

Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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✠ **March 8, 2015** ✠

Second Sunday of Great Lent

St. Gregory Palamas

St. Theophylactus, Bishop of Nicomedia (845)

Apostle Hermes of the Seventy (1st C)

The Third Week of Lent:

✠ **Wed. March 11, 6:30pm Presanctified Liturgy**

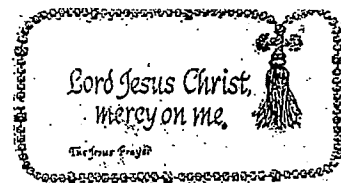
✠ **Fri. March 13, 6:30pm Presanctified Liturgy (w/Lenten Supper)**

➤ **The New Iconostasis has arrived in Charleston, SC. The new bells are coming tomorrow!**

If you do not feel like praying, you have to force yourself.

The Holy Fathers say that prayer with force is higher than prayer unforced. You do not want to, but force yourself. The Kingdom of Heaven is taken by force.

~ St. Ambrose of Optina



It Is Time to Begin

"He who tries to understand the commandments without fulfilling them, seeking to understand through learning and reading alone, is like a man who mistakes a shadow for the truth'. For the understanding of truth, is given to those who participate in truth, having tasted it through actual living. Those who seek this understanding without being participants in the truth receive a distorted wisdom... no matter how much they boast of their knowledge."

~ St. Gregory of Sinai (13th C)

Those who have carried on a business or some other undertaking, or in general have accomplished something in life, unanimously declare that the decision to act is of greatest importance, to take the first step, to begin.

There is nothing more foolish than a man who for a long time has thought of accomplishing some task, who has ample opportunity to set to work, and who, nevertheless, just cannot seem to make the decision to begin.

There are, one might add, certain activities which, according to those experienced in such matters, are accomplished by them selves-if only a beginning is made. For example, those involved in building churches wholeheartedly agree that every church "builds itself": it is enough just to begin, and then the money and materials will come of themselves.

The same is true of spiritual building, with the work of self-amendment, of pleasing God. After all, people are called "temples of the Holy Spirit." Through our work, our actions, we must all make ourselves into a temple for the Holy Spirit. But we haven't enough determination to begin building. And it is this very lack of determination which constitutes our greatest misfortune.

In his ascetic labors, St. Seraphim of Sarov equaled, if not surpassed, the spiritual heights of the great ancient fathers. In these podvigs (ascetic feats) he came to know through experience the strengthening Grace of God. Not long before his repose, he was asked why contemporary man so rarely attains to the spiritual level of the ancient Fathers.

"Because," answered the holy elder, "they lack determination. But God is just as ready as before to help those who seek to please Him, and His grace is ever all-powerful:

Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever.

Thus, we have no determination, and it is necessary to use all means possible to force ourselves to become determined. We must prod ourselves with the thought that perhaps this is the last month, even the last week of our life.

Everyone knows his greatest fault, his greatest weakness, which more than anything else estranges him from God. It is against this very weakness that one must resolutely rise up, using all possible means, and fight against it without compromising, without weakening, fighting even unto blood if necessary.

How many people, for example, perish and forsake God through immorality. This is one of the most widespread sins which holds in its grasp many people who are otherwise good-merciful, generous, pious. But this one passion alone prevents them from wholeheartedly giving themselves to God. And here is the main thing: determination, endurance at the beginning when there is the strongest urge to return to the accustomed sin. If one can only preserve oneself during those first critical months, the first half year, and cultivate in oneself the habit of chaste behavior, just as previously the habit of lust was cultivated. Here it is necessary to have maximum determination and not to fear any necessary measures. If you must restrict yourself to eat only bread and water, then do it! If you must avoid for a time visiting certain friends, think up a pretext. If less sleep will help, do not resist even this means. Avert the time you previously spent in various pleasures which aroused passion in the soul; use it now for reading spiritual books and attending church services.

One of the ancient ascetics, experienced in the warfare of the passions, expressed a profound truth: the devil of lust is like a hungry dog who has made a habit of always going to that house where each time he is thrown a bone; but just leave him a few times without the bone - and he will soon be broken of the habit.

And so, whatever passion afflicts us, let us become true men and not be like helpless children; let us despise our evil, not only because it is destroying us, but also because in sinning we crucify Christ Whom we love, Whom we all desire to serve. Let us say to ourselves: "Today I shall begin to serve God; from this very day begins my spiritual renewal." Seeing your firm determination, the Lord will unfailingly come to your aid, empowering your human weakness with His divine strength. Let us repeat to ourselves more often the words of one of the 24 supplications from the wonderful prayer of the great hierarch St. John Chrysostom, numbered according to the 24 hours in the day:

O Lord, though I have done nothing good in Thy sight, grant me by Thy Grace to make a good beginning!

(Translated from "Dushepolezni Sobesednik," Mt. Athos, 1909) ~ Orthodox America, February 1983

Wholeheartedly thank God, Who loves you---as I can see---very much. For if He did not love you, you would not be as you are. You think that you are lost, etc., but spiritually I see that you are very well off. Just do not despair; do not lose hope. He who has hope will by no means be put to shame.

Even if someone is covered by an abyss of sins, if he repents and does not lose hope, the devil fears him, because the paternal heart of the Heavenly Father yields when His Prodigal Son says, "I have sinned." He runs first, embraces him, kisses him, and kills the fatted calf in celebration, for His son was dead and is alive again. (Lk. 15:19-24). The despair of the sinner is completely unjustified. Is a handful of sand ever able to cover the ocean?

~ Elder Ephraim

Wisdom of St. Porphyrios of Athens, from *Wounded by Love*

With children what is required is a lot of prayer and few words

All things are achieved through prayer, silence and love. Have you understood the effects of prayer? Love in prayer, love in Christ. That is what is truly beneficial. As long as you love your children with human love — which is often pathological — the more they will be mixed-up, and the more their behavior will be negative. But when the love between you and towards your children is holy and Christian love, then you will have no problem. **The sanctity of the parents saves the children.** For this to come about, divine grace must act on the souls of the parents. No one can be sanctified on his own. The same divine grace will then illuminate, warm and animate the souls of the children.

People often telephone me from abroad and ask me about their children and about other matters. Today a mother phoned me from Milan and asked me how she should behave towards her children. What I said to her was this:

‘Pray, and when you have to, speak to your children with love. **Lots of prayer and few words.** Lots of prayer and few words for everyone. We mustn’t become an annoyance, but rather pray secretly and then speak, and God will let us know in our hearts whether the others have accepted what we have said. If not, we won’t speak. We will simply pray mystically. Because if we speak we become an annoyance and make others react or even infuriate them. That is why it is better to speak mystically to the heart of others through secret prayer rather than to their ears.

‘Pray and then speak. That’s what to do with your children. If you are constantly lecturing them, you’ll become tiresome and when they grow up they’ll feel a kind of oppression. Prefer prayer and speak to them through prayer. Speak to God and God will speak to their hearts. That is, you shouldn’t give guidance to your children with a voice that they hear with their ears. You may do this too, but above all you should speak to God about your children. Say, “Lord Jesus Christ, give Your light to my children. I entrust them to You. You gave them to me, but I am weak and unable to guide them, so, please, illuminate them.” And God will speak to them and they will say to themselves, “Oh dear I shouldn’t have upset Mom by doing that!” And with the grace of God this will come from their heart.’

This is the most perfect way — for the mother to speak to God and for God to speak to the children. If you do not communicate in this way, constant lecturing becomes a kind of intimidation. And when the child grows up it begins to rebel, that is, to take revenge, so to speak, on its father and mother who coerced it. One way is the perfect way — for the mother’s and father’s holiness and love in Christ to speak. The radiance of sanctity and not human effort makes for good children.

When the children are traumatized and hurt on account of some serious situation, don’t let it affect you when they react negatively and speak rudely. In reality they don’t want to, but can’t help themselves at difficult times. They are remorseful afterwards. But if you become irritated and enraged, you become one with the evil spirit and it makes a mockery of you all.

The sanctity of the parents is the best way of bringing up children in the Lord

We must see God in the faces of our children and give God’s love to our children. The children should learn to pray. And in order for children to pray they must have in them the blood of praying parents. This is where some people make the mistake of saying, ‘Since the parents are devout and pray, meditate on Holy Scripture and bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, it is natural that they will become good children.’ But nevertheless we see the very opposite result on account of coercion.

It is not sufficient by the parents to be devout. They mustn't oppress the children to make them good by force. We may repel our children from Christ when we pursue the things of our religion with egotism. Children cannot endure coercion. The reason why the children of some devout parents become rebellious when they grow up and reject the Church and everything connected with it and go off to seek satisfaction elsewhere is because of this pressure which they feel from their 'good' parents. The so-called 'devout' parents, who were anxious to make 'good Christians' of their children with their human love, pressurized their children and produced the opposite result. The children are pressurized when they are young, and when they reach the age of sixteen, seventeen or eighteen years old, they end up the opposite of what was intended. By way of reaction they start to mix with bad company and to use bad language.

When children grow up in an atmosphere of freedom and at the same time are surrounded by the good example of grown-ups, they are a joy to see. The secret is to be good and saintly and to inspire and radiate. The life of the children seems to be affected by the radiation of their parents. If the parents insist, 'Come on now, go and make confession, go and receive Communion', and so on, nothing is achieved. But what does your child see in you? How do you live and what do you radiate? Does Christ radiate in you? That is what is transmitted to your child. This is where the secret lies. And if this is done when the child is young, it will not be necessary for it to undergo 'great travail' when it grows up. Solomon the Wise uses a beautiful image about exactly this subject, underlining the importance of a good start and good foundations: He who seeks her [Wisdom] early shall have no great travail; for he shall find her sitting at his doors. The person who 'seeks her early' is the person who occupies himself with Wisdom from an early age. Wisdom is Christ.

When the parents are saintly and transmit this to the child and give the child an upbringing 'in the Lord', then the child, whatever the bad influences around it, will not be affected because by the door of its heart will be Wisdom — Christ Himself. The child will not undergo great travail to acquire Wisdom. It seems very difficult to become good, but in reality it is very easy when from an early age you start with good experiences. As you grow up effort is not required; you have goodness within you and you experience it. You don't weary yourself; it is yours, a possession which you preserve, if you are careful, throughout your life.

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All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness. (II Tim. 3:16)

When you read the Gospels, Christ speaks to you; when you pray, you are speaking to Him.... The Bible should be read not just for analysis, but as an immediate dialogue with the living Word Himself—to feed our love for Christ, to kindle our hearts with prayer and to provide us with guidance in our personal life.

St. Tikhon of Zadonsk (1779)

When one reads the Holy Scriptures, one should apply everything to oneself and not to someone else. As a Book uniquely inspired by God and addressed to each of the faithful personally, the Bible possesses sacramental power, transmitting Grace to the reader, bringing him to a point of meeting and decisive encounter with God.

St. Mark the Monk (4th C)

Keep on studying the Gospels until the end of your life. Never stop. Do not think you know it enough, even if you know it all by heart.

St. Ignatius Brianchaninov (1867)

The Holy Fathers on Prayer

Scripture, Divine Tradition and the Holy Fathers have given us great volumes of works devoted to prayer. Whether we are in Church, at home, at work, traveling, or at leisure, prayer constitutes our most intimate union with God. It is inconceivable even to imagine oneself as being an Orthodox Christian without prayer; in fact, the more one "lives and breathes" Orthodoxy, the more one's soul and body strive toward prayer, and the more one strives to develop perpetual, heartfelt communion with God every moment of one's life. To walk with God's presence felt continually in one's heart is to walk with unceasing prayer. Christ Himself is our example Who not only prayed corporally (Matt. 14:23; 26:36; Luke 6:12; John 17), but perpetually "beheld" within, God the Father (John 10:38).

There are many Christian virtues which we should follow, e.g., giving alms, showing mercy, being gentle, not arguing, etc., but these often require and depend upon circumstance - prayer, however, we can always practice; there is no circumstance which can prevent us in our conscious existence from conversing with God. Prayer should be our first, middle and final endeavor as Orthodox. From the moment of waking, to the time of sleeping, we should strive not to let prayer leave our hearts. Even while we sleep, God in His mercy is able to grant us prayer during such hours of "unconsciousness" - for, although we sleep, the heart is awake (Song 5:2). If we have prayer in our hearts continuously, then we stand always before God and all other Christian virtues are then easy to fulfill. As **St. Tikhon of Zadonsk** wrote:

As a bird without wings, as a soldier without arms, so is a Christian without prayer.

We are like birds ever striving to fly to God and dwell in His unutterably joyful Kingdom. and we are like soldiers perpetually battling those dark, evil forces which tempt us and often cause us to fall; with the wings of prayer we can soar to God and with the arms of prayer we can scatter the temptations of the dark ones, gaining for ourselves peace, crowns, and the Kingdom of Heaven.

The following are but a few of the teachings that we have been given about prayer and the reading of Divinely inspired books as expounded by Scriptures and the Holy Fathers- in particular, the emphasis is on personal prayer. We should strive to read and re read these words, implant them in our hearts, and put them into practice.

What is Prayer and Why It Is Needed

God is spirit; and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth. (John 4:24)

What then, is prayer? Prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God in praise and thanksgiving to Him and in supplication for the good things that we need, both spiritual and physical. Prayers are spiritual because they are originally born in the (human) spirit and ripen there by the Grace of the Holy Spirit. In their origin they (i.e. prayers, psalms, hymns, etc.) were purely spiritual and only afterwards came to be clothed in words and so assumed an oral form (**St. Theophan the Recluse**)

When you praise the Lord, exalt Him as much as you can; for He will surpass even that. Every man when praying converses with God. Each of us understands how great a thing it is, being man, to converse with God; but I doubt if anyone can express this honor in words, for it is higher even than the station of angels. A man who strives all his life to practice praying and serving God, speedily becomes akin to angels in life, honor, estate, wisdom and understanding.

If you deprive yourself of prayer, it is like taking a fish out of water; for as water means life to a fish, so prayer means life to the soul. .. Prayer is the cause of salvation, the source of immortality, the indestructible wall of the Church, the unassailable fortress, which terrifies the demons and protects us in the work of righteousness.

How to Pray and Types of Prayer

But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door; pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. (Matt. 6:6)
The room of the soul is the body; its doors are the five bodily senses. The soul enters its room when the mind does not wander here and there, roaming among the things and affairs of the world, but stays within, in our hearts. Our senses become closed and remain closed when we do not let them be passionately attached to external sensory things and in this way our mind remains free from every worldly attachment, and by secret mental prayer unites with God our Father. (St. Gregory Palamas)

Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord. (Eph. 5:19)

What is meant by those who sing with their "heart to the Lord?" It means: undertake this work with attention, for those who are inattentive sing in vain, pronouncing only words, while their heart wanders elsewhere. (St. John Chrysostom)

When you pray, try to let the prayer reach your heart; in other words, it is necessary that your heart should feel what you are talking about in your prayer, that it should wish for the blessing for which you are asking.... Observe, during prayer, whether your heart is in accord with that which you are saying. (St. John of Kronstadt)

Our prayer reflects our attitude towards God. He who is careless of salvation has a different attitude toward God from him who has abandoned sin and is zealous for virtue but has not yet entered within himself and works for the Lord only outwardly. Finally, he who has entered within and carries the Lord within himself, standing before Him, has yet another attitude. The first man is negligent in prayer, just as he is negligent in life, and he prays in church and at home merely according to the established custom, without attention or feeling. The second man reads many prayers and goes often to church, trying at the same time to keep his attention from wandering and to experience feelings in accordance with the prayers which are read, although he is seldom successful. The third man, wholly concentrated within, stands with his mind before God, and prays to Him in his heart without distraction, without long verbal prayers, even when standing for a long time at prayer in his home or in church.... Every prayer must come from the heart and any other prayer is no prayer at all. Prayer-book prayers, your own prayers and very short prayers, all must issue forth from the heart to God, seen before you. (St. Theophan the Recluse)

And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive. (Matt. 21:22)
Remember that while you pray, God expects from you a positive answer to His question: "Do you believe that I can fulfill your prayer?" You must be able to answer from the bottom of your heart: "Yes, I believe, O God," and then you will be answered according to your faith. (St. John of Kronstadt)

How many times have I prayed for what seemed a good thing for me and not leaving it to God to do as He knows best. But having obtained what I begged for, I found myself in distress because I had not asked for it to be, rather, according to God's will. (St. Nilus of Sinai)

I had rather speak five words with my understanding... than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue. (I Cor. 14:19)

Pray Simply. Do not expect to find in your heart any remarkable gift of prayer. Consider yourself unworthy of it-then you will find peace. Use the empty, cold dryness of your prayer as food for your humility. Repeat constantly: "I am not worthy, Lord, I am not worthy!" But say it calmly, without agitation. This humble prayer will be acceptable to God. (St. Macarius of Optina)

You should not make long prayer, for it is better to pray little but often. Superfluous words are idle talk. **(St. Theophylact of Bulgaria)**

Strive to render your mind deaf and dumb during prayer. Blessed is the mind which during prayer keeps itself wholly without image or fantasy. **(St. Nilus of Sinai)**

Do not rush one prayer after another but say them with orderly deliberation, as one addressing a great person for a favor. Do not just pay attention to the words, but rather let the mind be in the heart, standing before the Lord in full awareness of His presence, in full consciousness of His greatness and grace and justice. **(St. Theophan the Recluse)**

The Kingdom of Heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force. (Matt. 11:12)

In order to pray a man must struggle to his last breath. If we do not find prayer difficult, perhaps it is because we have not really started to pray. **(Abba Agathon)**

I advise you to convince yourself and force yourself to prayer and every good action, even if you do not feel the desire for it. God seeing such labor and application will give you goodwill and zeal. Such good will and a certain attraction to prayer is often a result of habit. Get into this habit and it will draw you to prayer and good actions. **(St. Tikhon of Zadonsk)**

If you strive after prayer, prepare yourself for diabolical suggestions and bear patiently their onslaughts; for they will attack you like wild beasts.... Try as much as possible to be humble and courageous. He who endures will be granted great joy. **(St. Nilus of Sinai)**

Do not spare yourself from heartfelt prayer even when you have spent the whole day in hard work. Do not indulge in laziness when you pray; tell God everything that is in your heart. If you allow yourself time to pray with diligence, you will not fall asleep before you have wept over your sins. Believe that, if for the sake of bodily rest you pray hurriedly, you will lose the tranquility of both body and soul. By what labor, sweat and tears is our closeness to God achieved! **(St. John of Kronstadt)**

Pray without ceasing. (I Thess. 5:17)

Make sure that you do not limit your prayer merely to a particular part of the day. Turn to prayer at any time. **(St. John Chrysostom)**

In everything they (the Apostles) did, they thought of God and lived in constant devotion to Him. This spiritual state was their unceasing prayer. **(St. Basil the Great)**

Rising in the morning stand as firmly as possible before God in your heart, as you offer your morning prayers and then go to the work apportioned to you by God, without withdrawing from Him in your feelings and consciousness....When there is no inner activity occupying a person, one must develop a habit of a continual repetition of a short prayer. This will eventually repeat itself and will bring one to constant remembrance of God, thus rejecting other thoughts of no profit. However, habit of the tongue is one thing, establishment in the heart is another. **(St. Theophan the Recluse)**

Those who have truly decided to serve the Lord God should practice the remembrance of God and uninterrupted prayer to Jesus Christ, mentally saying: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner." **(St. Seraphim of Sarov)**

Let not one think, my fellow Christian, that only priests and monks need to pray without ceasing and not laymen. No, no; every Christian without exception ought to dwell always in prayer.

(St. Gregory Palamas)

NO TEARS FOR TWO YEARS...

By Archimandrite Gregory, Abbot of Docheiariou Monastery, translated from Greek by the staff of the Greek Orthodox Brotherhood of St. Poimen.

Helen lived in Karpenisi and had married a very tough and cruel man who would beat her at the slightest provocation that he perceived; his violence (mostly kicks) towards Helen would parallel the neighborhood kids kicking their favorite soccer ball, as hard as possible. Her life was indeed difficult, yet she persevered with her only consolation being her closeness to the Mother of God. Her suffering and her affection for the Holy Mother encouraged and motivated her to serve in the Monastery of Panaghia Prousiotissa (in the island of Karpenisi) during the annual August fast for the Glorious Lady, the Theotokos, taking care of the Church and the other cleaning needs of the monastery.

Helen described to us the following story: During an early period of my marriage, I worked for a doctor, cleaning and taking care of his office; the job paid well and the doctor was always prompt in his payments to me; he was, however, a very tough and difficult boss, not unlike my husband. One day, I was picking up the office garbage-can to throw away its contents in the outside dumpster; suddenly, as I approached the dumpster, I heard a soft cry. I opened the lid and saw a baby covered in blood. "Holy Mother," I exclaimed, "what am I to do? I cannot possibly take the baby to the doctor as he is the one who has apparently thrown it in the dumpster believing it to be dead; and taking the baby home would infuriate my husband—he would 'crucify' me as a Paschal lamb."

I picked up the infant, kissed it, and, wiping the blood from his little body, I wrapped him in my bosom, trying to warm him up; it was a frosty winter day. When I arrived home, alone, I said to myself: "God is with me, I will keep him and nothing will happen." I washed him, wrapped him in an old shirt, crossed him and getting on my knees in front of the icon of the Mother of God, I prayed intensely: "Holy Panaghia Prousiotissa, send your grace upon this child and keep him from crying and revealing his presence." And the miracle happened. The baby did not cry for two whole years! I kept him in secret and fed him when nobody was around; and, he would sleep under our bed each and every night, always in quiet. When my husband would come home, my anxiety for his discovery would elevate, my heart rate would increase, but the baby remained my own little secret, for well over two years.

As time passed, my little boy started crawling. One afternoon during lunch, the baby made its way to the table and revealed his presence to my husband. Just as my husband saw him, his eyes widened and lit up as those of a lion, and with a stern voice he screamed: "What is that?" I crossed myself and proceeded to reveal my two-year secret. His disposition then changed, as by a miracle, he was moved beyond any of my expectations; he did not only express his full understanding but accepted my little angel boy as if it was his own.

Many years have passed since then, my husband has fallen asleep and this child is now married and works in Karpenisi. And from all of my children, he happens to be the only one that looks after me, during these, my difficult elderly years; my other children have pretty much forgotten their mother...

CHRIST THE GOOD ARTIST

From the Fifty Spiritual Homilies of St. Macarios the Great

As the portrait painter keeps an eye upon the subject's face and draws, and when the subject's face is towards him, attending to him at his painting, he draws the portrait easily and well, but when he turns his face away, he cannot draw because the face is not gazing at the painter; in like manner Christ, the good artist, for those who believe in Him and gaze continually at Him, straightway portrays after His own image a heavenly man... Yet if a man does not gaze constantly at Him, overlooking everything else, the Lord will not paint His image... We must therefore gaze upon Him, believing and loving Him, throwing away all else, and attending to Him, in order that He may paint His own heavenly image and send it into our souls, and thus, wearing Christ, we may receive eternal life, and even here may have full assurance and be at rest.

