

THE PROPHET

Monthly Newsletter of

St. John the Baptist Orthodox Church

Orthodox Church in America (OCA)

Archdiocese of Pittsburgh

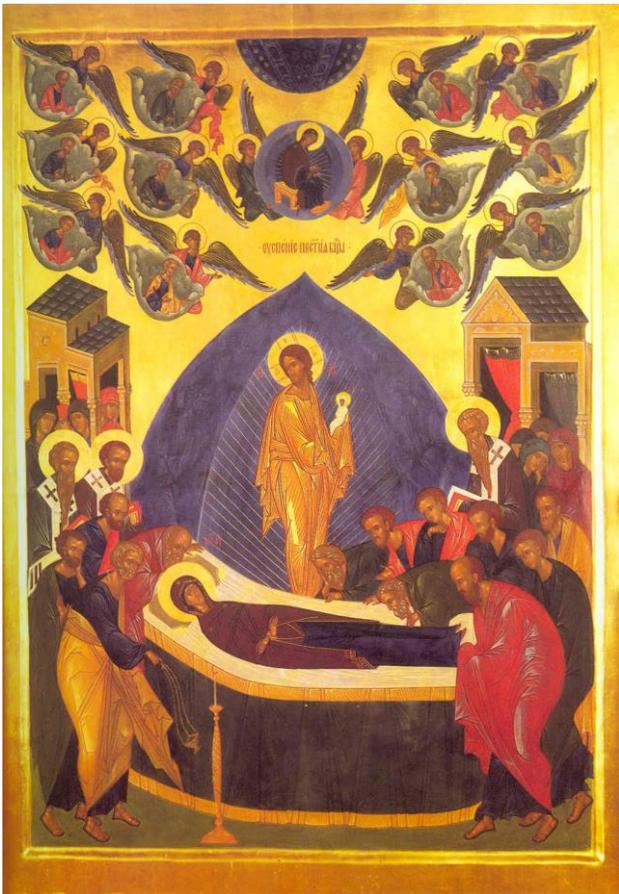
His Eminence, Most Rev. Melchisedek

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August 2021



The Dormition & Assumption of the Theotokos

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RECTOR'S REPORT:

Glory to Jesus Christ! Slava Isusu Christu!

The month of August brings with it many feasts, and thus many opportunities for us to enter into the life of Christ as made manifest through the liturgical life of the Church: The month begins with the "First Feast of the Saviour" in August, the feast of the Procession of the Life-Giving Cross, where we bless water and - in many places - honey, as Christ's passion, death, and resurrection bring refreshment and sweetness to our lives. Then, for the "Second Feast of the Saviour" - Holy Transfiguration, on Aug. 6 - we bless grapes and other fruits, being reminded that we are called to bear fruits of the Christian life by which we are transfigured and made god-like, and to offer those to God and our fellow man. For those of us in America, Aug. 9th is the feast of our national patron, St. Herman of Alaska. On Aug. 15th, we then celebrate the Feast of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary, blessing flowers to bring into our lives the hope offered by our Lady's assumption. The next day, we celebrate August's "Third Feast of the Saviour": the Feast of Christ the Saviour, which commemorates the true incarnation of Christ of the Virgin Mary as revealed in the Image of Christ "Not Made by Hands", a miraculous image of Christ which appeared on a handkerchief Christ used to wipe his face in lieu of being able to visit the King of Edessa.

For those of us here at St. John's, the month then concludes with our Altar Feast: the Beheading of St. John the Baptist. Because this feast conveniently falls on a Sunday this year, we should all strive to attend to fulfill our solemn duty to celebrate our parish's feast day.

With so many feasts, it is also important to note that, mid-way between Pascha and Christmas, we meant to remember the seriousness of this Christian life by being called to strictly fast for the first two weeks of August, in preparation and honour of the Falling-Asleep and Assumption of our Lady Theotokos. This fast is meant to be the strictest of the year apart from Great Lent, so let's try our best to keep it!

Let us use these feasts and fast to enter more fully into the Christian life, so that we might receive the grace and mercy of God, bearing fruit, and living in the hope of the resurrection unto new life promised to those who struggle to keep Christ's commandments.

In Christ, with thanks and love,
Fr. John Joseph Kotalik IV, Rector

MEMORY ETERNAL:
(Вѣчная память!)

We commemorate the anniversaries of:

Stefan Basalov (8/1/1920)
Anna Telesko (8/1/1981)
Theodore (8/2/1932)
Julia Polinsky (8/2/1995)
Mary Louise Kotyk (8/2/1999)
Elizabeth Ludinsky (8/2/2005)
Andrew Chobany (8/2/2008)
Nancy Jo Catherine (8/2/2011)
Dimitry Moskal (8/3/1932)
Nicholas Kozares (8/3/1960)
John Feyche (8/3/1991)
Michael Semnick (8/4/1961)
James Kern (8/4/2013)
Joanna Karachop (8/5/1923)
Charles Havrilak (8/6/1981)
John Lazor (8/7/1996)
Theodore Frank Hurzon (8/7/1977)
Harold Uram (8/7/1993)
Barbara Voskreskov (8/8/1918)
Louis Matyuf (8/9/1954)
Anna Savage (8/9/1985)

Thomas Minenok (8/10/1933)
John Matyuf (8/10/1954)
Michael Hanaris (8/10/1973)
Anna Popka (8/11/1920)
Barbara Meikel (8/11/1962)
John Chupinsky (8/11/2000)
Michael Lazorchak (8/1/1962)
Anna Lazor (8/12/1970)
Maria Korobushkin (8/14/1918)
Michael Petronko (8/14/1932)
John Telyatinov (8/14/1940)
Theodore Martinenko (8/14/1944)
Anna Koppy (8/14/1946)
Thekla Gabovsky (8/15/1923)
Marija Mataya (8/15/2001)
Anna Skalka (8/16/1919)
Anna Swanik (8/18/1941)
Paraskeva Kapustinsky (8/17/1919)
Anthony Monsour (8/17/1961)
George Hoholak (8/17/1993)
Luke Radich (8/18/1919)
Agnes Chupinsky (8/18/1993)
William Sohyda (8/18/2004)
Lillian Sohyda (8/18/2006)
Barbara Trivonovich (8/19/2016)
Aboud "Albert" Dagar (8/20/1968)
Margaret Lockoski (8/20/2016)
John Cruny (8/21/1949)
Nicholas Semenik (8/22/1945)
Daniel Kotyk (8/22/1959)
Julia Dampf (8/22/1966)
Anna Reucziak (8/22/1966)
Mary O'Brien (8/22/1992)
John Stephanchak (8/23/1928)
Barbara Srubhich (8/23/1956)
Caroline Kozares (8/23/1986)
Albert Nikovlech (8/24/1918)
Helen Sohyda (8/24/1956)
Peter Kirr (8/25/2007)
Cyril Stanko (8/26/1926)
Mary Vasyukhna (8/26/1941)
Cecelia Khomich (8/26/1941)
Beatrice Joseph (8/26/1957)
Pearl Karabushkin (8/26/1982)
Catherine Toth (8/26/1997)
Mary Naglovsky (8/27/1940)
Michael Suvak (8/28/1957)
Mary Dzuiba (8/28/1966)
Steven Kotyk (8/29/2000)
Simyon Tsibulsky (8/30/1918)
Alexander Evans (8/30/1942)
Marie Sohyda (8/30/2004)
Nicholas Holowach (8/31/1943)
William Sohyda (8/31/2002)

MANY YEARS:
(Многая и благая лѣта!)

Namedays:

Susan Pazuchanics (8/11)
Samuel Simko (8/20)
Aiden Onest (8/31)
Kiprian Yarosh (8/31)

Birthdays:

Dr. Dennis Davis (8/2)
Gwen Bushko (8/4)
Alexandra Oleynik (8/5)
Michael Pazuchanics (8/6)
Steve Simko (8/6)
Kiprian Yarosh (8/7)
Ryan Williams (8/13)
Pr. John Joseph Kotalik (8/15)
Beverly Davis (8/18)
Helen Lazorchak (8/18)
Luis Thompson (8/18)
Ashley Wright (8/19)
Elijah Cario (8/19)
Alexandra Yarosh (8/26)
Elena Yarosh (8/26)
Lydia Williams (8/28)
Grace Matyuf (8/30)

Wedding Anniversaries:

Daniel & Emily Thacker (8/2)
Dr. Rodney & Jo Fedorchak (8/8)
Kevin & Mary Ann Reck (8/20)
John & Dawn Simko (8/24)

Anniversary of Ordination:

Pr. John Joseph Kotalik (8/24)

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

The Transfiguration

from Fr. Thomas Hopko's "The Orthodox Faith"

The Transfiguration of Christ is one of the central events recorded in the gospels. Immediately after the Lord was recognized by His apostles as "the Christ [Messiah], the Son of the Living God," He told them that "He must go up to Jerusalem and suffer many things . . . and be killed and on the third

day be raised" (Mt 16). The announcement of Christ's approaching passion and death was met with indignation by the disciples. And then, after rebuking them, the Lord took Peter, James, and John "up to a high mountain" – by tradition Mount Tabor – and was "transfigured before them."

"... and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became white as snow and behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with Him. And Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish I will make three booths here, one for You and one for Moses and one for Elijah." He was still speaking when lo, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is My Beloved Son, with Whom I am well pleased; listen to Him." When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces with awe. But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Rise, and have no fear." And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead" (Mt 17.1-9, see also Mk 9.1-9; Lk 9.28-36; 2 Pet 1.16-18).

The Jewish Festival of Booths was a feast of the dwelling of God with men, and the transfiguration of Christ reveals how this dwelling takes place in and through the Messiah, the Son of God in human flesh. There is little doubt that Christ's transfiguration took place at the time of the Festival of Booths, and that the celebration of the event in the Christian Church became the New Testamental fulfillment of the Old Testamental feast in a way similar to the feasts of Passover and Pentecost.

In the Transfiguration, the apostles see the glory of the Kingdom of God present in majesty in the person of Christ they see that "in Him, indeed, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell," that "in Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 1.19, 2.9). They see this before the crucifixion so that in the resurrection they might know Who it is Who has suffered for them, and what it is that this one, Who is God, has prepared for those who love Him. This is what the Church celebrates in the feast of the Transfiguration.

Thou wast transfigured on the mount. O Christ God, revealing Thy glory to Thy disciples as they could bear it. Let Thine everlasting light shine upon us sinners through the prayers of the Theotokos, O Giver of Light, glory to Thee.

(Troparion)

On the mountain wast Thou transfigured, O Christ God, and Thy disciples beheld Thy glory as far as they could see it; so that when they would behold Thee crucified, they would understand that Thy suffering was voluntary, and would proclaim to the world that Thou art truly the Radiance of the Father. (Kontakion)

Besides the fundamental meaning which the event of the Transfiguration has in the context of the life and mission of Christ, and in addition to the theme of the glory of God which is revealed in all of its divine splendor in the face of the Saviour, the presence of Moses and Elijah is also of great significance for the understanding and celebration of the feast. Many of the hymns refer to these two leading figures of the Old Covenant as do the three scripture readings of Vespers which tell of the manifestation of the glory of God to these holy men of old (Ex 24.12-18; 33.11-34.8; 1 Kg 19.3-16).

Moses and Elijah, according to the liturgical verses, are not only the greatest figures of the Old Testament who now come to worship the Son of God in glory, they also are not merely two of the holy men to whom God has revealed himself in the prefigurative theophanies of the Old Covenant of Israel. These two figures actually stand for the Old Testament itself: Moses for the Law and Elijah for the Prophets. And Christ is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets (Mt 5.17).

They also stand for the living and dead, for Moses died and his burial place is known, while Elijah was taken alive into heaven in order to appear again to announce the time of God's salvation in Christ the Messiah.

Thus, in appearing with Jesus on the mount of Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah show that the Messiah Saviour is here, and that He is the Son of God to Whom the Father Himself bears witness, the Lord of all creation, of the Old and New Testaments, of the living and the dead. The Transfiguration of Christ in itself is the fulfillment of all of the theophanies and manifestations of God, a fulfillment made perfect and complete in the person of Christ. The

Transfiguration of Christ reveals to us our ultimate destiny as Christians, the ultimate destiny of all men and all creation to be transformed and glorified by the majestic splendor of God Himself.

There is little doubt that the feast of the Transfiguration of Christ belonged first to the pre-Easter season of the Church. It was perhaps celebrated on one of the Sundays of Lent, for besides certain historical evidence and the fact that today St Gregory Palamas, the great teacher of the Transfiguration of Christ, is commemorated during Lent, the event itself is one which is definitely connected with the approaching death and resurrection of the Saviour.

... so that when they would behold Thee crucified, they would understand that Thy suffering was voluntary (Kontakion)

The feast of the Transfiguration is presently celebrated on the sixth of August, probably for some historical reason. The summer celebration of the feast, however, has lent itself very well to the theme of transfiguration. The blessing of grapes, as well as other fruits and vegetables on this day is the most beautiful and adequate sign of the final -transfiguration of all things in Christ. It signifies the ultimate flowering and fruitfulness of all creation in the paradise of God's unending Kingdom of Life where all will be transformed by the glory of the Lord.

The Dormition of the Theotokos

from Fr. Thomas Hopko's "The Orthodox Faith"

The feast of the Dormition or Falling-Asleep of the Theotokos is celebrated on the fifteenth of August, preceded by a two-week fast. This feast, which is also sometimes called the Assumption, commemorates the death, resurrection and glorification of Christ's mother. It proclaims that Mary has been "assumed" [taken up] by God into the heavenly kingdom of Christ in the fullness of her spiritual and bodily existence.

As with the nativity of the Virgin and the feast of her entrance to the temple, there are no biblical or historical sources for this feast. The Tradition of the Church is that Mary died as all people die, not "voluntarily" as her Son, but by the necessity of her mortal human nature which is indivisibly bound up with the corruption of this world.

The Orthodox Church teaches that Mary is without personal sins. In the Gospel of the feast, however, in the liturgical services and in the Dormition icon, the Church proclaims as well that Mary truly needed to be saved by Christ as all human persons are saved from the trials, sufferings and death of this world; and that having truly died, she was raised up by her Son as the Mother of Life and participates already in the eternal life of paradise which is prepared and promised to all who “hear the word of God and keep it” (Lk 11.27–28).

*In giving birth, thou didst preserve thy virginity.
In falling asleep thou didst not forsake the world,
O Theotokos. Thou wast translated to life, O
Mother of Life, and by thy prayers, thou dost de-
liver our souls from death. (Troparion)*

*Neither the tomb, nor death, could hold the The-
otokos, who is constant in prayer and our firm
hope in her intercessions. For being the Mother of
Life, she was translated to life, by the One who
dwelt in her virginal womb. (Kontakion)*

The services of the feast repeat the main theme, that the Mother of Life has “passed over into the heavenly joy, into the divine gladness and unending delight” of the Kingdom of her Son (Vespéral hymn). The Old Testament readings, as well as the gospel readings for the Vigil and the Divine Liturgy, are exactly the same as those for the feast of the Virgin’s nativity and her entrance into the Temple. Thus, at the Vigil we again hear Mary say: “My soul magnifies the Lord and my Spirit rejoices in God my Saviour” (Lk 1.47). At the Divine Liturgy we hear the letter to the Philippians where Saint Paul speaks of the self-emptying of Christ who condescends to human servitude and ignoble death in order to be “highly exalted by God his Father” (Phil 2.5–11). And once again we hear in the Gospel that Mary’s blessedness belongs to all who “hear the word of God and keep it” (Lk 11.27–28).

Thus, the feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos is the celebration of the fact that all men are “highly exalted” in the blessedness of the victorious Christ, and that this high exaltation has already been accomplished in Mary the Theotokos. The feast of the Dormition is the sign, the guarantee, and the celebration that Mary’s fate is, the destiny of all those of “low estate” whose souls magnify the Lord, whose spirits rejoice in God the Saviour, whose lives are

totally dedicated to hearing and keeping the Word of God which is given to men in Mary’s child, the Saviour and Redeemer of the world.

Finally it must be stressed that, in all of the feasts of the Virgin Mother of God in the Church, the Orthodox Christians celebrate facts of their own lives in Christ and the Holy Spirit. What happens to Mary happens to all who imitate her holy life of humility, obedience, and love. With her all people will be “blessed” to be “more honorable than the cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the seraphim” if they follow her example. All will have Christ born in them by the Holy Spirit. All will become temples of the living God. All will share in the eternal life of His Kingdom who live the life that Mary lived.

In this sense everything that is praised and glorified in Mary is a sign of what is offered to all persons in the life of the Church. It is for this reason that Mary, with the divine child Jesus within her, is called in the Orthodox Tradition the Image of the Church. For the assembly of the saved is those in whom Christ dwells.

Over Come Evil By Doing Good

by Fr. Stephen Freeman, June 11, 2021

Drawing on the Book of Proverbs, St. Paul offers a simple admonition to his readers:

“...if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” (Romans 12:20)

He then adds:

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

It is a very simple statement. However, when anyone begins to suggest what that might look like, critics quickly begin to offer egregious examples that would ask us to bear the unbearable, with the inevitable conclusion: “Kill your enemies.” What is suggested, in effect, is that Christians should respond in the same way as any tyrant would, only a little less so. “Kill your enemies, but not so much.” (I use the term “kill” in this example only as the most extreme form of violence). A question: What is it about the

Kingdom of God that gave Christ and the Apostles such a confidence in its non-violence?

Consider these verses:

Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here." (Jn. 18:36)

And

"But now let the one who has a moneybag take it, and likewise a knapsack. And let the one who has no sword sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors.' For what is written about me has its fulfillment." And they said, "Look, Lord, here are two swords." And he said to them, "It is enough." (Lk. 22:38)

And

"And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword." (Matt. 26:52)

There is something of a mystery in Christ's instruction to buy a sword. Many consider it simply a metaphorical way of saying that troubles are coming. Indeed, one of those two swords is drawn and does terrible damage to a man when Christ is arrested, earning a rebuke. I have always wondered if Peter (the one who wielded the sword) thought to himself, "But I thought He said bring a sword!" As it is, Christ restored and healed the ear of the injured man.

The key, I think, is found in Christ's statement to Pilate that His Kingdom is not "of" this world. That does not mean that the Kingdom is located somewhere else. Rather, it means that His Kingdom's source is not found within the things of this world. It is a sovereign act of God. As such, its reality is independent of our actions and will. There is nothing in the Kingdom of God that requires our swords (or even our words). It is heaven-breaking-into-our-world. It is unassailable.

This is the faith of the martyrs. The long history of the Church's faithful who have gone to their

deaths include many stories of terrible persecutions and tortures. They also include an abiding witness to an abiding sense that everything being done to them somehow misses the point. When Christ stood before Pilate, He was threatened with the might and power of Rome. "Don't you know I have the power to release you or to kill you?" Human beings have no power over God. The Kingdom of God willingly enters into the suffering of this world, willingly bears shame, willingly embraces the weakness of the Cross. The martyrs acted as they did because their lives were *not of this world*. Christians should not live in this world thinking about a world somewhere else (heaven). Rather, Christians themselves are heaven in this world. It is that reality to which we bear witness (martyr means "witness").

Modern nation states came into existence slowly, as one of the consequences of the Reformation. Some, like England, had a head start, inasmuch as it was partially defined by its shoreline. But most, like France and Germany, evolved more slowly. We imagine today's modern states as though they were defined by blood and language. However, that is a fantasy, little older than the 19th century. Nationalism, sadly, was one of a number of romantic movements that served to replace the common life of the Church with romantic notions of lesser, tribal belongings.

The patriotic mythologies that came into existence together with modernity's nationalisms are siren songs that seek to create loyalties that are essentially religious in nature. World War I, in the early 20th century, was deeply revealing of the 19th century's false ideologies. There, in the fields of France, European Christians killed one another by the millions in the name of entities that, in some cases, had existed for less than 50 years (Germany was born, more or less, in 1871). The end of that war did *nothing*, apparently, to awaken Christians to the madness that had been born in their midst.

I have noted, through the years, that the patriotism that inhabits the thoughts of many is a deeply protected notion, treated as a *virtue* in many circles. This often gives it an unexamined character, a set of feelings that do not come under scrutiny. Of course, there are other nation-based feelings and narratives, some of which are highly reactive to patriotism though they are driven as much by the passions and their own mythology. These are the sorts of passions that seem to have risen to a fever-pitch in the last

decade or so, though they have been operative for a very long time.

These passions are worth careful examination, particularly as they have long been married to America's many denominational Christianities. I think it is noteworthy that one of the most prominent 19th century American inventions was Mormonism. There we have the case of a religious inventor (Joseph Smith) literally writing America into the Scriptures and creating an alternative, specifically *American*, account of Christ and salvation. It was not an accident. He was, in fact, drawing on the spirit of the Age, only more blatantly and heretically. But there are many Christians whose Christianity is no less suffused with the same sentiments.

Asking questions of these things quickly sends some heads spinning. They wonder, "Are we not supposed to love our country?" As an abstraction, no. We love people; we love the land. We owe honor to honorable things and persons. The Church prays for persons: the President, civil authorities, the armed forces. We are commanded to pray and to obey the laws as we are able in good conscience. Nothing more. St. Paul goes so far as to say that our "citizenship [*politeia*] is in heaven." The assumption of many is that so long as the citizenship of earth does not conflict with the citizenship of heaven, all is fine. I would suggest that the two are *always* in conflict for the simple reason that one is "from above" while the other is "from below," in the sense captured in Christ's "my kingdom is not of this world." There is a conflict. We should not expect that the kingdom of this world will serve as the instrument of the Kingdom of God. Such confusions have yielded sinful actions throughout the course of the Church's history.

St. Paul notes in Romans 13 that the state "does not bear the sword in vain." It has an appointed role in the restraint of evil. Such a role, however, is not the instrument of righteousness. It can, at best, create a measure of tranquility (cf. the Anaphora of St. Basil). The work of the Kingdom of God cannot be coerced, nor can it be the work of coercion. It is freely embraced, even as it alone is the source of true freedom.

My purpose in offering these observations is, if possible, to "dial down" passions surrounding our thoughts of the nation and politics in order to love properly and deeply what should be loved. That this

is difficult, and at times confusing, is to be expected. We live in a culture in which the passions are marketed to us in an endless stream, carefully designed for the greatest effect. If these thoughts of mine help still the passions to some degree, then I will have done well. If, on the other hand, they have stirred reaction, then, forgive me and let it go.

If the Kingdom of God were a ship (an image sometimes used of the Church), then we should not be surprised when the seas become boisterous and the winds become contrary. Nor should we panic if we find that Christ is asleep in the back of the boat. His sleeping, indeed, should be a clue as to what the true nature of our situation might be. There are some who imagine that the work of the Kingdom can only be fulfilled once we've learned to control the winds and the seas. We fail to understand that they already obey the One who sleeps.

And so we come to overcoming evil by doing good. It is a common teaching in the Fathers that evil has no substance – it only exists as a parasite. All created things are good by nature. It is the misuse of the good that we label "evil." To do good thus has the character of eternity. It is not lost or diminished with time. Christ said, "And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward." (Matthew 10:42)

When the final account is given, the nations will not be named. Their wars and empires will pass into what is forgotten. However, the many cups of cold water and other such acts of goodness will abide. I could imagine such actions on the part of a nation, and there are probably plenty. They likely go unnoticed, or even derided as wasteful.

I think that our politics and patriotism want to measure the seas, where God is measuring cups.

The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus **Chap. 5: the Manners of the Christians**

c. AD 130-200

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 dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.

A Reader's Guide to Orthodox Icons:

The Dormition - Icon of Hope

iconreader.wordpress.com

On August 15, the Dormition of the Mother of God is celebrated by most Christians in the world. The Church year begins on September 1, and the first Great Feast of the year is the Nativity of the Theotokos, making the Dormition of the Theotokos the last great feast of the year. It is entirely fitting that these two feasts – celebrating the birth and falling-asleep of Mary respectively – should buttress the entire church calendar. The Church calendar tells us

the story of our Salvation in the traditional way, with the climax of the story coming in the middle, which is when Easter is celebrated, before ending in a way which is somewhat symmetrical and complimentary to the beginning. Therefore, the final “scene” in our story of Salvation is the Dormition of Mary, the Mother of God.

The Icon of the feast depicts various strands of the story in one single frame. The story is this (from the OCA's website):

At the time of Her blessed Falling Asleep, the Most Holy Virgin Mary was again at Jerusalem. Her fame as the Mother of God had already spread throughout the land and had aroused many of the envious and the spiteful against Her. They wanted to make attempts on Her life; but God preserved Her from enemies.

Day and night She spent her time in prayer. The Most Holy Theotokos went often to the Holy Sepulchre of the Lord, and here She offered up fervent prayer.

In one such visit to Golgotha, the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Her and announced Her approaching departure from this life to eternal life. In pledge of this, the Archangel gave Her a palm branch. With these heavenly tidings the Mother of God returned to Bethlehem with the three girls attending Her (Sepphora, Abigail, and Jael). She summoned Righteous Joseph of Arimathea and other disciples of the Lord, and told them of Her impending Repose.

The Most Holy Virgin prayed also that the Lord would have the Apostle John come to Her. The Holy Spirit transported him from Ephesus, setting him in that very place where the Mother of God lay. After the prayer, the Most Holy Virgin offered incense, and John heard a voice from Heaven, closing Her prayer with the word “Amen.” The Mother of God took it that the voice meant the speedy arrival of the Apostles and the Disciples and the holy Bodiless Powers.

The faithful, whose number by then was impossible to count, gathered together, says St John of Damascus, like clouds and eagles, to listen to the Mother of God. Seeing one another, the Disciples rejoiced, but in their confusion they asked each other why the Lord had gathered them together in one place. St John the Theologian, greeting them with tears of joy, said that the time of the Virgin's repose was at hand.

Going in to the Mother of God, they beheld Her lying upon the bed, and filled with spiritual joy. The Disciples greeted Her, and then they told her how they had been carried miraculously from their places of preaching. The Most Holy Virgin Mary glorified God, because He had

heard Her prayer and fulfilled Her heart's desire, and She began speaking about Her imminent end.

During this conversation the Apostle Paul also appeared in a miraculous manner together with his disciples Dionysius the Areopagite, St Hierotheus, St Timothy and others of the Seventy Apostles. The Holy Spirit had gathered them all together so that they might be granted the blessing of the All-Pure Virgin Mary, and more fittingly to see to the burial of the Mother of the Lord. She called each of them to Herself by name, She blessed them and extolled them for their faith and the hardships they endured in preaching the Gospel of Christ. To each She wished eternal bliss, and prayed with them for the peace and welfare of the whole world.

Then came the third hour (9 A.M.), when the Dormition of the Mother of God was to occur. A number of candles were burning. The holy Disciples surrounded her beautifully adorned bed, offering praise to God. She prayed in anticipation of Her demise and of the arrival of Her longed-for Son and Lord. Suddenly, the inexpressible Light of Divine Glory shone forth, before which the blazing candles paled in comparison. All who it saw took fright. Descending from Heaven was Christ, the King of Glory, surrounded by hosts of Angels and Archangels and other Heavenly Powers, together with the souls of the Forefathers and the Prophets, who had prophesied in ages past concerning the Most Holy Virgin Mary.

Seeing Her Son, the Mother of God exclaimed: "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God My Savior, for He hath regarded the low estate of His Handmaiden" (Luke 1:46-48) and, rising from Her bed to meet the Lord, She bowed down to Him, and the Lord bid Her enter into Life Eternal. Without any bodily suffering, as though in a happy sleep, the Most Holy Virgin Mary gave Her soul into the hands of Her Son and God.

Then began a joyous angelic song. Accompanying the pure soul of the God-betrothed and with reverent awe for the Queen of Heaven, the angels exclaimed: "Hail, Full of Grace, the Lord is with Thee, blessed art Thou among women! For lo, the Queen, God's Maiden comes, lift up the gates, and with the Ever-Existing One, take up the Mother of Light; for through Her salvation has come to all the human race. It is impossible to gaze upon Her, and it is impossible to render Her due honor" (Stikheron on "Lord, I Have Cried"). The Heavenly gates were raised, and meeting the soul of the Most Holy Mother of God, the Cherubim and the Seraphim glorified Her with joy. The face of the Mother of God was radiant with the glory of Divine virginity, and from Her body there came a sweet fragrance.

Kissing the all-pure body with reverence and in awe, the Disciples in turn were blessed by it and filled with grace and spiritual joy. Through the great glorification of the Most Holy Theotokos, the almighty power of God healed the sick, who with faith and love touched the holy bed.

Bewailing their separation from the Mother of God, the Apostles prepared to bury Her all-pure body. The holy Apostles Peter, Paul, James and others of the Twelve Apostles carried the funeral bier upon their shoulders, and upon it lay the body of the Ever-Virgin Mary. St John the Theologian went at the head with the resplendent palm-branch from Paradise. The other saints and a multitude of the faithful accompanied the funeral bier with candles and censers, singing sacred songs. This solemn procession went from Sion through Jerusalem to the Garden of Gethsemane.

With the start of the procession there suddenly appeared over the all-pure body of the Mother of God and all those accompanying Her a resplendent circular cloud, like a crown. There was heard the singing of the Heavenly Powers, glorifying the Mother of God, which echoed that of the worldly voices. This circle of Heavenly singers and radiance accompanied the procession to the very place of burial.

Unbelieving inhabitants of Jerusalem, taken aback by the extraordinarily grand funeral procession and vexed at the honor accorded the Mother of Jesus, complained of this to the High Priest and scribes. The Jewish priest Athonius, out of spite and hatred for the Mother of Jesus of Nazareth, wanted to topple the funeral bier on which lay the body of the Most Holy Virgin Mary, but an angel of God invisibly cut off his hands, which had touched the bier. Seeing such a wonder, Athonius repented and with faith confessed the majesty of the Mother of God. He received healing and joined the crowd accompanying the body of the Mother of God, and he became a zealous follower of Christ.

When the procession reached the Garden of Gethsemane, then amidst the weeping and the wailing began the last kiss to the all-pure body. Only towards evening were the Apostles able to place it in the tomb and seal the entrance to the cave with a large stone.

For three days they did not depart from the place of burial, praying and chanting Psalms. Through the wise providence of God, the Apostle Thomas was not to be present at the burial of the Mother of God. Arriving late on the third day at Gethsemane, he lay down at the tomb and with bitter tears asked that he might be permitted to look once more upon the Mother of God and bid her farewell.

The Apostles out of heartfelt pity for him decided to open the grave and permit him the comfort of venerating the holy relics of the Ever-Virgin Mary. Having opened the grave, they found in it only the grave wrappings and were thus convinced of the bodily ascent of the Most Holy Virgin Mary to Heaven.

The miraculous transportation of the Apostles is shown in the top of the Icon, though the main scene depicted within the icon is the funeral procession itself. The Apostles are shown reverencing the body of the Mother of God: St. Paul at her feet; St Peter at the head with censer in hand.

Together with the Apostles are several bishops – indicated by their white sashes with crosses embroidered upon them – and women. The bishops traditionally represented are James, the brother of the Lord, Timothy, Heirotheus, and Dionysius the Areopagite, who first recorded the story of the Dormition in the 2nd century AD. The women are Sapphira, Abigail, and Jael, along with other members of the church in Jerusalem.

The account of the impious Jewish priest is not shown in [many icons, but is often shown of many icons of the Dormition]. At the top centre of [many icons is] the unwitnessed assumption of Mary's resurrected body into the open gates of Heaven.

Yet the main aspect of the Icon – to which all eyes are inevitably drawn – is the image of Christ in Glory holding the pure soul of Mary in His arms, shown as an infant. The parallel between the image of the God-Man Jesus holding the child-like soul of Mary and the image of the Mother Mary holding the Christ-child in her own arms is, of course, deliberate. The title of "God-bearer" is given to other Saints, such as St. Ignatius. To carry the Word of God, Jesus Christ, within us is the calling of all Christians: to bear Him spiritually within us during our lives, and shine with His glory. The "reward" for this in our earthly life is suffering at the hands of enemies, even to the point of martyrdom, as in the case of St. Ignatius. Yet the reward *after* our repose is that God bears our soul into His own hands and carries us into eternity, as we carried Him, for just a short time.

Elsewhere I wrote that no human being resembled Jesus Christ – the Son of God – more than His Mother, Mary. And yet this does not make the Theotokos the great exception to the human race, but the great exemplar. Jesus Christ Himself corrected the woman who shouted that Mary was blessed because

she had the honour of being the Mother of God: "*yea, blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it.*" This is why Mary is blessed – because more than any other person she heard the words of her Lord and kept them. This path toward Heavenly joy is open to us all.

And just as we look to Mary's life for an example, we look to her bodily death – in this Icon – for hope as to where such an example leads us. The hope is in the bodily Resurrection and the life of the age to come. Both are shown in the Icon: the bodily assumption of Mary into Heaven, as well as the commendation of her soul into the hands of Jesus Christ.

Like those who gathered around the body of the Virgin Mary, we gather around our departed loved ones and commend their souls into the hands of Christ. As we remember those who have reposed in the faith before us and have passed on into the communion of the Saints, we prepare ourselves to one day be received into the new life of the age to come.

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 7:

THE OBJECT OF HIS MINISTRY

The first six chapters of this exposition of the Doctrine of Christ have dealt with His person. We have tried to answer the question of who Christ is, according to the teaching of the Orthodox Church. Now it is time for us to turn our attention to the work of Christ. Other truths concerning His person will be evident in the presentation of what He did.

We Worship Christ as One Person

In the prayer that the Lord Jesus Christ prayed just before His passion, He refers to the **work** for which He had been sent into the world: "I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the **work** which thou gavest me to do." (Jn. 17:4) He had already described His purpose to His disciples thus: "I must work the works of Him that sent me ..." (Jn. 9:4) And He identified His own work with that of the Father: "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work."

Christ's work was not one particular act or deed of His life; rather, His work was His whole life and ministry. In other words, His work, His ministry, was one. It was a divine work accomplished through His humanity.

The Lord's great work was His ministry on behalf of the human race. "Even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Mt. 20:28)

Indeed, the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph and told him that the child conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary was of the Holy Spirit. The son born of her would "save His people from their sins." (Mt. 1:20, 21)

St. Paul described the ministry of Christ in these terms: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself." (II Cor. 5:19)

St. John the Apostle tells us that Jesus Christ saved us in having "given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true ..." (I Jn. 5:20) In his Gospel account, the same Apostle records the words of Jesus to those who sought to kill Him: "But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth, which I have heard from God." (8:40)

How this ministry of salvation, reconciliation and of testifying to the truth was accomplished must now be our focus.

Everything Christ did had as its one purpose the restoration of fallen mankind and the reconciliation of the world to Himself. It is traditional to speak of

three aspects of His one ministry: that of prophet, of priest, and of king.

The name that is properly given to Jesus is **Messiah**, a Semitic word which means "anointed." The name "Christ" is derived from the Greek word meaning the same thing. In the Old Testament, this anointing was given to persons who were ordained by the Holy Spirit for God's work among men. Thus, it was given to the prophets: Elijah was commanded by God to anoint "Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abelmeholah ... to be prophet." (III [I] Kgs. 19:16)

Anointing was also given to the high priests. The Lord said to Moses: "Thou shalt anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that they may minister unto me in the priest's office." (Ex. 30:30)

And, anointing was given to the kings. "And Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brethren: and the Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward." (I Kgs. [I Sam.] 16:13)

The name Christ (Messiah) is attributed to our Lord Jesus as having been anointed in His humanity by God Himself "with an oil of gladness, above [His] fellows." (Hb. 1:9) As previously stated (pg. 52), "fellows" refers to all those whose humanity He shared. This is said prophetically of the promised Saviour in Psalm 44 [45]:7, and here applied to Jesus by St. Paul.

Thus Jesus combined in Himself in the highest possible degree these three types of anointed ones. He is the **Prophet**, the **Priest**, and the **King**. He saved us as prophet by proclaiming to us the truth about God and about man; as priest, in offering Himself out of His love for us as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world; and as in having destroyed the reign of death and established His Kingdom among us.

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!