

# THE PROPHET

Monthly Newsletter of

## St. John the Baptist Orthodox Church

Orthodox Church in America (OCA)

Archdiocese of Pittsburgh

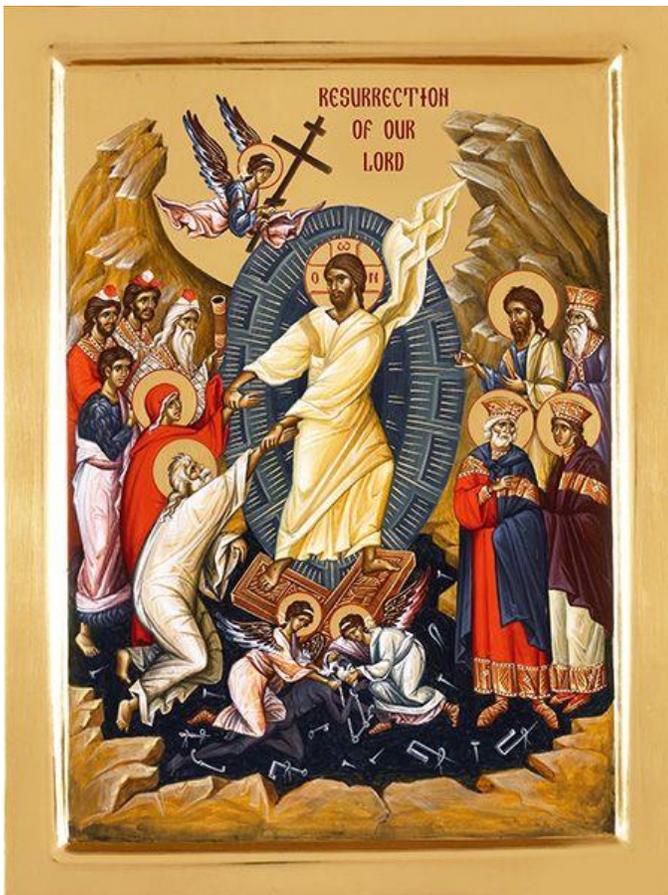
His Eminence, Most Rev. Melchisedek

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## May 2021



*The Descent into Hades (hell)*

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### IN THIS ISSUE:

|   |       |
|---|-------|
| Rector's Report   | pp. 1 |
| Memory Eternal  | pg. 2 |
| Many Years  | pg. 2 |
| It is Not the Palm Which is Consecrated,<br>but the Christian | pg. 3 |
| A Paschal Miracle:<br>St. Nectarius Descends from Heaven      | pg. 4 |
| The Dragons that Almost Exist<br>by Jonathan Pageau           | pg. 5 |
| What it Was that Saved Thomas<br>by Fr. Lawrence Farley       | pg. 7 |
| The Doctrine of Christ, Chpt. 5<br>by Abp. Dmitri of Dallas   | pg. 8 |

### RECTOR'S REPORT:

Christ is risen! Indeed He is risen!

As we sing throughout the Paschal season:

*This is the day of resurrection. Let us be illuminated by the feast. Let us embrace each other. Let us call 'Brothers' even those that hate us, and forgive all by the Resurrection, and so let us cry: Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.*

Brothers and sisters, I greet you all with the joy of this Paschal season, and not much more can be said than a sincere thank you to everyone who came and offered themselves to Christ through the services of Lent, Holy Week, and Pascha. By this journey into the endless joy of heaven help to strengthen us as we continue through the joys and sorrows of this earthly life. It is isn't always easy, but we must struggle to place everything within the context of this Paschal reality. In the words of St. John Chrysostom:

*Christ is risen, and [hell is] 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 dead remains in the grave.  
For Christ, being risen from the dead, is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.  
To Him be glory and dominion unto the ages of ages. Amen.*

**MEMORY ETERNAL:****(Вѣчная память!)****We continue our 40 days of prayer for:**

Apr. Antonio Perdomo (4/1)

Rose Lazorchak (4/2)

Apr. Nilus Lerro (4/28)

**We commemorate the anniversaries of:**

Maria Sapp (5/1/1957)

William Dampf (5/1/1967)

Philip Pastrick (5/3/1994)

Vasily Reshvisky (5/4/1922)

Henry Pirih (5/4/2010)

Peter Borsos (5/5/1970)

George Puskarich (5/6/1986)

Theodore Lisenko (5/7/1925)

Wasil Lasobek (5/7/1960)

Andrew Skirchak (5/7/1968)

Henry Pirih (5/7/1999)

Daria Ermakoff (5/9/1963)

John Taper (5/9/1972)

Helen Bobble (5/9/1993)

Apr. Paul Lazor (5/9/2020)

Frank Maddox (5/9/2020)

Vasily Kharasty (5/11/1946)

Mary Popovich (5/11/1985)

John Paul Kirr (5/12/1948)

Andrew Mokricky (5/12/1968)

William "Chip" Lazorchak (5/12/2009)

Helen Koman (5/14/2004)

Anna Koppy (5/14/2004)

Michael Gontz (5/14/2010)

Anna Kolarsky (5/17/2006)

Mat. Judith Horosky (5/17/2018)

Andrew Koman (5/18/1977)

Pearl Chopak (5/18/1985)

John Horosky (5/18/1988)

Anastasia Zulick (5/19/1979)

Elizabeth Havrilak (5/19/1997)

Emil Arnal (5/20/1994)

Julia Bokouski (5/21/1959)

Anna Tunair (5/21/1963)

Andrew Negra (5/21/1972)

Vasily Senko (5/22/1926)

Alexander Sam (5/22/1965)

Wasil Ludinsky (5/22/1967)

Sophia Petronie (5/22/2002)

Anna Suwak (5/22/2005)

Eva Pirih (5/22/2010)

Stephen Koppy (5/26/1950)

Metro Petrosky (5/26/2011)

Michael Marinkov (5/27/1956)

Henry Dampf (5/27/2012)

Alexandra "Sandra" Antoush (5/27/2014)

Michael Korvatsky (5/28/1929)

Michael Summers (5/28/1935)

Joseph Lilley (5/28/1996)

Helen Fetcko (5/28/2005)

Mary Ann Blyshak (5/29/2008)

Helen Uchatich (5/30/1925)

Vasily Chirkov (5/30/1926)

Peter Sakovich (5/30/1976)

Alec Timan (5/30/1997)

Stylianios "Stan" Kerkentzes (5/30/2001)

**MANY YEARS:****(Многая и благая лѣта!)****Namedays:**

Tamara Marsico (5/1)

Tamara Petronka (5/1)

John Nicholas Oleynik (5/8)

Rd. John Thompson (5/8)

Christopher Petronka (5/9)

Christopher Weber (5/9)

Simon Killmeyer (5/10)

Taisa Zupancic (5/10)

Helene Emerick (5/21)

Helen Kolarsky (5/21)

Helen Lazorchak (5/21)

Nora Lee (Eleanor) Roberto (5/21)

Ellie Ruffing (5/21)

Helen Jane Shamitko (5/21)

Elena Yarosh (5/21)

Isabela Marie Petronka (5/22)

Mat. Janine Marie Kotalik (5/22)

Sophie Germaine Helinski (5/28)

**Birthdays:**

John Nicholas Oleynik (5/3)

Taisa Zupancic (5/4)

Don Marsico (5/9)

Eva Chupinsky (5/14)

Anna Marie Spetek (5/14)

Brandon Mayberry (5/15)

David Alpaugh (5/15)

Layla Killmeyer (5/16)

Carol Sweda (5/20)

Adam Sweda (5/20)

Dr. Ruth Ann Esaias (5/22)

Aidan Onest (5/24)

Annabelle Ruffing (5/25)

Jerry Strennen (5/26)

Christopher Wright (5/26)

Dolores Schinosi (5/26)

Catherine Weber (5/28)

Shirley Lazorchak (5/30)

**Anniversaries:**

Sdn. Thomas &amp; Cynthia Havrilak (5/5/1985)

Richard &amp; Sonia Blaha (5/15/1988)

Fr. Joseph &amp; Mat. Annice Oleynik (5/22/1977)

Doug &amp; Darcie Burkholder (5/24/1973)

Kip &amp; Diane Yarosh (5/25/1997)

Michael &amp; Lara Galis (5/25/2019)

Rd. Anthony &amp; Patricia Kolarsky (5/28/1970)

*If you or a loved one are missing, please let  
Fr. John know so that we can correct our records!*

**It is Not the Palm or Pussy Willow  
Branches That Are Consecrated,  
but the Christian Holding Them**

*from the Catalog of Good Deeds  
(Weblog of St. Elisabeth Convent in Minsk)*

*"Many people celebrate holidays and know these  
holidays' names. Often they do it without knowing the  
reasons why they are established."*

(St. John Chrysostom)

A palm or pussy willow twig in our hands is a sign that the Lord's Entry into Jerusalem for voluntary suffering is no less important to us than to those who greeted Him with palm branches and shouted "Hosanna!" two thousand years ago. "We too, like the children, carry the symbols of victory and cry to Thee, the Vanquisher of death: Hosanna in the Highest! Blessed is He that comes in the Name of the Lord.", as the troparion of the holiday says.

The church is timeless. Divine services hardly ever speak of sacred events in the past tense. For example, we rarely hear that "the Lord ENTERED Jerusalem". Much more often the expression "ENTERS TODAY" is used. Evangelical events are experienced in human souls in a new way every time. We bring willows to the temple holding them during the service to show that we also welcome the Lord as our King and Messiah.

Unfortunately, over time this beautiful tradition has been reinterpreted in terms of trivial rituals. The folk tradition has reduced the meaning of the holiday shifting its emphasis (originally placed by liturgical texts on Christ "Coming in the name of the Lord" and the people greeting Him) to the blessing of the palms and pussy willow. It is beginning to look like we bring palms and pussy willows to the

temple (or rather, take it from the temple) as a kind of an amulet, rather than a way to testify our love to God. Sadly, we see the same story repeating year after year, when great numbers of people come to church long after the Liturgy has ended asking "Where is the willow being handed out here?"

Today we can find all sorts of advice about what to do with the palms and pussy willows, where to keep them and for how many years. Sometimes they even recommend eating a willow bud as a medicine. People hope to get help from the palms and pussy willows, because they are blessed. But if we take a close look at the text of the prayer, it turns out that there is not a single word there about the palms or pussy willows being sanctified. Its meaning lies in the following phrase: "... O Master, keep and preserve us also, who, following their example (the people coming to greet Christ with boughs of trees and branches of palms, foretelling his Resurrection) on the eve of the feast, carry in our hands palms and branches ...". It turns out that the church sees us, and not the branches as the object of consecration. The Book of Needs (a collection of priestly prayers with sacraments and rites of blessing) contains no instruction to sprinkle the willow or any other branches with holy water. This instruction later appeared in the Priest's Service Book (a book containing orders of the Liturgy, Vespers, Matins etc.) as a reflection of the established practice.

**Prayer at the Blessing of Palms on Palm Sunday**

O Lord our God, who sittest upon the cherubim: Thou hast reaffirmed thy power and sent out thine Only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to save the world through his Cross, Burial, and Resurrection. When he had come to Jerusalem for his voluntary Passion, the people that sat in darkness and the shadow of death took, as tokens of victory, boughs of trees and branches of palms, thus foretelling his Resurrection. Do thou thyself, O Master, keep and preserve us also, who, following their example on the eve of the feast, carry in our hands palms and branches, and who like the crowds and the children cry to thee, 'Hosanna!' With hymns and spiritual songs count us worthy to attain to the life-giving Resurrection on the third day: through Jesus Christ our Lord, with whom thou art blessed, together with thine all-holy, good, and life-giving Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. **✠ Amen.**

**A Paschal Miracle:**  
**St. Nectarius of Aegina Descends from**  
**Heaven to Serve Liturgy (1961)**

*from the Catalog of Good Deeds*  
*(Weblog of St. Elisabeth Convent in Minsk)*

The peasants in a mountainous village of Aegina had been without a priest for years. Times was going by, but nothing was changing. Lent came, but they still had no priest. The people were worrying. In the first and final weeks of the Great Lent, most Greeks put their work and daily business on hold to dedicate themselves to prayer. Everywhere, they lower the flags as if in mourning for the crucified Christ. Every day, the people stand long hours at the Lenten services, walk in processions around their parishes, keep a dry fast [xerophagy], and some do not eat at all. Few in the village could imagine spending all this time without a priest.

The peasants wrote a letter to the bishop asking him to send them a priest. *"Your Grace, could you please appoint us a priest, at least for Bright Week and Pascha,"* they implored. *"We need him to lead and guide us in our preparation, prayer and repentance, and in the celebration of Bright and Holy Pascha. Do not let your flock go without a shepherd, do not let our pleas go unanswered. Your Grace, please send us a priest of Your choosing."*

The bishop read the letter and conveyed the request of the mountain dwellers to the participants in the next episcopal meeting. *"Fathers, who can travel to this village for the Lenten weeks?"* he asked. But none of the priests could, and each gave a valid reason. As the meeting continued, the request from the mountain dwellers was lost among the other agenda items and the current documents. Everyone forgot about the letter, busy with the other errands and preparations for Pascha.

Finally, Great and Holy Pascha came, which all Greeks celebrate together in great awe and piety. Because Orthodox Christianity is Greece's official religion, it is also a public holiday upheld at the governmental level. Pascha Week was over, and the episcopate's priests were back at work. The bishop saw a letter on his table, and again it was from the mountainous village. It read, *"Your Grace, we have no words to convey to you our gratefulness and deep appreciation for your consideration and attention to the needs of our parish. Forever we will praise the Lord and be thankful to you, Your Grace, for sending us this pious and blessed*

*priest to lead our Paschal celebrations. Never before have we prayed together with a priest of such exceptional grace and humility."*

At the next episcopal meeting, the bishop asked the attending priests, *"Last time, I read out a letter from the peasants of a mountainous village who requested a priest. Who travelled there?"* Everyone was silent, no one said a word. The bishop was intrigued and curious. So he put together a delegation and days later, dust was clouding over the mountainous village on Aegina Island as the bishop and his group approached the village. It was the bishop's first visit there with such a large group of people. The parishioners met him with paschal cakes, festive drinks, painted eggs and bunches of flowers. In a solemn procession, they all went to the small church.

In Greece, all priests are civil servants, and they are required to enter their names in a designated logbook of the church, even they serve there only once. The bishop bowed before the icon of the church's patron saint and went into the altar. The Royal Doors were open, and all the people at church saw him pick up the logbook and take it to the nearby narrow window. Hastily, he paged through it and found the last entry. The inscription, made in elegant handwriting and beautiful ink, read, *"Nectarius, Metropolitan of Pentapolis."* Awe-stricken, the bishop dropped the book and fell on his knees right where he was standing.

As the news of the great miracle sank in, everyone was awe-stricken. After some moments of ringing silence, everyone was overwhelmed with emotions. The people fell on their knees, raised their hands, hugged, wept and gave thanks to Jesus and Saint Nectarius. Only now were they beginning to realize what had happened. The Almighty Lord had heard the tearful prayers from His people in a remote mountainous village and sent them a shepherd from His Kingdom of Heaven. Their shepherd on earth had forgotten about his smaller flock, but not the Lord of Heaven and Earth. It was the moment of truth. Metropolitan Nectarius, who departed this world in the 1920s, spent an entire week in the flesh with the simple shepherds and their families. He headed their processions of the Cross and to the Empty Tomb, sang hymns and said prayers, gave them comfort and guidance. He spoke to them about the Lord like nobody else had ever spoken to them before.

Only now did the people begin to realise what had filled their hearts with heavenly joy, inspired them to repent tearfully and made them cry with endearment, unrestrained and unashamed. Now they knew what was keeping them awake and eager to stand in prayer. The icon of Saint Nectarius was displayed at their church in a visible location, but nobody recognised him. Perhaps God had willed to hide from the people the identity of their good priest while he was with them.

## **The Dragons that Almost Exist**

*by Jonathan Pageau, Sept. 29, 2016*

Explaining the icon of St-George slaying the dragon to a 4-year-old is amazing. Explaining the icon of St-George to a 10-year-old is excruciating – “Yeah, but dragons don’t exist, do they?”.

Do they?

When someone tells you that dragons don’t exist or that monsters don’t exist, what is it they are saying? When gazing at the icon of St. George, which intuitively has to be one of the most satisfying icons to gaze upon, it reveals a truth so profound that despite the fact that “dragons don’t exist”, it is still one of the most popular icons and St. George is one of the most popular saints.

When we say “dragons don’t exist”, usually what is meant by “exist” is some kind of measurable, reproducible phenomena. “Dragon” then becomes a zoological specie, like a dog or a cat that could be separated into sub-species, bred and genetically modified. But to believe that such measurable categories in the world are the only ones that “exist” is not only untrue to the highest degree, but it is also an image of the mental tyranny of our scientific age that anyone could be so blind to believe this as they live out their lives.

What if dragons or else monsters in general are simply not the same type of “thing” as dogs or cats or apples? What if the way a dragon exists has less to do with the difference between a tiger and a rabbit and more to do with the difference between a friend and a stranger? The difference between a friend and a stranger is not a measurable, reproducible phenomenon, yet it is one of the most real experiences a human being has. A friend is a real category of existence, but there is no “zoological” friend, that is I cannot point to someone that would quantify

“friend” for all the world in the way a cat is a cat for everyone. Friend is a category of human engagement. And in a similar vein, encountering a stranger is encountering an undefined person, we could say the undecided in human form. I would like to suggest that a dragon and more generally a monster, is the category of the unknown itself in animal form. Ultimately a dragon is an image of chaos, the place where knowledge and categories reach their limits.

That a dragon is an image of chaos is not a new idea, it has been proposed by thinkers from extremely diverse areas, including Orthodox ones. But usually it is implied in saying things like “dragons are an image of chaos” that dragons are a kind of fable, a kind of metaphor. I am saying dragons exist, or rather almost exist. They are as real as a stranger is real, as an alien is real, real in ways that show us the very limits of existence itself. It is silly, for example, to say that UFOs do not exist. Of course UFOs exist, they are unidentified flying objects. Now the way we portray, imagine and project certain cultural forms and narratives into these UFOs is another matter, an important one which shows us how humans engage with the chaos and the unknown. Just like we can experience a UFO or a stranger, we can definitely come into contact with a dragon. And I think the story of St. George and many other traditional stories of dragons are built, are constructed in a manner that helps us understand “what” a dragon is. This is the reason the story of St. George perdures despite all the myth busters trying to take it down.

But we need to give the myth busters their due. So now, just as a thought experiment, imagine a terrible dragon threatening a city and eating its children. St. George comes and kills it. Imagine now a scientist arriving with all his instruments to dissect it. After several weeks of analysis and peer-reviewed data, the scientist informs the silly people of the town via some academic journal, that the dragon was not a dragon, but rather it was a giant Siamese-twin crocodile(s) with elephantiasis and rabies. The paper is quite long, in fact it details how each deformity on the giant Siamese-twin crocodile(s) with elephantiasis and rabies is related either to it being Siamese, it having elephantiasis or rather having come with time from its own violent self-destructive behavior due to its rabies. Some scientists begin to argue over the cause of certain of the deformities and soon someone holds a conference and the

organizers publish a book stating the different views on the matter.

The question is this: which is more real, the dragon or the giant Siamese-twin crocodile(s) with elephantiasis and rabies? The giant Siamese-twin crocodile(s) with elephantiasis and rabies does not properly account for the terrifying experience of monstrosity, and though the dragon has been dissected and tamed in a way, the experience, the narrative which impacted the very identity of that village is an encounter with a dragon. And also, it would be absurd to rewrite our zoological categories to make way for the exceptional category of the Siamese-twin crocodile(s) with elephantiasis and rabies. Just stick with dragons.

In the icon of St. George, the dragon is shown as an impossible hybrid, combining mammals, lizards and birds. As I have explained elsewhere, hybridity is the chaos which appears on the limits, in the in-betweens of categories, the exceptions. It is the very experience of the monster. The strange and exceptional are very important things and are categories which include many spiritual mysteries. Strangers in the Bible and in our tradition can secretly either be angels or devils. In the story of Abraham, the three strangers which come to him are angels and an image of the Trinity, but in the traditions surrounding the Nativity, the unknown shepherd tempting St. Joseph is secretly a devil. This is the nature of the ambiguous, it can hide either extremes.

Sadly in a world of only taxonomic categories, there is no room for the peripheral, the exception and the strange. Everything must fit, or else. This has caused both the mad permissiveness and unilateral openness as well as the totalitarian identity of absolute exclusion which characterize the duality of modernity. Both extremes cause each other and so can only swing from one impossible extreme to the next, either attempting to account for and justify every exception or else tracing an absolute border between us and them. In such a world there is no other option, either everything must fit, or else Occam's razor comes a slicing. But in a world with room for dragons, the natural hierarchy of being is allowed to both include the rule and leave an undefined space for the strange and exceptional, the monster even. There the dragon can almost exist.

As long as the dragon does not eat our children. And there are those of us now who intuit that the dragons have started to devour children.

Luckily we will always have St. George to protect us.

### Does Hades still Exist?

*from the Catalog of Good Deeds (Weblog of St. Elisabeth Convent in Minsk), June 6, 2013*

**Question:** *I recently heard a priest who said that Hades no longer exists, because in our hymns, we say that Christ destroyed Hades by his resurrection. Is that true?*

**Answer:** It is true that in the Paschal Matins, we sing: "We celebrate the death of death and the overthrow of hell [lit. Hades], the beginning of another life which is eternal, and in exultation we sing the praises of its source: He alone is blessed and most glorious: the God of our fathers." (Ode 7), but it is also true that we have hymns that say things like "... by Thy death, Thou hast destroyed the devil..." (Bright Wednesday, Praises), and yet we know that the devil has not ceased to exist as a result of the resurrection, because we are told by St. Peter "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Hades and the devil have been destroyed in that their power over mankind has been broken by the Cross and Resurrection of Christ. This does not mean that they have ceased to exist. Today is the 69th anniversary of D-Day, and we could say that Hitler's realm was destroyed on D-Day, but it wasn't ultimately destroyed until VE-Day (Victory in Europe Day).

Another problem we have in English is that the word "hell" is used to translate the Greek word "Hades" as well as "Gehenna". Hades in the New Testament means what Sheol in the Old Testament meant, which is "the abode of the dead." "Gehenna" refers to the lake of fire, or the final place where the wicked are condemned — which is what most people have in mind when they think of "hell." Even before the resurrection, the wicked were receiving a foretaste of punishment, and the righteous were receiving a foretaste of blessedness. But prior to the Resurrection of Christ, even the souls of the saints of the Old Testament abode in Hades. At the resurrection, the righteous were set at liberty, and taken into paradise, but this is still not the final state of

blessedness that will only be accomplished after the general resurrection. The wicked in Hades likewise will only experience the fullness of their punishment, after they are resurrected unto damnation, which is called the “second death”. At present, there are in Hades the souls of those who have died in a state of repentance, but who have not brought forth the fruits of repentance, and are not yet ready to enter into the presence of God. Many of those souls will enter in heaven before the final judgment, through the prayers of the Church, but some will await the final judgment there, and yet be saved. We do not believe that these souls suffer for their sins, but we do believe that our prayers are of some benefit to them. In the Kneeling Vespers of Pentecost, we pray: “[God] Who also on this most perfect and saving feast hast deigned to receive propitiatory prayers for those who are kept in hades, giving us great hope that through Thee release and consolation may be sent down to those held there in bondage and vileness.” We even believe that our prayers are of some benefit to those who will not ultimately enter into heaven, though we cannot speak of these things with precision, because these things have not been fully revealed to us.

### **What It Was that Saved Thomas**

*by Fr. Lawrence Farley, Apr. 11, 2018*

Thomas had a heart that had taken one too many beatings. Despite his often being stigmatized by later generations as “Doubting Thomas” there is nothing in his past record to indicate such a defect of character. In John’s account of Christ’s raising of Lazarus, when the Lord said that Lazarus had died and that He was going to enter the cauldron of dangerous Judea to “go to him” (John 11:15), the disciples assumed that He meant following Lazarus by dying too in His attempt to visit the grieving family. They were properly horrified, and reluctant to follow Him on such a doomed mission. It was Thomas who spurred them on and said, “Let us also go, that we may die with Him” (v. 16). In other words, Thomas could not bear the thought of letting his Lord die alone, but was prepared to accompany Him even if it meant his death as well. This is not the utterance of a doubter, or of someone who is of two minds. Thomas had wrapped his whole life around

Jesus, and that life would have no meaning without Him.

Like the other disciples, Thomas rode the rollercoaster of His Lord’s final days. He rode to the dizzying top when they entered Jerusalem and found the road strewn with palms and the air rent with cries of acclamation. He shared their sense of imminent triumph when Jesus commandeered the Temple and brought to public humiliation those who tried to entrap Him there. And like the other disciples he rode to the bottom of despair and grief when the morning after His late night Paschal arrest the mid-morning sun saw Him hanging on a cross. One can only imagine the trauma to his poor tender heart—the heart of someone who was prepared to die with his Lord during His recent visit to Lazarus in Bethany. They were so sure that Jesus was the Messiah, and that His Kingdom was at hand. Yet His crucifixion at Roman hands was the indisputable proof, as far as a Jewish mind was concerned, that He could *not* have been the Messiah, for the Messiah was by definition the conquering King, the one who would triumph over the Romans. Thomas’ whole world had been turned upside down in a day. How could they all have been so wrong? He could scarcely bear to try to work it out: had the Pharisees been right after all when they said He was a blasphemer who worked miracles by the power of Satan?

Then came the offer of another ride to the top of the rollercoaster: his fellow disciples came and said that He was alive after all and that they had seen Him (John 20:25). Thomas could not bear yet another disappointment, another blow to his heart. He could not bear to have his hopes ignited only to be told by them in another day or so that they had been mistaken after all, and that it was a mass hallucination or that it was only someone who looked like Jesus. Thomas faced them all and drew his line in the epistemological sand: “Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe!” *They* could believe all they liked; *he* would await the proof from his own senses. Note that Thomas did not say, “I *cannot* believe”, but “I *will not* believe” —this was about decision. Thomas was not doubting so much as choosing —making the choice to withhold belief until he had seen it for himself. It was not a defect in character, but the putting

on of armour, and his only way of protecting himself from yet another wound to his already bleeding heart.

*And yet*, note the next verse of John's Gospel: "After eight days again His disciples were inside and *Thomas with them*". Despite his refusal to share their faith, Thomas did not leave the apostolic company. In the months and years they had known Jesus, He had melded them into a unified family. They came from wildly disparate backgrounds—Simon was a Zealot who was dedicated to the violent overthrow of Rome, and Matthew was a collaborator who collected taxes for Rome. And yet Jesus had transformed them, so that they were now dedicated not only to Him but also to one another—and Thomas remained with this family. That was why he was with them a week later when Jesus once again came into their midst. That was why Jesus was able to reveal Himself to Thomas and elicit from him the saving cry, "My Lord and my God!" There is no reason to think that Jesus would have tracked him down if he had abandoned his fellow apostles and renounced their company. The risen Christ only revealed Himself to those who loved Him and identified themselves with His other disciples. He did not reveal Himself to Pilate and throw back into his Roman teeth the cynical quip, "What is truth?" He did not reveal Himself to Caiaphas to reassert His Messianic claim to now sit at the right hand of Power. His revelation to Thomas happened because Thomas stayed with his apostolic family and did not leave their company.

Thomas teaches us: take your doubts to Church. Do not abandon your Christian family, or retreat from the apostolic company. Stay in Church, praying privately and attending the Church's public Liturgy. And ask Christ to give you the answers, and reveal Himself, and bring you the truth. If you really want to know the truth, Christ will give it to you. But be clear: you must want to find the truth like a starving man wants to find food, like a man dying of thirst in the desert wants to find a watery oasis. If you merely wouldn't mind knowing the truth, there is no reason to think you will hear from Christ, for you are trifling with God. God Himself promised: "You will seek Me and find Me *when you search for Me with all your heart*" (Jeremiah 29:13). If you really want the truth, Christ will reveal it to you, for everyone who seeks finds. St. Thomas is not just the

saint for Christian doubters. He is the saint for all souls who really want to know the truth. And he reveals where that truth can be found: in the apostolic Church of the living God.

## **The Doctrine of Christ:**

### **A Layman's Handbook**

*by Abp. Dmitri (Royster) of Dallas, 1984*

Orthodox Philosopher Teena Blackburn reminds us that *Christian teachings, especially Christian sexual teachings, will not make any sense if you don't know Christ first, and if you don't understand what the Faith says about anthropology: about who Jesus is, what a human is, what life is all about. All that has to come first, or you just get a long list of rules. Christians are following Someone; the pattern of our life is not arbitrary! It is, ideally, rooted in the idea (and experience) that nothing God asks of us is for anything but our good, our joy, our ultimate happiness* (adapted by the editor). In order to help us come to know who Christ is and what the Church teaches us about Christ's divinity and his humanity (a pattern for our humanity!), each month of 2021 we will be looking at a chapter of "The Doctrine of Christ" by the ever-memorable Abp. Dmitri of Dallas (+2011), renowned Orthodox biblical scholar, theologian, missionary, and pastor.

## **Chapter 5:**

### **GOD AND MAN AT ONCE**

In the foregoing chapters, attention has been concentrated upon the fact that Jesus Christ, whom we call Lord, God, and Saviour, was truly God and truly Man. The circumstances of the Lord's birth in the flesh and His mother's perpetual virginity testify to the fact that the eternal Word of God was incarnate: "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

It has been demonstrated not only that Holy Scripture indicates the Saviour's having both the divine and the human natures, but also that the Church has always recognized the importance of this doctrine, having struggled down through the centuries to guard it and transmit it in all its purity. For indeed, the principal heresies which the Church has had to combat have been those distortions of this doctrine of the two natures in Christ.

Yet, it remains to explore the union of the two natures in the one Person of Christ, and then to explain the necessity of this union for man's salvation: his redemption from sin and his reconciliation with God.

Examination of some of the passages from the Bible in which Christ is presented as one and the same Person: God and Man, Son of God and Son of Man, with divine and human attributes or qualities and characteristics, will be helpful in this regard. While it is a historical fact that the man Jesus was crucified: His crucifixion was demanded by the Jews, ordered by a Roman governor, and witnessed by all the people of Jerusalem, we are struck by the way in which the Apostles spoke of it.

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For example, St. Paul has this to say: Had the princes of this world known of the hidden wisdom of God, "they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." (I Cor.2:8)

St. Peter, preaching to the Jews, accuses them of having "killed the Prince of Life." (Acts 3:15)

Furthermore, St. Paul exhorts the presbyters of the Church at Ephesus "to take heed ... to feed the Church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood." (Acts 20:28) To the Romans he says, "We were reconciled to God by the death of His Son," (5:10) and to the Hebrews, "Christ-who in the days of His flesh ... though He were a Son, yet learned He obedience by the things which He suffered." (5: 5-8)

From such passages as these, it can be seen that it was Christ the Man who suffered, shed His blood and was crucified. Yet at the same time, the Apostles could speak of the Lord of glory as having been crucified, and of God as having shed His blood. The Apostles knew that in the one Christ, His Godhead and His manhood were united in a single Person (**hypostasis**).

In other places in the New Testament, the eternal Word of God, who became flesh and lived and walked among men, is spoken of as the Son of Man. St. John records, for example, these words of Jesus in his Gospel account: "And no man hath ascended

up to heaven, but He that came down from heaven, even the Son of Man, which is in heaven." (3:13)

Further, in the same Gospel, Jesus, speaking person to person with the Jews, makes this statement: "Before Abraham was, **I am**." This they considered so blasphemous that they took up stones to stone Him to death. (8:58)

Thus we see from these passages that the human things: suffering, shedding of blood, and being killed, and the divine things: coming down from heaven and having always been (the attribute of eternity), are attributed to one and the same Person, Jesus Christ.

St. Paul provides further evidence of the oneness of Christ in the following passages. "But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by Him." (I Cor. 8:6) "[There is] one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." (Eph. 4:5,6)

### **One Person, Two Natures**

In Christ, there are not two separate Persons, but one and the same Person with two natures. Yet two ancient heresies, Arianism and Nestorianism, which were condemned by the Church in their time, distorted this fundamental doctrine of Christ. Ironically, they are widely held by twentieth-century Christians, and are believed to be very modern ideas.

Arianism, which rejected the divinity of Christ and reduced Him to a created agent of God's work, is the official doctrine of the Jehovah's Witnesses. As a matter of fact, Arius himself, the chief advocate of the doctrine and who gave it his name, is one of the "saints" or "spirits" of the Witnesses.

Nestorianism, which made of the one Christ two separate persons united only in a moral, cooperative way, is the effective teaching of most Protestants today. They regard Jesus Christ as having been deified in that He was adopted as the Son of God as His baptism. In this way they accept His divinity. Thus, their lack of precision in the doctrine of Christ has led many Protestants into a kind of inadvertent Nestorianism.

### **Assuming Human Nature**

The eternal Word, the Son of God, literally was made flesh, became man, and did not cease to be

what He was before: a divine Person, One of the Holy Trinity. In order to reconcile man to God, He assumed human nature and took it into the unity of His Person (**hypostasis**).

Those with whom Jesus Christ dealt on earth saw a **man**: a human living and going about as all men do, but also doing extraordinary things that no other man could do: the miracles. To some chosen ones He revealed Himself in His eternal glory: the Transfiguration. The God-man, Jesus Christ, is One. The flesh or human nature was taken into His Divine Person, so that there remained in Him exactly the same, one and unchangeable Person of the only-begotten Son of the Father.

St. John the Apostle expresses this doctrine in the first chapter of his Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth ... The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." (1:1,14,17)

He who already had the divine nature was precisely the one who took human nature. "[He], being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God," but "made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men," (Phil. 2:6,7).

The same man, born of the Virgin, is the only-begotten Son of God, and God. The same Son of God is the one who was born of the Virgin according to the flesh, since He became man. He did not live in a man previously created, as in a prophet, but He Himself became substantially and truly man. St. Paul makes this clear, when He says: "When the fullness of the time was come, **God sent forth His Son, made of a woman**, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law." (Gal. 4:4,5)

It is because of this consideration that the Church insisted in the Council that condemned Nestorius that the title of **Theotokos** (the one who gave birth to God, or the Mother of God) was not only correctly given to the Virgin Mary, but also that the very title was a guarantee of the unity of Christ.

Nestorius' error, which is that of most Protestants today, consisted of rejecting this title, saying that she was the mother of the man only, and effectively dividing Christ into two persons. Yet, St.

Paul is explicit in saying that it was God's Son who was made of woman. (See above.)

St. Gregory the Theologian condemned very sharply those who rejected the name "Theotokos". "Anyone Who does not admit that holy Mary is the Theotokos is out of touch with the Godhead. Equally remote from God is anyone who says that Christ passed through the Virgin as through a channel without being formed in her in a manner at once divine and human-divine, because without the agency of a man; human, because following the normal process of gestation." (*Letter to Cledonius*, II)

Notwithstanding, a very large number of Fundamentalists assert that God used the Virgin as an instrument, taking nothing from her, and then discarded her!

All of the passages quoted above show that in Jesus Christ, the humanity did not receive a **hypostasis** (or person) apart from that of the divinity. It did not form an independent personality, but was taken by the divinity into the unity of His divine **hypostasis** so that, even after the Incarnation, He remains always the Son of God, the Second Hypostasis of the Holy Trinity, just as He was before the Incarnation.

In the Epistle to the Romans, the Apostle enumerates the reasons why Israel was the chosen people: "to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers ..." (9:4, 5) It is to this historical, human race that Christ belongs "concerning the flesh;" He descended from them as a man. Of this same Person the Apostle says that He "is over all God blessed forever..." (9:5)

Accordingly, it is the same one Person who has a historical earthly lineage and is at the same time the eternal Son of God: "Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God..." (Rm. 1:3,4)

### The Fathers and the Two Natures

In every generation since the time of our Lord's earthly life and the New Testament period, the Church has continued to teach the same doctrine regarding the two natures of the one, same Lord Jesus Christ. St. Ignatius of Antioch, a disciple of the Apostle John, wrote early in the second century:

“There is only one Physician – of flesh yet spiritual, born yet unbegotten, God incarnate, genuine life in the midst of death, sprung forth from Mary as well as from God, first subject to suffering, then beyond it – Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Eph. 7:2) We find the same teaching in St. Irenaeus, in the late second century, in Tertullian (third century), in St. Athanasius (fourth century), and so on down to the present time.

An excellent summary of the doctrine is given by St. Gregory the Theologian in the letter to Cledonius (A.D. 382 or 383), referred to previously. It says in part: “In Christ we do not separate the man and the divinity; we teach the unity and identity of Person, who before was not man, but God and only-begotten Son before all ages, not having a body or anything corporeal, but who, in these last days, has taken humanity also for our salvation, subject to suffering in His flesh, impassible in His Divinity, limited in the body, without limit in the spirit, at the same time earthly and heavenly, tangible and intangible, comprehensible and incomprehensible, so that, by one and the same Person, perfect man and God, all humanity, fallen because of sin, might be resurrected.”

The very foundation of the Christian Faith is the mystery of the Incarnation. The heresy which divides Christ into two persons undermines the Incarnation and, consequently, the redemption of mankind. If the divinity and the humanity were not united in a single Person; if the Son of God were united only in a moral way with the man Jesus; if it were not the Son of God in His flesh, taken by Him into the unity of His Person, who suffered for us and died on the cross, but simply the man Jesus, the expressions “the Word was made flesh,” “God sent forth His Son, made of a woman,” and “they crucified the Lord of glory,” would be empty words. The Incarnation would be unreal, and our redemption would not have been accomplished.

So while some people preach salvation through Jesus Christ, the very faultiness or incompleteness of their doctrine of Christ undermines their preaching. The Jesus they preach may offer ultimately no salvation at all.

### The Uniting of the Two Natures

It yet remains for us to examine the very way or mode of the **union** of the two natures in one Person. This is referred to as the **hypostatic union**.

For this inquiry, the definition of the teaching concerning the person of Christ produced by the Fourth Ecumenical Council (A.D. 451) is of very great importance. Known as the **Chalcedonian Decree** [or: **Definition**], the Council having met in Chalcedon, it used four expressions to describe the way in which the two natures are united. These expressions are adverbs in Greek, the language of the Council and its documents, but they are usually translated into English by the phrases **without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation**.

Entirely consistent with all of the testimonies from Holy Scripture examined heretofore, these terms were included in the Decree to emphasize the disastrous results of the false teachings of the Nestorians and the Monophysites. (This latter taught that there was an absorption of the humanity by the divinity and consequently only one nature.)

#### § Without Confusion

The divinity and the humanity in Christ were neither confused nor mixed with each other. Had they been, He would be neither perfect God nor perfect Man. Neither the divine nature nor the human nature could be attributed to Him. Rather, a new, third nature would be formed out of the fusion or mixture of the two, with new qualities and new differences.

#### § Without Change

If in the Person of Christ either the divinity had changed into humanity, or the humanity had been absorbed by or transformed into the divinity, we would have to attribute to Jesus Christ only one of the two natures. One nature would have remained intact and the other would have been destroyed and robbed of its qualities. Any of these notions would undermine the doctrine of the **Reconciliation**. (See **Chapter Four**.)

Even before the Fourth Council, many of the Fathers had defended the Orthodox doctrine of Christ. St. John Chrysostom (*On II John*, Homily 11) says: “By a union and conjunction God the Word and the flesh are a unity: there is no confusion or annihilation of substances.”

In one of the letters of St. Basil the Great, (cclxii), we read: "I admonish them to give up the absurd idea that God Himself changed into flesh and did not take Adam's nature from the Virgin Mary, or that He transformed Himself into material in His own divinity ... If He transformed Himself, He also changed. But we cannot say or even think so, because God Himself has said, 'For I am the Lord, I change not' (Mal. 3:6). Besides, what have we gained in the Incarnation, if it is not our body united to the divinity that has conquered death?"

### § Without Division

The two natures reside in Christ in their perfect **integrity** and with their differences, that is, with their particular qualities. They do not exist separately nor form two particular persons, not having a simple moral union, as Nestorius taught, but being united in the one and the same Person of the Man-God.

### § Without Separation

The two natures were united in the one Person of the Saviour at the moment of His conception in the womb of the Virgin. They were no longer and will never be separate: their union is **perpetual**.

"One must not believe that He was born of the Virgin first as a simple man, and that afterwards the Word of God descended upon Him, but rather we say that the Word was united in the very womb to the human nature and that He was born in the flesh." (St. Clement of Alexandria, *Epistle I to Nestorius*)

"Just as a man who is born naturally is not ready for action in an instant, but first the very germ of nature becomes flesh, and then with time, little by little, gains strength and the organs of the senses are formed, so God the Word, descending at the very beginning and at the root of human generation, began by taking flesh without transforming Himself into flesh ... because the Divinity is above all transformation." (St. Proclus, *Letter to the Armenians*)

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### A Permanent Union

The **hypostatic union** did not cease even during the sufferings of the Saviour on the cross, because if the Divinity, as some heretics claim, had separated Himself then from His humanity and had abandoned it, the Apostle could not have said that they had "crucified the Lord of glory" (I Cor. 2:8), or that we who, "when we were enemies ... were reconciled to God by the death of His Son," (Rm. 5:10), or that the Lord purchased the Church "with His own blood." (Acts 20:28)

Neither did this union cease after the resurrection of the Lord, nor after the ascension into heaven. It will never cease. He Himself assured Thomas that He rose from the dead in the flesh, inviting him to touch His body. Thomas' response is the faith of the Church: "My Lord and my God." (Jn. 20:26-28)

It is also in the flesh that He will come again to judge the living and the dead. (See Mt. 25.) After the ascension, as the Apostles stood looking toward heaven, "two men stood by them in white apparel; which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, **shall so come in like manner** as ye have seen Him go into heaven." (Acts 1:10, 11)

*If there are any topics you would like covered in future editions of the Prophet, or if you have any articles which you found to be a blessing, please let Fr. John know!*