



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

3101 Clairmont Ave. Birmingham, AL 35205

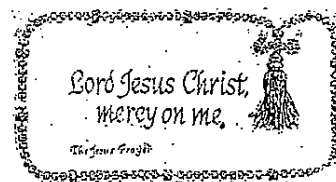
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September 3, 2017

Hieromartyr Anthimus of Nicomedia (302)

St. Phoebe the Deaconess of Corinth (1st C)



"The most enjoyable of all subjects has to be God, because God is the source of all joy."

— Thomas Oden

- **Annual Parish Assembly – Sunday, September 17 / Last week for nominations**
- **October 8, 2017 – St. Symeon's 40th Anniversary ~ with Archbishop Alexander**

Anniversary Photos: Send 10 of your favorite parish life photos, old and new, for inclusion in the 40th anniversary commemoration to st.symeon.orthodox.church@gmail.com. Please include a description of who, what and when for each photo. If you don't have digital copies, you may give original carefully labeled photos in an envelope to Shea Cole, who will scan them and return them to you.

Both Monastic and Married ~ Fr. Sergius, Abbot of St. Tikhon's Monastery

✠ There is only one Lord, one Gospel, and one way for all of us that leads to the Kingdom. The task for all of us is to continue to put God in the very first place of our heart and life. Again and again, day by day, moment by moment, we are all called, both monastic and married, to live with an uncompromising commitment to the Lord and His Gospel and to carry the Cross that God has given to us. Is this easy? By no means but with God all things are possible. To me monastic life and married life are not opposed: we both have families, we both have heads of those families and we all need to work out our common salvation in the midst of those families. As a monastic I will never ascribe to understanding the difference between monastic life and married life as *us* and *them* but rather always *we*.

Overcoming "Frightening Worldliness"

"We live by the Gospels and the explanations from the Holy Fathers. Jesus Christ and His teachings are the same yesterday and today. We cannot pick and choose how we want to interpret those."

In the first chapter of Great Lent, Fr. Alexander Schmemmann uses the phrase "frightening worldliness" to describe one of the aspects of our human inability to focus on the one thing needful. Let us explore what that could mean for us almost 50 years after his book was published: why frightening, why a problem in our spiritual life and what could be the result if we choose to live in worldliness?

It is frightening on several levels. We can lose our values, beliefs and trust in the Lord if we choose to live a life based on the world around us. The world in this age has many beliefs contrary to the Christian life. We cannot take these on and make them "ok" in some form or fashion because the world says they are okay. We live by the Gospels and the explanations from the Holy Fathers. Jesus Christ and His teachings are the same yesterday and today. We cannot pick and choose how we want to interpret those.

{over}

There are so many things contrary to our faith in these times—such as definitions of marriage, and traditions for burials. Surrounded by a multiplicity of different religions and beliefs, maybe the biggest danger is accepting them all as “ok? **We are told to accept and agree with everyone or we are not good people. But then are we faithful to Christ and His teachings?**

We live in a frightening world. We are told that the world is changing before our eyes and that we are to blame for it, yet we are not offered a viable way to bail ourselves out of this sinking ship. Many face temptation to despair over climate change, the threat of wars, the fear of those different from us be it race or religion. We are bombarded with news of tragedy, global illness and threat of financial catastrophe.

At some point—if we let all this capture our attention—we lose the fear of God and come to rely on science and not on God. We can lose our trust that the Lord knows all things and will care for us. But we cannot live with our heads in the sand—yes, there are things we can personally do to take all these predictions of destruction and turmoil in stride. Keeping our faith pure, reading and understanding the Gospels, living them as a witness to others who may have lost hope, praying and leading others to what we know to be true and steadfast—this is the love of our Lord Jesus Christ. In a world weary of strife and despair, we can be a light on the hill to others who are confused. We can share our time and wealth and make the world a little less frightening to others who need our help.

Probably the most crucial point for us is to keep our lives focused on what we know is good and true, to immerse ourselves in knowing our faith and being able to recognize when we are slipping ourselves. Putting trust in other faiths and cultures while losing our own is a slippery slope, a tipping point of no return—we must be careful to protect what we hear, see, read and pursue. This syncretism happened to the early Israelites—it can certainly happen to us. Do we believe more in science or philosophy at the expense of the Gospel? Have we lost our focus of what our lives should be in Christ? Do we even know what that means, living here in the land of plenty? We all know the story of how to boil a frog: you start with cold water and slowly heat it up. He will not be aware of the danger. In these times of being assaulted from many sides, when our children being taught things to be normal that we know are not normal, we need to know our faith and safeguard our minds and hearts. We are to enlighten others, not condemn them, but we cannot do this if we accept the world's definitions and norms. We live in this world but we are not of this world (cf John 17). We can be set apart and still live here. People should be able to look at us and ask why we have hope and why we have love and why we do not fear.

So yes, Fr. Alexander's phrase “frightening worldliness” applies to us—maybe even more so today. We must remember God, study His word and live it to the best we can every day and not just Sundays. We live for the Kingdom to come and not for this world which will pass away. Our decisions must be based on Scripture that never changes. Truth is always truth: “Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). We can bring His love and peace that passes all understanding to a world that is very desperately in need of Him. We need with God's help to renounce the ways of the world that do not conform to His teachings, and we need to constantly study and remember what those are. As Fr. Schmemmann says in Great Lent, the Lord gave us Lent to bring our focus back to God. Let us then make a wholehearted effort to renew our strength, to ask God to guide us and help us. He is a living God, so if you ask you will receive. But ask in fear, because that is where our true fear should be. To lose the love and care of our living Lord is much more frightening than anything society can throw at us.

NOTES ON THE JESUS PRAYER

Warm, succinct suggestions on making the prayer of the heart come alive from Moscow pastor Fr. Artemy Vladimirov. Fr. Artemy has a parish where a lot of non-Russians gather for worship along with the locals.

We very much pity those Orthodox Christians who think that the best rest for their exhausted soul is to watch television news. This isn't a bad thing, perhaps, but it's a dead thing. You may spend all of the earthly time you have been allotted with such distractions, but you will never be at peace. If you want to calm your mind and ease your heart, try calling instead on the most holy name of Jesus Christ, without haste and with only one intent: to attract His attention and repent of your sins.

To stand before the face of God, to cleanse your heart and sanctify the space of your life by invoking His name, this is your aim. We don't know how God cleanses our heart by His name, but we believe that He does so in a supernatural way. In saying the Jesus Prayer, it is not so important whether you are "a monk or a drunk," but you are to be very steadfast, attentive, humble, mild, and concentrated.

Try taking a walk for ten minutes as you invoke His miracle-working name, and you will see spiritual profit. Begin in a simple, humble manner, "Oh, Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner." You may even do this somewhat mechanically, knowing that this tradition has been sanctified by generations of saints, but as you walk and pray, try not to think of anything else. Just walk in the presence of God.

In these ten minutes, you will find that your fevered mind is soothed, that the noisy bazaar of your thoughts has become light, clear, and direct, and that your heart has begun to say other prayers in a manner that satisfies you. You pray, you breathe, you speak to God; you are not just repeating empty words. What does it mean to have your mind in your heart? It means that you are to control your feelings. You are not to admit invaders into your heart, but are to check your heart with your mind, to observe everything that takes place there. To have your mind in your heart is exactly what our Lord prescribes to us in His commandment: *When thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father who is in secret...*

What does it mean to shut the door? It means to banish every earthly image or passion with the concentration of your mind and will. When we pray we should not admit feelings of lust or open our hearts to the snake of irritation; we are to rid ourselves of everything that is unpleasant. To have your mind in your heart is to control the space of your heart. It is the kingdom of God Almighty and of nothing else.

If you make progress in this humble prayer, you will begin to understand that this commandment is very complete. Your heart will be filled with a spiritual warmth that embraces the center of your feelings. You will come to understand what attentive prayer is, and that your heart has been created for ceaseless prayer. Ceaseless prayer is not a perpetual repetition of this or that word or phrase. The Holy Fathers say that it is the feeling of your heart. Just as you view the objects of this world with open eyes, so your heart, warmed by prayer to God, will partake of the spiritual world. This will be due, not to your piety, but to God's grace. Unceasing prayer may have no words, but you will walk and sleep in the presence of God.

*Archpriest Artemy Vladimirov
Road to Emmaus magazine*

2/25/2009

More Wisdom from St. Paisios of Mt. Athos (+1994)

God does not interfere in our lives, but waits for us to ask Him to help us, for He respects our freedom.

If those who are poor, in need and are starving do not grumble or murmur, they will receive the same reward as hermits who struggle in asceticism on the slopes of Mt. Athos. Monks abstain from food voluntarily, which greatly eases their ascetic labors. If I do something, for example, then I do it of my own free will, and as a result I barely feel the burden of asceticism. But these poor people hunger involuntarily and thus suffer much, much more. God can reward these people with even greater rewards than the ascetics living in solitude.

Those who are proud and exalted must remain in obedience to someone in order to cut off their will (here the elder is first of all talking about obedience to a spiritual father).

Pious parents who want their children to become monks should not push them towards making such a decision, but must lead an ascetic way of life themselves.

Everyone must act according to his spiritual state. One must not take up ascetic labors that he is not ready for yet.

Nowadays the devil with his great malice unwillingly does the world a huge favor. Pious people, seeing where this world is going to, draw close to other pious Christians and receive a stimulus in their spiritual battle with the evil one.

We monks often become hardhearted because we don't see other people's pain. But the poor laypeople are compassionate, for they see pain and sorrow around them all the time. Therefore, we have to make other people's pain our own, and pray for the whole world.

If sincere repentance and humility are absent—the prerequisites for a person to feel that God's mercy is vital to them—then external asceticism and self-coercion alone will bring one to a state of spiritual delusion.

Our mind (as much as possible) should be near God and not think about evil things.

If we sow a handful of wheat, we'll harvest wheat; if we plant thorns—we'll grow thorns. The good that one does gives rise to new virtues, while sin leads to new sins.

A married person once said to me that monasticism, unlike marriage, is not a Sacrament. I replied that monasticism is a sacrament of the Church Triumphant [in Heaven], for a monk, while still on earth, already has a foretaste of the angelic life.

Many who have fallen into spiritual delusion, whom the devil has made into false prophets, did not place repentance and the knowledge of their own faults at the foundation of their spiritual warfare, but strove for fasting and vigil, wishing, on account of their pride, to achieve holiness by means of ascetic feats.

We should not seek pleasure in prayer, not even spiritual pleasure. Otherwise, we become like the kind of children that love their father only because he gives them caramels and chocolates. The peace of our souls is what should be sought in prayer.

Misfortunes, pain and revilement save us from hell.

Don't Believe in God? ... Maybe You'll Try U.F.O.s

By CLAY ROUTLEDGE, JULY 21, 2017 *New York Times*

"Seeking meaning does not always equal finding meaning."

Are Americans becoming less religious? It depends on what you mean by "religious."

Polls certainly indicate a decline in religious affiliation, practice and belief. Just a couple of decades ago, about 95 percent of Americans reported belonging to a religious group. This number is now around 75 percent. And far fewer are actively religious: The percentage of regular churchgoers may be as low as 15 to 20 percent. As for religious belief, the Pew Research Center found that from 2007 to 2014 the percentage of Americans who reported being absolutely confident God exists dropped from 71 percent to 63 percent.

Nonetheless, there is reason to doubt the death of religion, or at least the death of what you might call the "religious mind" — our concern with existential questions and our search for meaning. **A growing body of research suggests that the evidence for a decline in traditional religious belief, identity and practice does not reflect a decline in this underlying spiritual inclination.**

Ask yourself: Why are people religious to begin with? One view is that religion is an ancient way of understanding and organizing the world that persists largely because societies pass it down from generation to generation. This view is related to the idea that the rise of science entails the fall of religion. It also assumes that the strength of religion is best measured by how much doctrine people accept and how observant they are.

This view, however, does not capture the fundamental nature of the religious mind — our awareness of, and need to reckon with, the transience and fragility of our existence, and how small and unimportant we seem to be in the grand scheme of things. In short: our quest for significance.

Dozens of studies show a strong link between religiosity and existential concerns about death and meaning. For example, when research participants are presented with stimuli that bring death to mind or challenge a sense of meaning in life, they exhibit increased religiosity and interest in religious or spiritual ideas. Another body of research shows that religious beliefs provide and protect meaning.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that the religious mind persists even when we lose faith in traditional religious beliefs and institutions. Consider that roughly 30 percent of Americans report they have felt in contact with someone who has died. Nearly 20 percent believe they have been in the presence of a ghost. About one-third of Americans believe that ghosts exist and can interact with and harm humans; around two-thirds hold supernatural or paranormal beliefs of some kind, including beliefs in reincarnation, spiritual energy and psychic powers.

These numbers are much higher than they were in previous decades, when more people reported being highly religious. People who do not frequently attend church are twice as likely to believe in ghosts as those who are regular churchgoers. The less religious people are, the more likely they are to endorse empirically unsupported ideas about U.F.O.s, intelligent aliens monitoring the lives of humans and related conspiracies about a government cover-up of these phenomena.

An emerging body of research supports the thesis that these interests in nontraditional supernatural and paranormal phenomena are driven by the same cognitive processes and motives that inspire religion. For instance, my colleagues and I recently published a series of studies in the journal *Motivation and Emotion* demonstrating that the link between low religiosity and belief in advanced alien visitors is at least partly explained by the pursuit of meaning. The less religious participants were, we found, the less they perceived their lives as meaningful. This lack of meaning was associated with a desire to find meaning, which in turn was associated with belief in U.F.O.s and alien visitors.

When people are searching for meaning, their minds seem to gravitate toward thoughts of things like aliens that do not fall within our current scientific inventory of the world. Why? I suspect part of the answer is that such ideas imply that humans are not alone in the universe, that we might be part of a larger cosmic drama. As with traditional religious beliefs, many of these paranormal beliefs involve powerful beings watching over humans and the hope that they will rescue us from death and extinction.

A great many atheists and agnostics, of course, do not think U.F.O.s exist. I'm not suggesting that if you reject traditional religious belief, you will necessarily find yourself believing in alien visitors. But because beliefs about U.F.O.s and aliens do not explicitly invoke the supernatural and are couched in scientific and technological jargon, they may be more palatable to those who reject the metaphysics of more traditional religious systems.

It is important to note that thus far, research indicates only that the need for meaning inspires these types of paranormal beliefs, not that such beliefs actually do a good job of providing meaning. There are reasons to suspect they are poor substitutes for religion: They are not part of a well-established social and institutional support system and they lack a deeper and historically rich philosophy of meaning. Seeking meaning does not always equal finding meaning.

The Western world is, in theory, becoming increasingly secular — but the religious mind remains active. The question now is, how can society satisfactorily meet people's religious and spiritual needs?
~ Clay Routledge is a professor of psychology at North Dakota State University.

✠ "Nowhere does the Gospel tell you to believe in yourself, but to believe in God that God can help, that God can heal. Some people, however, take this the wrong way, and say, 'Man has powers, and must believe in himself.' To believe in one's self contains either egoism or demonism." ~ St. Paisios

✠ "In the last days, when the breath of the Antichrist corrupts earth and sea and every breath of life, as a refreshing breath of grace, like the fiery Prophet Elijah, God kindles the energy of noetic prayer in the chest and the heart of the Church, as an antidote of spiritual and bodily health and salvation for the days which will come."
-Elder Ephraim of Arizona

✠ "Like the sun which shines on all alike, vainglory beams on every occupation. What I mean is this. I fast, and turn vainglorious. I stop fasting so that I will draw no attention to myself, and I become vainglorious over my prudence. I dress well or badly, and am vainglorious in either case. I talk or I hold my peace, and each time I am defeated. No matter how I shed this prickly thing, a spike remains to stand up against me."
St. John Climacus (7th C)

✠ "You must know that only passions and sins are ours. Whatever good we do is from God, whatever foolish things we do come from us. When God's Grace abandons us for just a little while, we become unable to do anything. As in natural life, when God removes oxygen from us we die immediately. The same is true for spiritual life: If God removes His Grace, we are lost."
~ St. Paisios (+1994)

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE ABSURD

By Fr. Seraphim Rose (+1982).

The present age is, in a profound sense, an age of absurdity. Poets and dramatists, painters and sculptors proclaim and depict the world as a disjointed chaos, and man as a dehumanized fragment of that chaos. Politics, whether of the right, the left, or the center, can no longer be viewed as anything but an expedient whereby universal disorder is given, for the moment, a faint semblance of order; pacifists and militant crusaders are united in an absurd faith in the feeble powers of man to remedy an intolerable situation by means which can only make it worse. Philosophers and other supposedly responsible men in governmental, academic, and ecclesiastical circles, when they do not retreat behind the impersonal and irresponsible facade of specialization or bureaucracy, usually do no more than rationalize the incoherent state of contemporary man and his world, and counsel a futile "commitment" to a discredited humanist optimism, to a hopeless stoicism, to blind experimentation and irrationalism, or to "commitment" itself, a suicidal faith in "faith."

But art, politics, and philosophy today are only reflections of life, and if they have become absurd it is because, in large measure, life has become so. The most striking example of absurdity in life in recent times was, of course, Hitler's "new order," wherein a supposedly normal, civilized man could be at one and the same time an accomplished and moving interpreter of Bach (as was Himmler) and a skilled murderer of millions, or who might arrange a tour of an extermination camp to coincide with a concert series or an exhibition of art. Hitler himself, indeed, was the absurd man par excellence, passing from nothingness to world rule and back to nothingness in the space of a dozen years, leaving as his monument nothing but a shattered world, owing his meaningless success to the fact that he, the emptiest of men, personified the emptiness of the men of his time.

Hitler's surrealist world is now a thing of the past; but the world has by no means passed out of the age of absurdity, but rather into a more advanced—though temporarily quieter—stage of the same disease. Men have invented a weapon to express, better than Hitler's gospel of destruction, their own incoherence and nihilism; and in its shadow men stand paralyzed, between the extremes of an external power and an internal powerlessness equally without precedent. At the same time, the poor and "underprivileged" of the world have awakened to conscious life, and seek abundance and privilege; those who already possess them waste their lives in the pursuit of vain things, or become disillusioned and die of boredom and despair, or commit senseless crimes. The whole world, it almost seems, is divided into those who lead meaningless, futile lives without being aware of it, and those who, being aware of it, are driven to madness and suicide.

So it is too with absurdism; it is the negative side of a positive reality. There is, of course, an element of incoherence in our world, for in his fall from Paradise man brought the world with him; the philosophy of the absurd is not, therefore, founded upon a total lie, but upon a deceptive half-truth. But when Camus defines absurdity as the confrontation of man's need for reason with the irrationality of the world, when he believes that man is an innocent victim and the world the guilty party, he, like all absurdists, has magnified a very partial insight into a totally distorted view of things; and in his blindness has arrived at the exact inversion of the truth. Absurdism, in the end, is an internal and not an external question; it is not the world that is irrational and incoherent, but man.

If, however, the absurdist is responsible for not seeing things as they are, and not even wishing to see things as they are, the Christian is yet more responsible for failing to give the example of a fully coherent life, a life in Christ. Christian compromise in thought and word and negligence in deed have opened the way to the triumph of the forces of the absurd, of Satan, of Antichrist. The present age of absurdity is the just reward of Christians who have failed to be Christians.

And the only remedy for absurdism lies at this, its source: we must again be Christians. Camus was quite right when he said, "We must choose between miracles and the absurd." For in this respect Christianity and absurdism are equally opposed to Enlightenment rationalism and humanism, to the view that reality can be reduced to purely rational and human terms. We must indeed choose between the miraculous, the Christian view of things, whose center is God and whose end is the eternal Kingdom of Heaven, and the absurd, the Satanic view of things, whose center is the fallen self and whose end is Hell, in this life and in the life to come.

We must again be Christians. It is futile, in fact it is precisely absurd, to speak of reforming society, of changing the path of history, of emerging into an age beyond absurdity, if we have not Christ in our hearts; and if we do have Christ in our hearts, nothing else matters.

It is of course possible that there may be an age beyond absurdity; it is more likely, perhaps—and Christians must always be prepared for this eventuality—that there will not be, and that the age of absurdity is indeed the last age. It may be that the final testimony Christians may be able to give in this age will be the ultimate testimony, the blood of their martyrdom.

But this is cause for rejoicing and not for despair. For the hope of Christians is not in this world or in any of its kingdoms—that hope, indeed, is the ultimate absurdity; the hope of Christians is in the Kingdom of God which is not of this world.

Pearls of the Holy Fathers {18 – Part 2}

Meditate upon His Passion: it helps the fulfillment of Christian duty. . . The suffering of Christ is like a saving book from which we learn all the supreme good: repentance, faith, devotion to God, love of our neighbor, humility, meekness, patience, detachment from worldly vanities; like a spur it stimulates one.

St. Tikhon of Zadonsk

Whenever we enter the church and draw near to the heavenly Mysteries, we ought to approach with all humility and fear, both because of the presence of the angelic powers and out of the reverence due to the sacred oblation; for as the Angels are said to have stood by the Lord's body when it lay in the tomb, so we must believe that they are present in the celebration of the Mysteries of His most sacred Body at the time of consecration.

Venerable Bede

If an unbaked brick is put in the foundations near to the river, it does not last for a single day, but baked, it lasts like stone. So the man with a carnal disposition of soul, who has not been in the fire through fear of God like Joseph, utterly disintegrates.

Abba Orsesius

A slave does not demand his freedom as a reward; but he gives satisfaction as one who is in debt, and he receives freedom as a gift.

St. Mark the Ascetic

According to the Fathers, if our inner self is watchful it can protect the outer self. But we and the demons combine in committing sins. The demons work through evil thoughts alone by forming in the intellect what fanciful pictures they wish; while we sin both inwardly through evil thoughts and outwardly through our actions. Lacking the density of physical bodies, the demons through deceitfulness and guile are purveyors of torment, both to themselves and to us, by means of evil thoughts alone. If they did not lack the density of physical bodies, they would always be sinning through outward actions as well, for their will is always disposed to ungodliness.

St. Hesychius the Presbyter

There is no venom more poisonous than that of the asp or cobra, and there is no evil greater than that of self-love. The winged children of self-love are self-praise, self-satisfaction, gluttony, unchastity, self-esteem, jealousy and the crown of all these, pride. Pride can drag down not men alone, but even angels from Heaven, and surround them with darkness instead of light.

St. Hesychius the Presbyter

Just as the dolphin stirs and swims about when the visible sea is still and calm, so also, when the sea of the heart is tranquil and still from wrath and anger, mysteries and divine revelations are stirred in her at all times to delight her.

St. Isaac the Syrian

Imitate the Publican, and you will not be condemned with the Pharisee. Choose the meekness of Moses and you will find your heart which is a rock changed into a spring of water. Mother Syncretica

When you fall down before God in prayer, become in your thought like an ant, like the creeping things of the earth, like a leech, and like a tiny lisping child. Do not say anything before Him with knowledge, but with a child's manner of thought draw near to God and walk before Him, that you may be counted worthy of that paternal providence which fathers have for their small children. St. Isaac the Syrian

Fire descended in wrath and consumed sinners, the Fire of mercy descended and dwelt in the bread. Instead of that fire which consumed mankind, you have consumed Fire in the Bread and you come to life.

St. Ephraim the Syrian