, fear of the Lord) and the particular gifts which enable ministry. Living in the kingdom of God includes enjoying a relationship with the Theotokos, all the heavenly hosts and all the saints as well as all believers, living or dead (the communion of saints).

These blessings are hidden from the world, but “*When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory*” (v. 4).

## **Consequences of This Hidden Life**

St Paul insists that receiving the gift of life in Christ has consequences. *“Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth... Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them.*

*“But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man...”* (vv. 2, 5-10).

Elsewhere St Paul had explained why Christians must put away things of the earth. *“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life”* (Gal 6:7, 8). Things of the earth, like our mortal bodies, die and decay no matter how much we pamper them. Lust, envy, wrath, filthy language and the rest of St Paul’s list in Colossians are simply ways we pamper our decaying flesh. By cherishing the “wealth of the kingdom” mentioned above – sowing “to the Spirit” – we enjoy in this world a measure of the life to come.

## **Putting off the Old Man**

From time to time Christians have misinterpreted St Paul’s teaching on putting off the old man. People like the Amish, for example, thought to express their detachment from the world by adopting a particular form of dress or hair style, or by living apart from others in closed communities because they are Christians. As early as the second century, however, most believers have known the distinction between living *in the world* but not *of the world*. An unknown “disciple of the apostles” wrote the following description of the Christians for a certain Diognetus somewhere in the Roman Empire.

“For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do

not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives.

“They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor are glorified... To sum up all in one word— what the soul is in the body, Christians are in the world... God has assigned them this illustrious position, which it is unlawful for them to forsake.”

While monastics would later separate themselves from the world, they would do so because they had a particular vocation, not simply because they were Christians.

### **Thirtieth Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **Seeking What is Above (Col 3:12-16)**

“BLESSED IS HE WHO HAS COME AND WILL COME in the name of the Lord.” This verse from the Syriac liturgies sums up the entire Church’s approach to the presence of Christ in the world. The Incarnation the presence of Christ is hidden in the flesh yet revealing God through that same flesh. The promise of the Second Coming of Christ points us to His coming in glory in the last days when His divinity will no longer be hidden in His flesh but revealed in it.

If God has manifested Himself in the world, where is God? We can “find” God first of all in His works, in which anyone can marvel, Christian or not. At the beginning of the scientific age people came to believe that they understood nature and could explain it without God. Today’s scientists are more likely to see our cosmos as beyond their grasp. It continually reveals new dimensions and, for many of them, more than ever does it point to God.

The greatest manifestation of God in human experience to date has been in Christ. His life and death reveal a love which point to the essence of the divine nature. “*God is love*” (1 Jn 4:8), and it is that love which is expressed in our understanding of God as the Holy Trinity. It is because of love that Christ can say things like “*I and the Father are one*” (Jn 10:30). The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are an eternal circle of love overflowing in love for us. The coming of the eternal Word of God into the world incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth is the decisive sign of this overflowing love. “*In this the love of God was manifested towards us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world that we might live through Him*” (1 Jn 4:9).

As our services for the feasts of Christ’s Nativity and Theophany indicate, the ultimate coming of God and the ultimate revelation of Him will take place on the last day of human history. Until then, because of our fallen humanity, we are only capable of glimpsing God in a very limited way. As the second century Father, Theophilus of Antioch, wrote to his pagan friend Autolykos:

“If you say, ‘show me your God,’ I would reply, ‘show me yourself...’ Show that the eyes of your soul are capable of seeing and the ears of your heart able to hear...”

Our broken humanity is meant to be transformed in Christ at the last day: “*When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory*” (Col 3:4). Then what we could only glimpse in this present life will be manifest to us. “For God will raise your flesh immortal with your soul,” Theophilus tells his friend, “and then, having become immortal, you shall see the Immortal One if now you believe in Him.”

### **Preparing for That Day**

To see the Immortal One on that day is not like seeing the president in a parade, or even meeting someone renowned for their holiness. When St Peter first experienced the power of God working in Christ to provide an unexpected catch of fish, his response was to fall on his knees and cry, “*Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man!*” (Lk 5:8). Not that he was unusually sinful, but that he was a son of Adam, tied to this earth, subject to the passions. And when he, with James and John, beheld Christ transfigured on Mount Tabor the same thing happened: they fell on their faces. If we are to see the Lord in an even more glorious state, we must be prepared in some way.

We must become people who “*seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on things on the earth*” (Col 3:1-2).

When we are young, we are anxious to amass one thing after another: a diploma, a car, a good job, a spouse, a home, a baby, etc, etc. Our minds are on things of the earth. If we grow in wisdom as well as in age, however, we realize that the material things that we have striven to own, own us. We find that we do not need the things we thought would make for a good life. We discover that holiness is a matter of subtraction, simplifying our lives so that we do not crowd God out of them.

In the monastic life people are called to put aside material attachments, family life and even one’s own will to devote themselves as much as is humanly possible to the things above. Monasticism is thus called the “angelic life” in the Christian East. Monastics strive to live in the heavenly realm rather than in this world.

Most believers are not monastics, and St. Paul was not writing to monks or nuns. Yet he insists, we must at least moderate our attachments to this world to the best of our ability. The Church would come to recommend practices such as fasting and almsgiving a ways to foster this detachment. Even more fundamentally, as St Paul says, we must “put to death” things such as the desire to possess (“fornication, uncleanness, passion, etc.”) or to control (“anger, wrath, malice, etc.”). Rather we are to put on virtues like compassion, kindness, humility forgiveness and love after the model of Christ’s earthly life. “*As Christ forgave you, so also you must do*” (Col 3:13).

### **Possessing and Controlling Others**

In the ancient world chieftains prided themselves on the number of cattle, slaves and women they possessed. This was even true in Israel where, we read in 1 Kings 11:1-3, that King Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines! Today sexual promiscuity is often an acting-out of the desire to possess. Whether officially rape or not, it turns an act of love into an act of self-gratification at another's expense. St Paul in Col 3, pairs it with "covetousness which is idolatry" (v. 5). If we have an abundance of material goods, Paul repeatedly insists, it is to supply the lack of others. Covetousness is to claim what belongs to others— or what God has given us to supply the wants of others – for ourselves. And, as Paul concludes, to so seek to possess others' goods – or others themselves – is actually idolatry. We make a god of whatever we put at the center of our life.

St Paul's second list of vices (Col 3:8-9) is a collection of devices designed to give us power over others. Anger, cursing, blasphemy, (and we might add obscene gestures) are ways we seek to intimidate others. Lying is often a more subtle way to do the same thing. The popular expression, to "get over on" someone, is an apt way of saying that all such dynamics are simply attempts to control situations and people.

To become a person more prepared to see the vision of God at Christ's coming in glory we must begin by eliminating passions such as the above and cultivating the love for others which characterizes Christ and His true disciples.

### **Thirty First Sunday after Pentecost**

#### **"Of Whom I Am the Greatest" (1 Tim 1:15-17)**

MANY PEOPLE WHO REGULARLY ATTEND the Byzantine Divine Liturgy – Catholic or Orthodox – might not realize how Holy Scripture is woven throughout the Liturgy. We easily recognize the whole chunks of Scripture such as the Epistle and Gospel readings and the psalm verses found in the antiphons, the prokimenon, or the Alleluia and Communion chants. We may be surprised to hear that our Sunday morning service (Orthros and Divine Liturgy) may include from 400 to 500 direct quotations from or allusions to Holy Scripture every week.

Today's Epistle reading – perhaps the shortest in the lectionary – is one example of a Biblical quotation which is embedded in the Liturgy. In the prayer before Communion said by the priest and, in many parishes, by the all the communicants we say "I believe, Lord, and profess that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God, *come to this world to save sinners, of whom I am the greatest.*" The words in italics are a direct quote from today's reading, 1 Tim 1:15. It has been calculated that there are nine such quotations or allusions in the prayer before Communion alone!

#### **Paul the "Greatest of Sinners"**

St Paul, who penned this phrase, did not try to hide the fact that before his conversion he had persecuted the Church. In Acts 22 we read how Paul defended himself from a mob who accused him of being a Greek whose presence in the temple defiled it. Paul insisted that he was not a Greek but a Jew, raised "*according to the strictness of our fathers' Law.*" He added, "*I persecuted*

*this Way [belief in Christ] to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women, as also the high priest bears me witness, and all the council of the elders, from whom I also received letters to the brethren, and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished” (vv. 3-5).*

Pursuing Christians “to the death,” in order to “bring them “in chains ...to be punished” certainly qualifies Paul for having done great wrongs. He did not despair, however, because he felt assured that God had forgiven him. He wrote to the Corinthians, “I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain” (1 Cor 15:9, 10).

St Paul made no secret of his past, which was well known among the believers. As he told the Galatians, “You have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it” (Gal 1:13). Paul experienced God’s forgiveness in his call to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles: “It pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles” (vv. 15, 16). God’s response to Paul’s sins was not punishment but renewal.

### **Us the “Greatest of Sinners”?**

Why do we appropriate St Paul’s admission and make it our own week after week? What have we done that is comparable to persecuting the Church? Should we be saying this prayer at all?

In this prayer we are trying to avoid the attitude of the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable and express the humility of the Publican. We do not point the figure and accuse anyone of sin but ourselves. “Sin” in Eastern Christian terminology implies guilt, and I can only accuse myself of guilt – not anyone else.

This attitude is evident in the priest’s prayer after the Great Entrance in both the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom and that of St Basil. He prays, “Make us fit to offer You spiritual gifts and sacrifices for our sins and the faults of the people,” itself a quotation from Heb 9:7. I can accuse myself of sin, i.e. admit guilt. I can recognize that you have done something wrong but I cannot accuse you of doing so culpably.

In 2013 Pope Francis made headlines, achieving praise in some circles and causing horror in others when he said of homosexuals, “who am I to judge?” Was he approving of homosexual acts, which the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* ¶2357, citing “tradition” teaches are “intrinsically disordered”? Or was he addressing the question in the spirit of today’s epistle and our prayer: we can say that an action in itself is wrong; we cannot say that anyone else is a sinner.

### **Thirty Second Sunday after Pentecost (Sunday of Zacchaeus)**

## **Our Program of Repentance (1 Tim 4:6-16)**

PHYSICAL FITNESS IS BIG BUSINESS today. People run to gyms and exercise programs, or they just run. St. Paul sees the value of keeping one's body in shape, but puts it in a perspective of his own. "*Bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise for the life that now is and of that which is to come*" (1 Tim 4:8).

We may readily grasp that spiritual exercise may bear fruit in the life to come, but what promise does it have "for the life that now is"?

A great part of spiritual training is concerned with the control of the passions. We strive to free ourselves from the compulsion to pursue pleasure so that we can pursue a relationship with the living God. If we follow this training, the result in our life now is that we are no longer driven to acquire or possess. We are content.

When a person is beset by greed he is never satisfied with what he has. There is always more, there is always something better to be acquired. While he seems content with his latest acquisition it is only for a moment, because nothing he has truly satisfies. The same is true of people governed by gluttony, lust, popular acclaim or pride. They never have enough.

A person who has learned to control the passions, on the other hand, is content knowing that all he is and all he has is the gift of God. He has learned that material wealth, physical pleasure, or the good opinion of others are all passing and insignificant when compared with the possibility of knowing and serving God. He is happy to devote energy and resources to others as much as possible because he controls them; they do not control him. Controlling the passions makes us free here and now.

Someone who undertakes spiritual discipline devotes himself to developing spiritual strengths or virtues just as an athlete strengthens physical muscles. We have all seen runners stretching their leg muscles before beginning a run. Their stretches are a warm-up in anticipation of the effort ahead. Similarly there is a warm up necessary at the start of a spiritual effort. Repentance is the necessary prerequisite to any effective spiritual effort, whether it is the encounter with Christ in the Liturgy or any of the mysteries, in the Great Fast, or in any spiritual work which we pray may be fruitful. Ignoring our personal spiritual state before any of these borders on presumption. Even world-class athletes, whether physical or spiritual, always begin each contest at the beginning, with a warm-up.

These strengths, or virtues, also enable spiritual athletes to remain faithful in the face of persecution or hardship. How could the martyrs and confessors have endured the torments they suffered without the fortitude which spiritual discipline produces? How could people like Father Damien in a leper colony, Mother Teresa on the streets of Calcutta, or Dorothy Day in the tenements of New York have served day after day in such atrocious conditions without the patience and dedication of a spiritual athlete? Without the endurance which spiritual discipline

produces believers would quickly fall away from their commitment and collapse on the sidelines. Spiritual discipline develops the endurance to live for God in the here and now.

Another aspect of spiritual discipline is concerned with fidelity to prayer. Many people pray – or say prayers – from a sense of duty. Praying, they feel, is something we “ought to do.” A person of prayer is rather one who senses an authentic relationship with God and who prays out of love rather than a sense of obligation. Such a person reaps the fruits of a commitment to prayer in this life, becoming someone who experiences the presence of God in his life on earth.

The presence of God may be experienced in many ways. There are saints who have experienced God directly in visions or in charismatic gifts. But the presence of God may also be experienced in consolations or in the assurance of blessing from God without any exterior manifestation. In either case to experience the presence of God in one’s “life that now is” is clear evidence of the truth of St. Paul’s statement: godliness profits a person in this life as well as in the life to come.