



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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✠ **May 24, 2015** ✠

Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council

St. Symeon the Stylite (the Younger)
of the Wonderful Mountain (592)

St. Vincent of Lerins (450) Nun-Martyr Martha of Monemvasia (990)

St. Nicetas of Stylite, Wonderworker of Pereyaslav, Russia (1186) St. Gregory of Novgorod (1193)

The God-mantled Fathers
gathered on this day as
bright torches flaming
with light, O Christ!
They recognized Thee
as the only Son of God,
Consubstantial and
Co-eternal with
the Father!

✠ **Today – 3:00pm ~ Sacrament of Marriage: Kassiane Kirchner & Joseph Mabry**

✠ **Next Sunday, May 31 - The Feast of Pentecost**

✠ **Sunday, June 7 - 3:00pm ~ Sacrament of Marriage**
~ Georgia Carter and Euphrosynus Briggs ~ By Fr. Benedict Crawford

On Temptations ...and Swimming ~ St. Dorotheos of Gaza (5th C)

✠ "For those who can swim properly [in the sea], when a wave comes against them, they bow under it; and hide themselves beneath it, until it passes. Therefore, they continue swimming --- free from danger. If, however, they struggle against the wave, it pushes them and throws them a great distance. Once they start swimming again, another wave may come. If they oppose themselves to it, then it will again push them and throw them backwards a substantial amount. Thus, they become tired and they do not progress. If - as I said - they bend themselves down under the wave, and 'humble' themselves under it, then it passes them without harming them; and they can continue swimming as much as they desire. It is the same with the temptations: If a person endures temptations with patience and humility, it passes by him without danger; but if he remains afflicted, sorrowful and considering everything as a reason for it, he damns himself and loads the temptations on himself."

The Holy Fathers and the Ecumenical Councils

During the early years of the Church, when a dispute arose concerning whether or not gentile converts should be circumcised, the Apostles met together in Jerusalem to resolve the issue (Acts 15). This council set the precedent for all future gatherings of the Church's leaders.

As the Church grew and spread throughout the Roman Empire, it became necessary for the bishops of Churches in a given area to meet together on a regular basis to address issues of common concern. Apostolic Canon 34 provides for the creation of a regional synod. The bishops of a given area were to gather together twice a year. The meetings were to be chaired by bishop of the major

city in the area, the *metropolis*. The bishop of this city became known as the *metropolitan*.

Each bishop was responsible for the governance of his Church. Issues of common concern, however, were brought before the regional synod and decided by all of the bishops. The metropolitan did not "rule" the synod, but he did have veto power over the synod's decisions. Just as nothing within a given Church could be done without the bishop's approval, so nothing could be done in a region that affected more than one Church without the approval of the metropolitan. The metropolitan, then, served as the principle of unity within the synod.

Some issues, however, such as doctrinal questions, involved more than the Churches of a particular region. For this reason, larger gatherings of bishops were called to deal with issues pertaining to the universal Church. The largest and most important of these gatherings are called the Ecumenical Councils.

The Ecumenical Councils were originally convened by the Roman Emperor and presided over by a senior bishop. The Orthodox Church recognizes seven councils as being Ecumenical:

NICEA I (A.D. 325) - This Council was called to deal with the heresy of Arianism -the teaching that the Word and Son of God is a created being. The first part of the Nicene Creed was drafted here. The hero of Nicea I was St. Athanasius of Alexandria, whose theology was decisive even though, as a deacon at the time, he could not vote.

CONSTANTINOPLE I (A.D. 381) - This Council expanded and completed the Nicene Creed and affirmed the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The theology of the Cappadocian Fathers- St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian, and St. Gregory of Nyssa -was particularly influential here.

EPHESUS (A.D. 431) -This Council condemned the teachings of Patriarch Nestorius of Constantinople, who refused to accept the unity of humanity and divinity in the person of Christ and who refused to call the Virgin Mary *Theotokos*. St. Cyril Archbishop of Alexandria, was the hero of this Council.

CHALCEDON (A.D. 451) - This Council was called to combat the opposite heresy of Nestorianism: Monophysitism. According to the Monophysites, Christ's divine nature swallowed up His human nature, leaving Him with only one nature. The bishops accepted the *Tome* of Pope St. Leo the Great along with the theology of St. Cyril of Alexandria as the standard of Orthodox thought concerning the

person of Christ. The Council decreed that in Christ the divine and human natures exist without "mixture, confusion, division, or separation."

CONSTANTINOPLE II (A.D. 553) - This Council further elaborated on the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon. In addition, some of the teachings of Origen of Alexandria, such as the pre-existence of souls, were condemned.

CONSTANTINOPLE III (A.D. 681) - This Council condemned the heresy of Monothelism, which held that Christ had only one will. The bishops affirmed that Christ has a perfect human will as well as a perfect divine will, thus affirming His full humanity. Pope Honorius of Rome was condemned as a heretic for his support of the Monothelites.

QUINISEXT (A.D. 692) - This Council, also called the Council in Trullo, is considered a continuation of the Fifth and Sixth Councils and not a separate Council unto itself. Among other things, it reaffirmed the condemnation of the teachings of Origen.

NICEA II (A.D. 787) - This Council was called to decide the appropriateness of using icons in the Church. The bishops decreed that the veneration (not worship) of icons was necessary to preserve a proper understanding of the Incarnation.

It is important to note that not all large councils are considered Ecumenical Councils. We often speak of Ecumenical Councils as being "infallible," but there was no guarantee at the beginning of any of these Councils that they would be considered infallible. Only *after* the decisions of a Council have been received by the *consciousness of the whole Church* can it be called Ecumenical and infallible.

When the bishops meet together in council, they do not invent new doctrines. Rather, their job is to express the mind and life of the Church. A specific situation, such as the challenge of a new heresy, may necessitate the development of the Church's vocabulary or a change in the way the Church expresses a particular idea. Nevertheless, it is the duty of the bishops to elaborate upon what the Church has always believed and experienced, not to invent new teachings.

When, however, bishops in council did deviate from *the faith once delivered* and made decrees contrary to the faith and life of the Church, the Body of the

Church throughout the world rejected the decisions. A council held in Ephesus in 449 had a greater number of bishops in attendance than many Ecumenical Councils, yet its decisions were rejected by the Church at large. It has gone down in history as the 'Robber Council.'

The purpose of a council, whether a regular meeting of a regional synod or a gathering of all of the world's bishops, is to express the mind and heart of the Church as a whole. *No single bishop, not even a patriarch, can claim exclusive rights to the Holy Spirit. The bishops are answerable to the whole Church for their decisions.*

It is this conciliar process, reflecting the conciliar nature of the All-holy Trinity, which is the supreme expression of authority within the Church. It is for this reason that the Church cannot and will not accept the claims of the Bishop of Rome to be infallible and to rule over the entire Church.

— taken from The Faith: Understanding Orthodox Christianity
by Clark Carlton

CONCERNING ECUMENICAL DIALOGUES OF "LOVE"

Let us not fool ourselves. There is also "the dialogue of falsehood," when those who discourse together consciously or unconsciously lie to one another. This kind of dialogue is customary when the "father of lies," the Devil, presides, "for he is a liar, and the father of lies." (John 8: 44) It is also usual for his unconscious and conscious co-workers to reach their "truth" with the help of falsehoods when they want to accomplish their good through evil. There can be no "dialogue of love" without the dialogue of truth. Otherwise this dialogue is not true and is not natural. Accordingly the commandment of the Apostle asks that "love be genuine." (Rom. 12.)

The heretico-humanistic separation of and detachment of love from truth is a sign of the lack of theanthropic faith [faith in the God-man Jesus Christ] and of the loss of theanthropic balance and common sense. At any rate, this was never, nor is it the way of the Fathers. The Orthodox are rooted and founded only "with all of the saints" in truth, and have claimed in love this theanthropic life-saving love for world and for all of the creation of God from the time of Apostles until today.

- The Blessed Elder Justin Popovich (+1979)

May 23 ~ New Martyr Evgeny, Soldier for Christ



Soldier-Saints can be found in all centuries and from numerous countries. A military career does not automatically imply sinfulness or exclusion from the Kingdom of God. Certainly, a spirit of repentance and an awareness of one's sins are required of any Christian soldier. However, obedience to the chain of command, a setting aside of one's own will, and a readiness to die for others are also integral not only to the soldier's way of life, but to the way of life of any sincere Christian. In this period when the military is often criticized and mocked, it should not be forgotten that Jesus Christ never condemned military service. He did not rebuke the Centurion who came to Him in faith. He did not call him a warmonger. He did not require from him "whole burnt offerings and oblations for sin." (Psalm 39:10.) It was enough for Christ that the Centurion wholeheartedly acknowledged Him as Lord: "I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed." (Matthew 8:8.) The Centurion was not afraid to make a decision. He did not malign his military leaders. He did not consider desertion because he approached Christ as an authority much greater than his superiors. He remained loyal to his way of life, while exhibiting great faith in Christ. Although a Gentile, the Centurion's judgment was sound and his faith so great that Jesus Himself was moved to remark, "I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel." (Matthew 8:10.)

In the ancient lives of Soldier-Saints, removal of the belt and a laying down of the sword were considered to be a single act, an act that spoke loudly. Not only did it symbolize a denouncing of the Soldier-Saints' military status, it also indicated a heartfelt confession of the Christian Faith and a willing embrace of inevitable martyrdom. The actions of New Martyr Evgeny Rodionov would also speak loudly. His witness would initiate a fervor of renewed faith and conviction among the Orthodox faithful and even among the non-Orthodox. Contrary to his predecessors though, Evgeny would not remove the symbol he wore, the symbol of the most invincible weapon in the world, the Cross of Christ. Although he unwaveringly refused to remove the Cross from his neck, it is clear by his actions that Evgeny not only wore the Cross externally, he carried it within. In no uncertain terms, he had taken up the Cross and followed Christ. (Matthew 16:24.)

Eighteen-year-old Private Evgeny was involved in the war between Russia and Chechnya which took place between 1994 and 1996. He and three other young soldiers were assigned to Border Patrol between the republics of Chechnya and Ingushetia. The post was far from military support. In fact, it was nothing more than a small cabin, without electricity or any means of communication. There were no barriers or defensive constructions, just an open field and a road, making the post quite vulnerable to attack. The checkpoint on this mountainous road was heavily traveled by numerous vehicles carrying anything from weapons and ammunition to captives and drugs.

On the fateful day of February 14, 1996, the young soldiers routinely stopped an ambulance at the checkpoint. Suddenly, a group of armed Chechen rebels leaped from the vehicle and a scuffle ensued. The rebels quickly subdued the stunned, inexperienced soldiers and took them to the Chechen settlement of Bamut, where they were held captive in a dark, damp cellar. Between intervals of torture, the beaten and starved young soldiers were urged to side with the Chechen rebels and convert to Islam. It is clear that Private Evgeny had every opportunity to stay alive. He was not quite nineteen and had his whole life ahead of him. Yet, he was undaunted. In spite of the horrible tortures, Evgeny would not renounce Christ nor would he convert to Islam. He was ordered to take off the small, silver cross he always wore around his neck, but he refused. He would not remove his cross; he would not forswear his religion. Evgeny encouraged the other soldiers to stand firm with him for Christ. After almost one hundred days of imprisonment, the four young soldiers were beheaded. For Evgeny, the martyrdom would have a special impact. It coincided with his 19th birthday — May 23, 1977 to May 23, 1996.

It was subsequently learned that the officers under whom Private Evgeny served decided not to report the disappearance of the Border Patrol to their commanders. Had they done so, they would have been found to be at fault - having placed a post so far from military support and so vulnerable to attack without any defense. The rumor then spread that Evgeny and the three young soldiers were deserters. Their names and characters were viciously slandered. The Military Procurator's Office even raised a criminal case against them. Photographs of New Martyr Evgeny reveal an expressionless, yet pensive face, rather unemotional and stalwart, like that of a soldier whose duty is his life, for whom obedience is tantamount. The face of this young man evoked wonder as to how such a soldier would have deserted his post. It just did not make sense. Nonetheless, the fabricated story continued to spread.

When Evgeny's mother, Lubov Vasiievna Rodionova, learned of her son's disappearance, she began a relentless search. God protected her every step of the way. She traversed over mined roads and through enemy territory without any arrest, harm or injury whatsoever. Her actions were equivalent to an American woman in present-day Iraq looking for her soldier-son. For many months, Lubov roamed Chechnya. Although she got to know many commanders on both sides of the war, she was unable to obtain any information about her son, except to hear of the rumors of his desertion. God, however, would bless her search so that she could bury her son on his native soil and spread his story, his story of uncommon faith and valor.

Lubov's plight was not unique. Thousands of families were searching for their loved ones. During a lull in the war, Chechen rebels turned their heinous knowledge into profit. They contacted the families of those they had killed and demanded large sums of money to reveal the whereabouts of their bodies. In September, 1996, a Chechen man, eager to capitalize on human grief and sorrow, contacted Lubov and sought a hefty ransom. Lubov and her husband mortgaged their apartment and sold everything they had to pay the ransom. The Chechen man brought Lubov to the site, but cautioned her to remove her son's body only at night. She returned to the site and found the remains of four bodies. She identified her son's remains by his boots and the small, silver Cross he had refused to remove, which was stained with blood. She brought the bodies back to Russia for proper burial. Next, with great daring, Lubov sought out her son's murderer, Chechen General Ruslan Khaikhoroyev.



~ Icon of St. Evgeny in Rostov, Russia

Absolutely dumbfounded that she would do such a thing, he uttered: "You are one brave woman!" He audaciously gave her a videocassette on which the execution of her son had been recorded. In spite of the torment this must have caused, the videocassette helped clear her son's name from slander and the charge of desertion. The Russian nation actually ended up decorating Evgeny with the Order of Courage.

Lubov faithfully tends her son's grave, along with the graves of his three comrades, atop an icy hill near an old church in Rostov, south of the Chechen capitol of Grozny. Thousands of people travel to the site. They pray before Evgeny's relics and ask for his intercessions. Miracles are occurring through the God-pleasing Evgeny — unofficial icons emit rivulets of sweet-smelling myrrh — people are kept from dangers through their prayers to the young Soldier-Saint — a zealous fervor is warming the hearts of many who had given up in religion.

Neither the godlessness of Communism nor the fanatical doctrine of Islam could cause this young man to disavow the Orthodox Faith. Although his death is untimely, it has produced great fruits in a land that has been tempest-tossed for such a long time.

Holy New Martyr Evgeny, pray unto God for us!

Getting Back Up

Fr. Stephen Freeman

Glory to God for All Things Blog

One of the fathers was asked, "What do you do all day in the monastery?" He replied, "We fall down and get up; fall down and get up; fall down and get up again."

This, I think, may be the most accurate and faithful description of the Christian life that I know. We fall, and we fall repeatedly. Our very best intentions often serve to make the sting of the fall all the more painful. In my experience, many Christians harbor a quiet despair.

The world suffered a great loss recently with the death of **Archimandrite Roman Braga**. He was among a number of great Romanian figures who survived the terrible prison in Pitești, during the early 1950's. The Communist regime had decided to carry out a program of psychological and physical torture on Christians that are among the worst ever visited on the Church.

Fr. Roman, **Fr. George Calciu**, Pastor Richard Wurmbrand and others survived the ordeal. Alexander Solzhenitsyn once labeled the Pitești prison program as "the most terrible act of barbarism in the contemporary world."

The stories related by the survivors give us a window into the unimaginable. Without relating those graphic details, I will share one common element. The program was designed for "brainwashing through torture." The agreed account says that "everyone broke." *Everyone* denied their faith under torture. Prisoners were even forced to take part in the torture of other prisoners. Suicides were common. Fr. Roman said that each day they would return from the tortures, broken and filled with self-loathing at their denial of Christ. And, every day, all of the prisoners would forgive and restore those who had been broken.

In the midst of this terrible human-created hell, a number of the prisoners clearly became Saints. Stories of the Uncreated Light are not uncommon. Fr. Roman said that it was in the prison that he learned to pray.

I count it a remarkable blessing that three of the greatest confessors of the Pitești experiment came eventually to reside in America and ended their days in this land.

I also count their experience as a teacher for our modern period. The goal of the Pitești experiment was brain-washing, to make prisoners abandon their belief in God and to acquire a new mind – that of their Communist torturers. We live today in a very benignly constructed era of brainwashing.

Never at any time in my life (61 years), have I seen such angry reactions and denunciations of Christianity as are common today. Many will point to various failings or crimes of the Church and say that Christians have only themselves to blame. But, this is itself a very sad distortion.

I do not see the daily great trial of Christians coming from the extremes or being provoked by Christian mis-behavior. It is the relentless drumming of mass consumerism, mind-numbing mis-education and manipulation of sexual desires that are the most destructive of our faith. And the consequences that are most disturbing are not found in the extremes, but in the quiet despair of average, well-intentioned believers.

The lure of secularism is its claim and pretensions to "normalcy." Secularism (the claim that either there is no God, or that if there is, He belongs to a "religious" sphere) is the default position of our culture. The exclusion of God from daily life is simply seen as normal.

The result is that repeated falls in Christian struggles are met with, "Why bother?" One insidious perversion of Christian teaching

suggests that once a person has accepted Christ as Savior, nothing else matters. Salvation can thus be the gateway into a secularized Christian life in which religious devotion is simply numbed into non-existence.

Judging by the "Post-Christianity" of the modern West, this numbing secularization is far more successful in suppressing Christianity than the flagrant persecutions in the Communist East. Christianity is trending upward in those countries, in stark contrast to the West.

The martyrs and confessors of Pitești stand as witnesses to those who fall each day. For the most remarkable witness of their experience is that they **got back up**. Not only did they get back up, but their fellow-sufferers restored them, forgave them, and welcomed them back into their lives. Individuals got back up, but with every act of forgiveness and restoration, the entire community got back up.

The Christians of Pitești, in their patient endurance and quiet generosity, overthrew "the most terrible act of barbarism in the contemporary world," and did so on a daily basis. Learning to "get back up," is perhaps the greatest requirement of the Christian life in the modern world. I have several specific thoughts in this regard:

1. Know where you are.

You live in a highly secularized world. It is not a "neutral zone," but a setting that is quietly hostile to most of Christian believing. As the fathers said, "Prayer is a struggle to a man's dying breath." Expect nothing different.

2. Trust in mercy above all else.

God is on your side and has not given you this life in order to test you or to condemn you. St. Isaac of Syria said that all of the

world's sin was nothing more than a grain of sand compared to the ocean of God's mercy.

3. You are saved by your weakness, not by your strength.

The teaching of the Scriptures are quite clear: we are saved *by our weakness*, not *in spite of our weakness*. (2 Cor. 12:9) God made Christ *to be sin* that we might be made the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:21)

4. Get back to work.

St. Paul tells us that "where sin increases, grace increases even more." But warns us not to use this as an excuse. We simply dust ourselves off, and get back to our spiritual struggle. This is especially true of our prayers. People frequently avoid their prayers after a fall of one sort or another. They feel somehow unworthy or incapable. This is utter nonsense. We should rush to our prayers after a fall – the sooner the better. It is good for us, and the devil hates it.

5. Never judge another.

We are all aware that we should not judge. But we take this to be a moral teaching. It is far more than that. We do not judge because it is not possible for us to judge rightly. This even applies to our own lives. Not until all things are revealed at the end of days will judgment be possible. We must learn to be agnostic about the sins of others. We simply do not know.

6. Give thanks in all things.

To give thanks in all things (and for all things) is a primary, foundational aspect of the Christian life. We must learn in the end, to give thanks even for our falls. For though in our falls, sin is revealed, grace is revealed to be even greater. And so we give thanks – that our sin is revealed and that grace is been shown to be greater.

Glory to God for all things!

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