

Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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Visit stsymeon.com

✠ **March 23, 2014** ✠

Sunday of the Cross

Monk-Martyr Nikon and his disciples in Sicily (251)

St. Nikon, Abbot of the Kiev Caves (1088)



Fourth Week of Great Lent

Feast of the Annunciation ~ March 25

- ✠ **Tomorrow night – 6:30pm Vespers of Annunciation with Litiya**
- ✠ **Tuesday, March 25 10:00am Annunciation Divine Liturgy**
- ✠ **Tuesday Night, March 25 6:30pm Inquirer's Class**
- ✠ **Friday March 28 6:30pm – Presanctified Liturgy {NO Potluck Supper}**

- + **Children's Lenten Retreat – This Saturday, March 29 10:00am - 5:00pm**
for all Sunday School children from Kindergarten through Middle School. The theme is "The Sundays of Lent." Children's confessions will be available during the day and Children's choir will sing for Vespers that night. Volunteers and helpers will be needed.
- + **Youth Trip to Atlanta – March 29 with Fr. Deacon - to visit Atlanta Orthodox churches**

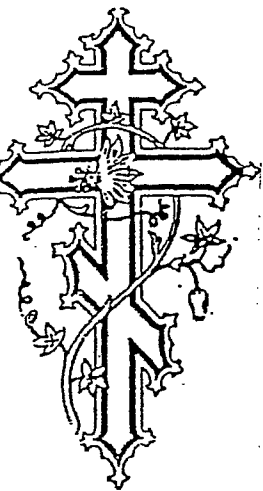
Love Crucified

"Looking upon the Savior's Cross, contemplate Love, crucified upon it for our salvation; and think, for what blessedness He has saved us, and from what torments He has redeemed us! He has snatched us from the jaws of the beast and hast brought us to the Father! O love! O redemption! O indescribable, endless blessedness!" - St. John of Kronstadt

OUR INVINCIBLE WEAPON

When our Savior rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven, he did not leave us orphans. He established His grace-filled Church and adorned it with numerous gifts to help continue His presence among us. We have been given the Divine Services, the Sacraments, the icons, the holy Scriptures, and so much more. And wherever we turn, we see the Life-giving Cross. We see it in icons, on the iconostas, behind the altar table. We constantly make its image over ourselves and we kiss it as it is held by the priest. Several days of the liturgical year are set aside for its commemoration, as is also every Friday of the week. While the canons of the Church prohibit kneeling on Sunday (1st and 6th Ecumenical Councils), on Sundays commemorating the Cross we are instructed to kneel and prostrate ourselves before it. This is how holy and venerable the Cross is.

Outside the Orthodox Church, however, it seems that the Cross (along with most everything else) has been pushed aside as an object of no particular spiritual importance. It is seen now as a "Christian symbol" and nothing more than that. And to many



who wear it, it is merely another ornament. Even a fair number of Orthodox Christians, either out of ignorance or complacency, pay little attention to the Cross. They make the sign of the Cross sloppily and venerate the Cross in Church services simply out of habit, not thinking about what they are doing. But the precious Cross is of outstanding and vital importance to Christians. It is the instrument God chose to accomplish our redemption and salvation.

At the time our Lord was preaching along the shores of Galilee, the cross was used as a cruel device to put criminals to a slow and agonizing death. How the demons must have rejoiced to see so many people suffer upon it and die! But it is often God's way of doing things to take something "bad" and bring some good out of it; to bring repentance out of sinning, wisdom out of affliction, and so on.

So in his unfathomable wisdom, our Savior deigned to suffer and die upon it. At first Satan delighted in our Savior's suffering. He thought he was about to take possession of another "holy man's" soul just as he had with so many of the righteous of the Old Testament times. He soon realized that something was very wrong. Suddenly Satan found himself face to face with God Himself! And what unbearable suffering the devil must have experienced in God's presence. There was no place to run, no place to hide in his kingdom of darkness. It was full of God's glory. As a hymn from the Great Vespers of the Exaltation of the Cross says:

No sooner had the wood of the Cross been set up, O Christ our Lord, than the foundations of death were shaken. For that which hell swallowed eagerly, it let go in trembling. Thou hast shown us Thy salvation, O Holy One, and we glorify Thee.

Now, whenever Satan sees the Cross, he writhes in anguish. Whether he sees it on a wall in our homes, or hanging around our neck, or being traced over us with three fingers, the devil remembers that it was through the Cross that God descended into Hades and took all the souls of the righteous which had been kept in captivity for so many centuries. The evil one knows that his power has been destroyed and that Christ has trampled down death by death. Therefore Satan despises the Cross and shrinks from it in fear. He even despises our venerating it. The Holy Fathers made this analogy: When Jesus Christ descended into Hades, He struck Satan a deep and mortal wound. Now, whenever Satan beholds the Cross, it is like rubbing salt into that wound. He cannot bear the pain.

So God has given us a mighty weapon indeed against our enemy. Knowing its power, let us never hesitate to carefully make the sign of the cross over ourselves. Knowing its sanctity, let us hold it in high veneration and reverently kiss it and bow down before it, giving thanks to the Son of God for so mercifully giving it to us!

-Fr. Mark Andrews, Scranton, PA



Let Us Help People in Repentance ~ Elder Paisios of Mt. Athos (+1994)

SPIRITUAL WEAPONS (from the book "Spiritual Struggle")

"It is not enough to simply make your confession to the Spiritual Father; you must also truly repent of what you have done."

- *Geronda, what can help people most today?*

- Today, if people could be taught repentance, this alone would be of great help. By reading as much as we can the lives of Saints which emphasize repentance, we can benefit. To ask for repentance from God means to ask for enlightenment. When we ask for repentance and we repent all the more, naturally we will become more humble and by necessity we will receive more divine Grace, more divine enlightenment. When one is in a state of repentance, he retains the Grace of God. In any case people are good. You see, most people don't confess and don't go to Church; they are terribly ignorant about these things, and yet, on the other hand, they come and ask me for help. There is something in this.

- *Geronda, do trials and tribulations become occasions for people to approach God?*

- The well-disposed can benefit from the trials and tribulations they may encounter in life. But people who don't have a good disposition have a quarrel with God and curse Him. Unfortunately, they don't say, "I have sinned," but are tormented. The devil has a great deal of authority over people. We have given him many rights over us. Look what modern man has come to! The bad thing is that he himself obstructs divine intervention, because he has no spirit of repentance. If there was repentance, many things would have been corrected. But now we will go through storm after storm. God save us! We must ask for everyone to be granted a spirit of repentance, and for those who deliberately harm the Church and have no intention of correcting themselves; may God grant them repentance before they are taken from this life.

As far as we can, let us help people to repent, so that we may all receive God's blessings.

Repentance and confession, that's what we need today. I constantly advise repentance and confession, so that the devil will lose his rights over us and the external demonic influences will be stopped. People need to be shaken up to understand, to repent. For example, someone confesses that he has committed adultery. The Spiritual Father conveys Christ's forgiveness and imposes a penance, but goes no further. The Spiritual Father must help this person understand that the sin was not just the adultery itself; it also involved other potential crimes such as the break-up of two families. Unfortunately, some Spiritual Fathers do not venture deeper into these spiritual matters to prick the penitent's conscience.

- *Geronda, are there people who are good, but who don't go to Church often and don't have a sacramental life in the Church?*

- It is possible once in a while to have someone who doesn't go to Church often, but who has devotion and kindness in his soul, thus making room for God to find a dwelling place there. Such people, reinforced by a sacramental life, would make tremendous progress in the spiritual life. On the other hand, there are other people who go to Church, confess, receive Communion, are observant, and yet God finds no room to dwell in them, because they have no humility, no kindness, and no true and authentic repentance. It is not enough to simply make your confession to the Spiritual Father; you must also truly repent of what you have done. Every prayer should begin with a confession before God. But this should not be a mere sentimental confession, relating our sins and then doing the same things all over again. This is not true awareness of our sinfulness. When we

become truly conscious of our sins, this is shown by a certain degree of improvement in our spiritual life.

Repentance Helps to Eradicate Evil

When we ask for repentance from God for everyone in the world, we must include ourselves among those who have need of repentance and must never say, "Lord, help the people who are sinners." The three Young Men of the Old Testament were born in captivity and yet did not say, "It is not our fault." They actually said, "We are justly suffering for our sins; we deserve to have suffered even more." They spoke as if they themselves had broken God's commandments before the Babylonian captivity; as if they were participants in the sin of their forefathers even though they had no part, since they weren't even born then. I am so moved by the prayer they offered when placed in the fiery furnace, *"For thou art just in all that thou hast done to us, and all thy works are true and thy ways right ... For we have sinfully and lawlessly departed from thee, and have sinned in all things and have not obeyed thy commandments ... And now we cannot open our mouths; shame and disgrace have befallen thy servants and worshippers. For thy name's sake do not give us up utterly and do not break thy covenant, and do not withdraw thy mercy from us, for the sake of Abraham thy beloved and for the sake of Isaac thy servant and Israel thy holy one."* In other words, "Lord, You are just in punishing us because we have sinned, but for the sake of Abraham whom You love, as he did not sin, do not abandon us". By including themselves among the sinners and trusting God completely, the three Young Men survived the fiery furnace as a refreshing experience, While the pagan Who went near to check things out was consumed by the flames.

If one doesn't work like this, he constantly finds excuses, "The devil made me do it." "It's Adam's fault, it's Eve's fault; it's not my fault." A theologian once told me, "Why should We suffer now because of Eve's disobedience?" "My good man," I told him, "does that bother you or prevent you from being saved?" Why blame poor Adam or the unfortunate Eve? They made one mistake and were in Hell for Such a long time, while for us Christ has come and redeemed us all. And He has reassured us of His forgiveness, not only seven times but seventy times seven! Thousands of times We sin and Christ forgives us, as long as we repent Sincerely, and we still dare to say that Adam or Eve is to blame? Notice how they hesitate to give the name Eve - to give the name of Eve to a nun, or at least Zoe, if Eve seems too difficult. In this respect, Eve is indeed wronged. She is our mother, the mother of all the people in the world, and we don't even want to hear her name. The curse in essence was given to the devil by God. *Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made.* The devil entered the serpent to deceive man. And yet everyone blames Eve, saying that she brought us down and that we'd have been just fine in Paradise if she hadn't disobeyed. Now if Christ had said to us, "If you sin once, you, too, will go to Hell for so many centuries," then perhaps one might have some grounds for saying something. How ungrateful people can be!

Repentance is of great significance. Man doesn't realize that God's decision can be changed by repentance. This is not a small matter for man to have such power. You've done something wrong? God gives you a slap. You say, "I have sinned." He then stops and gives you blessings. In other words, the unruly child comes to his senses and is tormented by his conscience. Then the Father caresses His child with love and comforts it. Because the Israelites had strayed from God's commandments, they lived in exile for seventy-five years. Finally, when they had repented, Cyrus the king appeared, who one may dare to say proved himself better than the sons of Israel, who had polluted the sacred traditions of their worship of the true God. God changed Cyrus' mind and made him believe in the God of Heaven. Consequently, he set the Israelites free to return to their homeland and provided money and supplies to rebuild the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem. Cyrus showed such kindness and devotion that not even the Israelites themselves had shown. And all this happened because the people repented and changed their way of life. You see how much repentance can help in getting rid of evil! **True repentance is the key.**

St. Theophan the Recluse on the Forgiving of Offenses

Nothing is so powerful in the sight of the Lord as the forgiving of offenses, because it is the imitation of one of the actions closest to us of God's mercifulness; and we are not tempted by anything so easily as by irascibility and the desire for vengeance by a provoking word and, not infrequently, even a deed.

Why is it so, that we do not always forgive, but more often give ourselves up to outbursts of anger, annoyance and indignation? I think, it is from inattentiveness to the value of forgiving. In minutes of susceptibility to offense, one must restore in one's mind and heart the promise for forgiveness, which is undoubtedly more valuable than the greatest losses which an offense has the power to cause.

Let us forgive and we shall be forgiven; let us forgive again and we shall again be forgiven; and so on without end. He who forgives will himself walk under God's all-forgivingness, in the embrace of God's mercifulness and love. But let us hasten to forgive, in order to be forgiven, and this becomes easier, because that which we shall forgive is insignificant; while that which we shall be forgiven is so valuable that it cannot even be compared with it. In the Gospel parable, our sins against God are valued at ten thousand talents, while the sins of others against us are valued at a hundred denaria (Matthew 18:23-34). According to our reckoning, our sins are a thousand rubles, while the sins of others against us are one kopek. To gain a thousand rubles for a kopek for goodness' sake! if such an opportunity to make such a gain were to open up in everyday life, one would not even be able to force one's way through the crowd. But no gain on earth can be so sure as the Lord's promise is sure, and no appraisal of earthly things can be so exact as the comparative appraisal of our sins and the offenses caused us is exact, because it is determined by the God of righteousness Himself. Thus, remember the sins which thou hast been forgiven or seekest forgiveness of, and if not out of thankfulness for mercy received, then in undoubted hope of receiving it, forgive, forgive and forgive with a wide and open heart.

Of course, it is not possible suddenly to acquire such a profound and abundant peace that would swallow up every insulting blow. The first degree of insusceptibility to offences and, consequently, forgiveness is silence. When they offend thee keep silent. Do so one time, and the next time thou wilt keep silent more easily; and the more often thou wilt keep silent, the more often thou wilt meet offenses with less disturbance. Lack of disturbance will bring rest, while rest will be reborn as peace. Then, in the face of offenses thou wilt be as a firm wall exposed to grains of sand flung up by the wind.

The frequent forgiving of offenses not only imparts ease and skill to this, but develops even a thirst for offenses, for the Lord's sake, during which he who is struck on the cheek turns the other, and he who is forced to go one mile goes two. This is a height which seems unattainable to us, but to which he who has begun to forgive as one ought ascends easily, naturally, without special efforts.

The forgiving of offenses is a most attractive virtue, often bringing into the heart a reward for itself.

From the treasure of Orthodox services for the Sunday of The Cross:

- ✠ “Come, ye faithful, and let us venerate the life-giving Wood, on which Christ, the King of Glory, stretched out His hands of His own will. To the ancient blessedness He raised us up, whom the enemy despoiled of old through pleasure, making us exiles far from God. Come, ye faithful, and let us venerate the Wood whereby we have been counted worthy to crush the heads of our invisible enemies. Come, ye kindred of the nations, and let us honor in hymns the Cross of the Lord!
- ✠ Rejoice, O Cross, perfect redemption of fallen Adam! Glorifying in thee, our faithful kings laid low by thy might the people of Ishmael. We Christians kiss thee now with awe, and glorifying God Who was nailed on thee, we cry aloud: O Lord, Who on the Cross wast crucified, have mercy on us, for Thou art good and lovest mankind!”
- ✠ “O Lord, Thou hast stretched out Thine hands of Thine own will upon the Cross: fill us with Thy light through fasting and through prayer, through abstinence and works of charity; and count us worthy to adore Thy Cross with contrite hearts, for Thou art good and Thou lovest mankind.”
- ✠ “O Lord all-merciful, in the multitude of Thy mercies blot out the multitude of my sins, and count me worthy with a pure soul to behold and kiss Thy Cross during the present week of abstinence, for Thou lovest mankind.”
- ✠ “O mighty wonder! Before us stands the Wood, on which Christ was crucified in the flesh. The world venerates it and, illumined, cries aloud: ‘Great is the power of the Cross! When devils look upon it, they are burnt; by the sign of the Cross they are consumed with fire.’ O pure and holy Wood, I call thee blessed; I honor thee and worship thee with fear, and I give glory unto God Who through thee has bestowed upon me life without end.”
- ✠ Today the words of the Prophet are fulfilled: for see, we worship at the place on which Thy feet have stood, O Lord, and tasting from the Tree of salvation, we have been delivered from our sinful passions at the intercessions of the Theotokos, O Thou Who alone lovest mankind.”

By Means of Wood and Water

Moses... was himself saved by means of wood and water before the Law was given, when he was exposed to the Nile's currents, hidden away in an Ark (Exod. 2:3-10). And by means of wood and water he saved the people of Israel, revealing the Cross by the wood, Holy Baptism by water (Exod. 14:15-31). Paul, who had looked upon the mysteries, says openly, 'They were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud' (I Cor. 10:2). He also bears witness that, even before the events concerning the sea and his staff, Moses willingly endured Christ's Cross, 'Esteeming', he says, 'the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt' (Heb. 11:26). For the Cross is the reproach of Christ from the standpoint of foolish men. As Paul himself says of Christ, 'He endured the cross, despising the shame' (Heb. 12:2).

-St. Gregory Palamas

The Glorification of the Virgin Mary

by Fr. Michael Polsky (+1960)

Just as Christ is the Second Adam, so Mary is the second Eve. This is evident from a comparison of the temptation of Eve with the Annunciation of Mary. Then there was a manifestation of a fallen Angel, the serpent, the devil. Here there is a manifestation of a holy Angel, Gabriel. Genesis 3:1 (Rev. 20:2) - Luke 1:26.

The first promised Eve, that through her man would be as God, - "ye shall be as gods." The second promised Mary that through her God would become man - "He shall be called the Son of the Most High"... the Son of God; Emmanuel, which being interpreted is. God with us. Genesis 3:4 - Luke 1:32, 35; Matt. 1:23.

Through Eve - the fall; through Mary - salvation. When Eve was deluded and desired to be as God, she was not made God. Now God is made man so that man can in reality become divine, and first of all Mary does so, in whom He came, as being the first of all the race of man. Woman was the first to fall, and the first to be saved.

Eve was shown as one who did not trust God's commandments, who did not believe God and who longed to receive divinization by her own empirical knowledge. Mary trusted God completely. Genesis 3:6 - Luke 1:34, 37, 45.

Only one who recognizes the "greatness" of the All-holy Virgin, "which the Mighty One hath done" to her could "call her blessed" [see *The Magnificat*]. If the Lord has done great things for her, then we must recognize this greatness, be aware of it and in turn confess it, and we must glorify both Him, Who gave this greatness, and the one to whom He gave it, and all the more so in that she to whom He gave this greatness had unlyingly foretold that they would glorify her for that greatness.

That greatness consists in the fact that the Lord, wishing to be incarnate "looked upon the lowliness" of her, that is on the spiritual perfection of the Virgin, and was incarnate precisely of her. He did "great things" for her by His Incarnation and through the glory that this has among the peoples. By humility, as one who flees glory, by remaining unknown and making oneself nothing, - things which seemingly contradict "being called blessed of all generations" - in these things the glorification consists. Thus did the All-holy Virgin herself explain the term "called blessed," saying "He hath looked upon the lowliness of His handmaiden; for behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed" (Luke 1:48).

"To call blessed" (Luke 1:48), - In Greek *makarizo*, - to bless, to consider blessed, which means also to glorify.

"All generations shall call me blessed."

The veneration of the All-holy Virgin will live throughout all generations and tribes, not just for a day but perpetually, and not just in such a way that all bless her and she does not hear this, not at all, the perpetual blessing will impart unto her joy like unto the joy that the original cause of her blessedness, the Incarnation of God the Word, imparted unto her. Concerning the Incarnation of the Son of God she will rejoice eternally. This is joy in the glory of God.

Once she received the angelic greeting: "Rejoice, Full of Grace, the Lord is with thee," and she cried out, "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour." The all-holy Virgin now abides in the eternal joy of Paradise with God, and neither previously nor after this is there any greater joy for her, than the people's repetition for her of the angelic salutation. At this greeting she responds and hastens with goodwill and mercy. The Virgin Mary has been lifted up to Heaven in joy and to our aid.

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A BEGGAR FOR CHRIST

From humansarefree.com.

Meet 98-year old Dobri Dobrev, a man who lost his hearing in the second world war, who walks 10 kilometers from his village in his homemade clothes to the city of Sofia, where he spends the day begging for money.

Though a well known fixture around several of the city's churches, known for his prostrations of thanks to all donors, it was only recently discovered that he has donated every penny he has collected—over 40,000 euros—towards the restoration of decaying Bulgarian monasteries and churches and the utility bills of orphanages, living instead off his monthly state pension of 80 euros.

Dobrev's fame is now spreading outside of Bulgaria as his story is disseminated via the Internet.

One resident describes what he knows about *Elder Dobry*: "He is called a saint, an ascetic hermit, a man who doesn't take money, an angel, a divine stranger, a traveler from the past, a beggar. Few Bulgarians have not heard of Good Old Dobry Dobrev, many are those who do not have the faintest idea of the true holiness of his cause. This year Elder Dobry turned 98 and still continues to give

selflessly to others his only treasure—kindness and humanity. And at this advanced age he can be spotted from time to time throughout metropolitan streets in search of generous people to implement his cause.

Elder Dobry has been raising money for decades to restore churches throughout Bulgaria. He is not afraid of cold and bad weather, does not worry that he will remain hungry. He is not angry at people's indifference to his work. The old man radiates kindness and meekness. He is ready to kiss the hand of anyone who has dropped a coin into his box, to talk about God with every passerby, to give thanks for the charity.

But Elder Dobry is not a beggar. He does not rely on strangers to save his body, but he wants to save their souls. A man like him cannot be called a beggar who has forgotten his needs and is raising money for a lofty mission, far from the material benefits of life. To donate to the church means to bestow to the generations, to faith in a godly future to build a benevolent Bulgaria. This is what

Elder Dobry thinks he does without expecting gratitude. He respects people. He sees that the world around him is selfish, but he doesn't get upset and instead provides an example with his donations. So many people worship the faith of this man who doesn't take money. We don't know much about Elder Dobry's life. He does not want fame and does not want to divulge details of his daily life. It's enough for him that people know he is a good person who collects money and donates it to the Bulgarian churches and monasteries.

A Sofia visitor recounts his meeting him as follows: "Yes, *Dyado Dobri* (Grandpa Dobri, as the locals call him). I lived in Sofia for six months and traveled by public transport. He

came on the tram every day, one stop after mine. Every day he would sit and someone always recognized him and spoke to him. The man tells some very interesting and heart-warming stories. He never begs for money, people just put money in his little wooden box and he shows them respect. I'm very happy to see he's doing alright and continuing his great cause."

Another past resident of the area recalls the following: "Four years ago, I had the pleasure to meet him and directly delight in his innocent kindness

and simplicity. People from Sofia know him as elder Dobri Dobrev from the village Baylovo. He is a 98-year old elder who could often be seen standing in front of the church of St. Alexander Nevsky or St. Methodius and Cyril and their Five Disciples with his metal cashbox and begging for money. He gives the collected money for renewing monasteries and churches or to poor people.

"I met him at the church of St. Kyriaki, when I was attending the holy Liturgy which was led by several bishops, in presence of the graceful relics of St. Stephen Milutin the King. Simply, he entered through the church gate, stood in front of the relics and, like a young boy, made a few deep bows. That was an amazing scene, especially because of the feeling of unworthiness when God crosses our life-path with one of His righteous men.

Kind eyes, pleasant smile, humble look ... all that makes him bright in the eyes of those who have met him and without hesitation hurry to get a blessing from this sagacious elder."

