

THE UNIVERSAL EXALTATION OF THE
PRECIOUS AND LIFE-GIVING CROSS

Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

3101 Clairmont Ave. Birmingham, AL 35205

Church Tel. 205-930-9681 / 205-907-9447

Visit stsymeon.com

✠ **September 13, 2015** ✠

Forefeast of the

Elevation of the Cross

Founding of the Church of the

Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (335 AD)

Hieromartyr Cornelius the Centurion (1st C)

The greatest balm that Christ's sacrifice on the Cross gave us is the crushing of the devil. After the Crucifixion of Christ, the devil is like a snake with no fangs – with no poison. He is like a wild dog without teeth. All poison was removed from the devil; all teeth were removed from the wild dogs that are the demons. So, they are now disarmed, while we are armed with the Cross.

Elder Paisios of Mt.
Athos (+1994)

✠ **Tomorrow 10:00am Divine Liturgy ~ Feast of the Elevation of the Precious & Life-Giving Cross**

➤ **Visit the new St. Symeon's Website (same links) thanks to the work of Phillip Ritchey, along with Nicholas Wells!**

Parish Council Nominees: The Ballot for the 2015-16 Parish Council election includes the following 14 nominees (in alphabetical order):

Wilfrid Bodden, Jonathan Boyer, Ignatius Burton, John DeBlock, James Gordon, Innocent Krause, Thomas Lotz, Mary Potts, Theodore Reese, Dunia Ritchey, Jason Simmelink, Columba Spence, Andrew Staursky, Andrew Wells

- **The Annual Parish Meeting is Sunday, September 27, after the Liturgy.**
- **Church School begins Sunday, September 27 also.**

The Cross is Foolishness to Those who are Perishing

To the the sick and gasping even good foods are unpleasant, friends and relations are burdensome...and sometimes not even recognized! Much like this is the case of those who are perishing in their souls. For the things which tend to salvation, they don't know, and those who are careful about them they consider troublesome. Such is the nature of their disease. And just what the insane do, hating those who take care of them and reviling them, the same is the case with unbelievers also...This is the nature of the thing, that the power of the Cross is not recognized by those who perish. For they are beside themselves. ...But what do you say, O man? Christ became a slave for you, "having taken the form of a slave" (Phil. 2:7) and was crucified, and rose again. And for this reason you ought to adore Him risen and admire His lovingkindness, because what neither father, nor friend, nor son did for you, all this the Lord did for you....and it cannot be explained by the world's



wisdom...for the folly of men will make them laugh at it. The greatest things of all no language can explain...

Do not say then, Why did Jesus not help Himself on the Cross? He was hastening on to to battle with death itself! He did not descend from the Cross, not because he could not, but because He would not. For Him Whom death itself could not restrain, how could the nails of the Cross restrain? What philosopher among those who have studied logic...has saved us and made known the truth? Not one. It was the Fisherman's work, the whole of it. But how did He "destroy wisdom?" Being made known to us by Paul and others like him, He showed it to be unprofitable...for God has overcome by contraries and has shown us that the Gospel is not of man.

- Saint John Chrysostom

FOR CONSIDERATION...

The mysterious power of the Cross, however inexplicable, is true and indisputable. Saint John Chrysostom speaks of the custom of his time, of placing the sign of the Cross on "the imperial crown and the soldier's armor, and of making it on parts of the body: the head, the breast and heart, both at the table of sacrifice and on lying down in bed." "If," he says, "we are striving to drive out demons, we use the Cross, and it is also of aid in healing sickness." Saint Benedict made the sign of the Cross over a glass containing poison, and the glass shattered as if struck by a stone. Saint Julian made the sign of the Cross over a cup of poison brought to him, and drank the poison, suffering no bodily harm from it. The holy martyr Vasilissa of Nicomedia protected herself with the sign of the Cross and stood in the midst of the flames, remaining completely untouched. The holy martyrs Audon and Senis crossed themselves when ravening wild animals were set loose on them, and the beasts became docile and meek as lambs. The sign of the Cross has been the most powerful weapon against great temptations from demons, from the early ascetics down to the present day. The most ferocious of the devil's devisings are dispersed into nothing, like smoke, when a man signs himself with a Cross. Thus it was the goodwill of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself that the very sign of wickedness and shame, the Cross, should, after His crucifixion on the wood of the Cross, be the means of invincible, all-conquering power and might.

+ + +

The Cross, the Fountain of Life

✠ "He gave His Only-begotten Son," not a servant, not an Angel, not an Archangel. And yet no one would show such anxiety for his own child, as God did for His ungrateful servants ... He who giveth life to others, much more to Himself doth He well forth life ... For He calls the Cross the fountain of life; which reason cannot easily allow, as the heathens now by their mocking testify. But faith which goes beyond the weakness of reasoning, may easily receive and retain it.

-St. John Chrysostom

The Precious Cross Of Christ

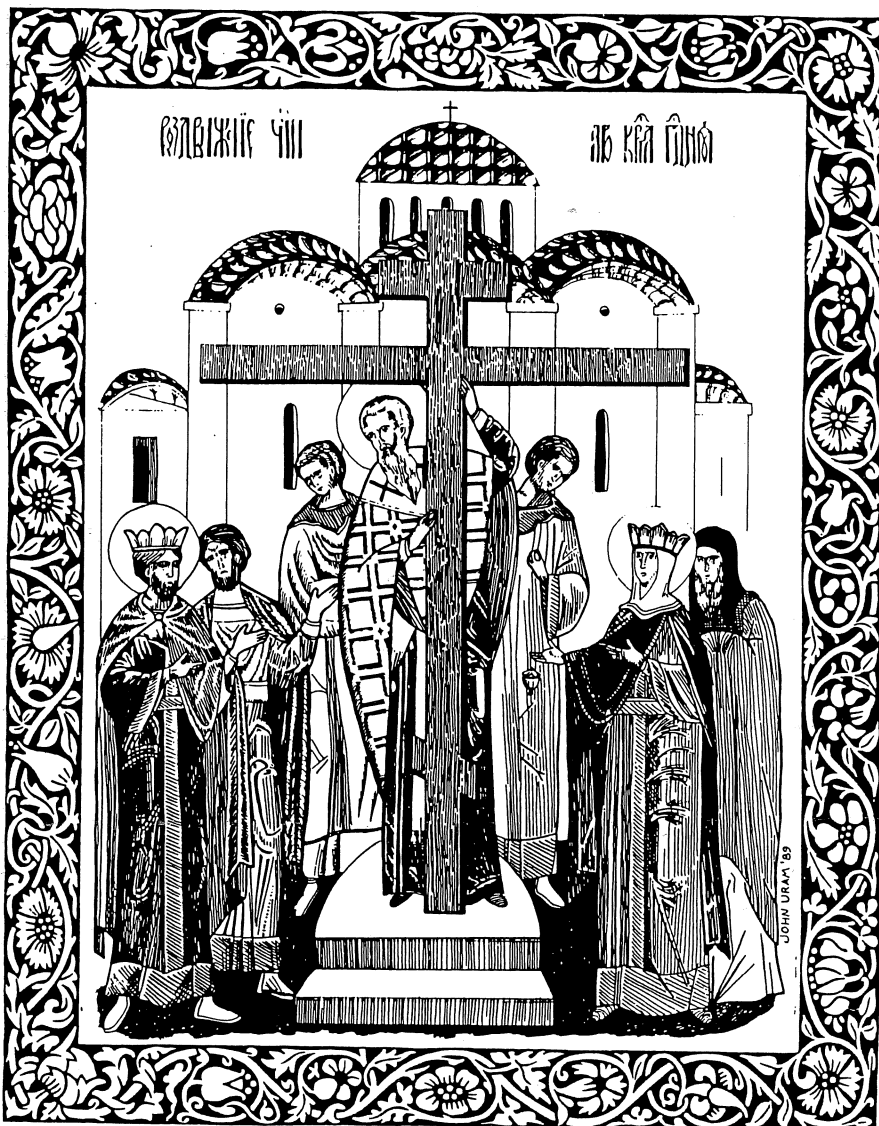
O Thou thrice-blessed and all-worshipful Cross of Christ, all we the faithful venerate and magnify thee, being joyous at thy divine Exaltation. But as the trophy and unconquered weapon that thou art, by thy grace, protect, cover, and shelter those who cry to thee: Rejoice, O Wood most blessed.¹

If there is one universally recognized symbol common to Christians throughout the world, it is the Precious Cross.

All Christians are aware of the fact that Jesus Christ was crucified on a cross in the first century of this era. In the Orthodox Church, this event is commemorated annually on Holy Friday. In addition to this day, however, various other days are set aside specifically to commemorate and celebrate the Cross and all that it means in our life as Christians. One of the most outstanding of these days dedicated to the Life-Giving Cross is the day of its Exaltation (lifting-up), or Elevation, celebrated each September 14.

On this bright and triumphal day are commemorated two events connected with the Precious Cross of Christ: the first, the finding of the Cross on Golgotha and the second, the returning of the Cross to Jerusalem from Persia. We turn now to *The Prologue from Ochrid*, by Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic (St. Nicholas of Zicha), for a precise look at these historical events.

"Staying in the Holy Land, the holy Empress Helena decided to look for the Precious Cross of the Lord. An old Jew called Judah was the only person who knew the whereabouts of the Cross, and, under pressure from the Empress,



he revealed that the Cross was buried under the Temple of Venus that the Emperor Hadrian had built on Golgotha. The Empress ordered that this idolatrous temple be pulled down, and then, digging deep below it, she found three crosses. While the Empress was in uncertainty about how to recognize which cross was the Lord's, a funeral procession passed by. Then Patriarch Macarius told them to place the crosses one by one on the dead man. When they placed the first and second on him, the dead man remained unchanged, but when they placed the third on him, he was restored to life. By this, they knew that this was the

Precious and life-giving Cross of Christ. After that, they placed it on a sick woman, and she recovered. Then the Patriarch raised the Cross aloft for all to see, and the people sang with tears: 'Lord have mercy!' The Empress Helena had a silver casing made, and placed the Precious Cross in it.

"Later, King Chozroes conquered Jerusalem, took the people into slavery and carried the Lord's Cross off to Persia, where it remained for fourteen years. In 628, the Greek Emperor Heraclius was victorious over Chozroes and brought the Cross back to Jerusalem with great ceremony. Entering the city, Heraclius

¹ Kontakion 1 of the Akathist Hymn to the Precious Cross.

was carrying the Cross on his back, but suddenly the aged Emperor was unable to take another step. Patriarch Zacharias saw an angel directing the Emperor to take off his imperial robes and walk beneath the Cross along the way that Christ had walked, barefoot and humiliated as He had been. He passed this vision on to the Emperor, who stripped himself of his raiment and, in poor clothing and barefoot, took up the Cross, carried it to Golgotha and placed it in the Church of the Resurrection, to the joy and consolation of the whole Christian world."

The services of this special day also refer to the appearance of the Sign of the Cross in the sky, as witnessed by the Emperor Constantine in the year 312, shortly before his victory in battle over Maxentius. At that event, the Lord spoke to Constantine with the words "By this sign conquer," and the Emperor had the image of the Holy Cross emblazoned on the shields of his entire army.

Various other appearances of the Holy Cross in the sky have been recorded in Holy Tradition, including an appearance at Jerusalem in the year 351, during the time St. Cyril was Patriarch of that city. The Cross is said to have reached from Golgotha to the Mount of Olives, and was almost two miles long. This miraculous sign remained in the sky for a week.

This testimony concerning the centrality of Christ's Holy Cross within the Christian life can be supplemented with scores of accounts of miraculous occurrences resulting from contact with the Precious Cross itself, one of the splinters taken from it, an image of the Cross worn around the neck or used in prayer, or even making the Sign of the Cross either over someone or something, or on our own person. This Invincible Trophy, our Weapon of Peace, permeates all of time and every place in order to reveal the awesome magnificence of Christ the Lord in an infinite

variety of ways.

As we can see, the cross, originally an instrument of cruel torture and feared by a great many prisoners and enemies of the state power, has been transformed into the cause of joy and gladness for Orthodox Christians everywhere. In fact, this transformation is so complete and so universal, that our Tradition speaks of the Precious Cross as none other than that very same Tree of Life which was planted in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve had access to this wonderful source of life right up until they partook of the other, inaccessible tree . . . The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis 2:9, 15).

But, once our ancestors committed that infamous act of disobedience, God prevented their (and our) access to the Tree of Life itself—he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword on guard (Genesis 3:24). This was the state of affairs until Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Lord of the Universe, hung and died on that very same Tree of Life. In so doing, He has restored to us our refreshment, joy, and consolation. Our Lord has presented us once again with the glorious and precious gift of LIFE! This newness of life is perfectly present in the Holy Cross.

So our celebration consists of far more than a series of historical events associated with the Precious Cross. Rather, it is a cosmic commemoration of a life which far exceeds the boundaries of time, space, and our own universe. Even before the fall, Adam experienced the Tree of Life only in a partial and limited way. Now, with the coming of God in the Flesh in the Person of Jesus Christ, all of the fullness of *His Divine Life* reaches out to us from the outstretched arms of the Precious Cross. The text of the Feast of the Exaltation itself proclaims this reality: "Through the Cross, O Lord, today Thou hast raised us up again, who were plunged continually in the gloom of our forefather. Unrestrained greed thrust down our nature into error: but now we have

been restored to our full inheritance by the light of Thy Cross which we, the faithful, magnify."²

Focusing on our own participation in the Life of the Cross, we respond just as did those early Christians in Jerusalem who fell in tears before the shadow of the Cross with the cry "Lord have mercy." Picture the Precious Cross elevated high above—as it was on Golgotha that afternoon when the Savior of the universe was willingly hung upon it. There are no words adequate to express his amazing act of mercy. It shows God's infinite love for us. When we reflect on this, how can we do anything else but prostrate before the Sign of our salvation and humbly ask for God's mercy?

To be able to speak or even think these precious words (Lord have mercy), requires genuine humility. Unfortunately, this virtue has all but disappeared from our planet. Even the Precious and Holy Cross itself is boldly misused as a cheap decoration, as jewelry, no different from any bracelet or cufflink. It seems fashionable to display all sorts and sizes of crosses as necklaces, pins, or even earrings. Pride and egotism, not humility, are the driving forces behind such "fashion statements." Instead, humility instructs us to wear the holy and victorious Cross of Christ close to our hearts, even if it is only the Lord Himself Who sees it. If we are living the life of the Cross each day then it is *that* example which will mark us as humble Christians under the protection of the Sign of the Cross. The use of our magnificent Cross, granted to us by the Master, Jesus Christ, must always reflect the majesty and dignity of so great a trophy.

To wear the Cross of Christ is both a great honor and a heavy burden, yet one marvelously lightened by divine help—for our Lord said, "Take my yoke upon your shoulders . . . for my yoke is easy

² Ode 9 of the Second Canon of Malina.

The Precious Cross Of Christ

and my burden is light.”

Similarly, if we prostrate before the Holy Cross physically, then we had better realize what that act of prostration implies, in terms of the life we lead. We Christians are called to take seriously the reason we lie there before the Holy Cross. If we can do this so readily, then we should not flinch from defending this image against those who would mock and spit upon it. We are Orthodox Christians—members of the army of Christ; our greatest weapon is the Cross, and we should not be ashamed of it, but should have a serene sense of confidence and courage in using it and calling upon its power often.

To make the Sign of the Cross upon our person is the beginning (before meals, before sleep, before getting out of bed, before driving, and so on). There can be no shame in signing ourselves with this unconquerable ensign. But again, it is not for display or to satisfy our conceit that we should be willing to show the world that we have accepted the Cross of Christ. Rather, we should expect to be persecuted for standing beneath the Cross against the enemies of Christ. By scorning the earthly shame and signing ourselves accordingly, we win eternal glory, knowing that Christ Himself will not be ashamed when it comes time to bless us with this same sign at the hour of our judgment. “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Matt. 16:24). This is a lifetime commitment filled with difficult burdens and treacherous dangers, but *there is no other way*; the life of the Cross is the “narrow path that leads to life” (Matt. 7:14).

The narrow path reveals to us the way of acceptance, the way of obedience, the way of suffering in order to be glorified. For just as Pascha follows Holy Friday, Resurrection follows Crucifixion and salvation follows suffering and death.

Unless we bear this in mind, we will continually question our own crosses (Why me? What did I do wrong to deserve this? and so on). It is helpful to keep in mind the Jews of old and other unbelievers who could not—would not—believe that God would take human flesh, and so they scorned Christ. They could not imagine that God would allow Himself to have that very flesh which He assumed, be torn and broken by spikes and whips. Rejecting our own crosses places us in the company of those who could not accept the truth.

As Christians we are inspired by the knowledge that our crosses are the best and perhaps the only way for us to pass through the treacherous waters of this life. Whatever trials and griefs we encounter, we are able to utilize these very burdens just as Christ utilized the Cross in order to gain victory over death. So the way of acceptance and obedience is, to be sure, the way of Christ. Father Alexander Elchaninov states, “It often seems to me that the thorns and thistles on our life’s course are ordained by God in order to cure specifically our soul. I see this with absolute clarity in my personal life.”³ Our Cross is a personal gift—to think of it in this way is a great blessing—which is the specific medicine Christ uses to restore our spiritual health.

Our personal Crosses—our trials and tribulations—should not, however, be used as measurements of how blessed we are. More often than we think, others around us bear heavier Crosses than we; in humility, we should assume that our cross is lighter than that of others. Each soul is different; we cannot look into the souls of others. It is prideful and unfair to compare our sufferings with those of others. Nor should we pray that we might be given heavier cross, but for that one which will be best to bring about our salvation—for the Lord knows what is best for us. As Metropolitan Philaret of

Moscow prayed, “I dare not ask either a cross or a consolation.”

To help bear another’s cross as our own, though, without the pride and show of being noticed, is to begin practicing real Christian spirituality. This is what it is to live the virtues of the Beatitudes. As the Apostle urged, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Again, to live the Life of the Cross is to die to ourselves.

Perhaps the most mysterious aspect of the Cross is that it is a doorway or portal from the old to the new. Just as death itself is a passageway from corruption to incorruptibility and from the present time into eternity, so is the Precious Cross of Christ a bridge between two realities. The death of Christ on the Cross is followed by and linked to, the Resurrection and new life which are possible only through the Cross and death, so that even on the feast day of the Exaltation itself we strictly fast: it is both feast and fast. While we dwell in the flesh on earth we are living in both realities, the old and the new, and we long for the day when death will truly be no more. In striving for that day and that condition we let go, little by little, of that which ties us to the present reality. In straightening our backs beneath the weight of our own crosses we steadily approach the portal of Christ’s Cross—which carries us ultimately into eternal life.

All of this and more is signified by the stark, wooden image on a distant hillside. All of history cannot contain the salvific power of the Cross, and pales in significance compared to it. The angels in Heaven encircle the life-bringing Cross in fear and trembling. And all that we can do is fall down before the Exalted Image of our own salvation and burst into an ever-resounding chorus of “Lord, have mercy.” This Image is the inexpressible, true, and praiseworthy Holy Cross.

—Priest Gregory Horton

³ *Diary of a Russian Priest.*

The Elder Paisios of the Holy Mountain on Positive Thinking

"We must have positive thoughts, otherwise none of the spiritual fathers - not even the saints- can help us. When Jesus was on the Cross and all the terrible events were taking place, two thieves were also being crucified with Him. *And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour (Mark 15:33) ... And behold the curtain of the temple was rent in two, from the top to the bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs also were opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs, after His resurrection, they went into the Holy City and appeared to many (Matthew 27:51-53).* Each one of them had a different attitude towards Him, even though they were both placed next to the same God; a God who had never been blamed for, or accused by anyone for the slightest sin. On the contrary, many people were benefited by Him: some had been cured of a specific disease, others had been resurrected and all these miracles took place in public. Now, even nature was reacting against the injustice done to Him.

The thief placed on the left cross had created inside his mind a "factory," which produced only negative thoughts. *One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, Art Thou not the Christ? Save thyself and us (Luke 23:39).* Although he could see what was going on around him, he never questioned himself about it. The one on the right, who had a positive way of thinking, reacted as follows: *But the other rebuked him saying, Dost thou not fear God, since thou art under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man hath done nothing wrong. And he said, Jesus, remember me when Thou comest into Thy kingdom (Luke 23:40-42).* Both thieves had the same almighty God placed between them who could help them. The negative thinking of the one on the left prevented God from helping him, whereas the one on the right - who had committed terrible crimes and was legitimately being punished - was able to "move" Jesus with his positive attitude. And He said to Him: *Truly, I say unto thee, today thou shalt be with me in Paradise (Luke 23:43).*

We should keep in mind that God "cannot" help us, even if he really wants to, unless we acquire a positive way of thinking. Concerning the spiritual progress of a disciple monk, it is more important for him to develop good thoughts than to be guided by a spiritual father who is considered a living saint..."

This and That

➤ Family and social breakdown is inextricably linked to the abandonment of Christian sexual ideals — specifically, the idea that sexual passion should be limited to expression within the bounds of marriage. Chastity — which is not “no sex,” but rather the right ordering of the God-given sexual instinct — is a Christian virtue. It is not the most important Christian virtue, but it is not one that can be discarded, either.

Christianity, properly understood, takes a more holistic view of the human person... But liberals, Christian and otherwise, fail to appreciate the extent to which abandoning sexual restraint results in broken families and broken societies. “Different beliefs about the universe lead to different behavior,” C.S. Lewis writes. The Sexual Revolution teaches something different about sex, the body, desire, and identity. Christianity opposes it — and Christian chastity cannot be isolated from the overall Christian conception of what the body is and who we are as incarnated eternal beings.

The point is, there is no way for Christians to undertake the task of nurturing stable families... without making the teaching of Christian chastity part of the mission. This is the one thing the world cannot accept — and in fact, finds a form of madness, indeed of bigotry.

The romanticization of sexual love is no new thing. But it continues to seduce us and to confuse us, and, along with economic individualism, has become one of the two dominant ideologies of our civilization. *This bad idea has consequences.* The destruction of the family and the sundering of social bonds are among them. -Rod Dreher, June 30, 2015, *The American Conservative* (Orthodox writer)

➤ Christians are not going to be allowed to depart from the (culture war) battlefield. Once the atomic weapon of “bigotry” has been used, you can’t just contain the radiation. Christians will be occupied for years yet to come defending their institutions – not because that’s what they want to do, but because they will be forced to. I wish that the sides could stand down now – truly I do – but I simply think the logic is inexorable. I hope and wish I am wrong. But I fear I am right. – Patrick Deheen

➤ **Re: Syrian Refugees**... Luckily for the Christians, there’s Eastern Europe. Unlike Western Europe and the USA, the old “Iron Curtain” countries have lived through communist madness and realize it has nothing to do with tolerance. They were eyewitnesses to anti-Christian persecution on a level that the rest of the West has yet to behold.

As a member of the European Union, Slovakia is forced to help resettle the million or so “migrants” that are pouring into Europe from Africa and the Middle East annually. But a spokesman for the country’s interior minister recently said that Slovakia will accept Christian refugees but not Muslim ones. He argued that Slovaks are primarily Christians and that there aren’t even any mosques in his country of five million, so Muslims would find it hard to integrate anyway.

Poland is applying similar criteria when accepting refugees from the Syrian crisis—Christians to the front of the line. The Czech Republic has applied similar measures with asylum-seekers this year. According to Poland’s prime minister Ewa Kopacz: *Today Christians who are being persecuted in a barbaric fashion in Syria deserve Christian countries like Poland to act fast to help them.*

Naturally, EU officials are calling such policies intolerant and bigoted and non-inclusive and probably illegal... Immigration isn’t just the biggest issue in America. It’s the biggest issue across the world, or at least where immigrants are being foisted upon unwilling hosts. But at least for now, Eastern Europe appears to be a safe space for Christian refugees.

– Theodore Dalrymple

Wisdom of the Holy Fathers

"The Lord said of His Church: 'I will build My Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it' (Mt. 16:18). This is said of the pastors of the Church and of all true believers, as well as of all the sacraments, all the dogmas and commandments of the Holy Orthodox Faith, and of all the offices of the sacraments; for instance, the Liturgy, Holy Orders, Matrimony, Baptism, Chrism, Holy Oil, which have been established unto all the ages, and have already been in existence unchanged during many centuries. See how firm is the Church, founded by the Lord! Remember these words of the Lord and do not waver in the slightest degree when celebrating any of the sacraments. Be firm as adamant."

~ **St. John of Kronstadt (1908)**

"Be attentive to your heart and watch your (spiritual) enemies, for they are cunning in their malice. In your heart be persuaded of this: it is impossible for a man to achieve good through evil means. That is why our Savior told us to be watchful, saying: 'Straight is the gate, and narrow is the way that leads to life, and few there are that find it' (Mt. 7:14)." ~ **St. Isaiah the Solitary** (*The Philokalia Vol. 1*)

"He who shall preserve the life bestowed upon him, and give thanks to Him Who imparted it, shall receive also length of days forever and ever. But he who shall reject it, and prove himself ungrateful to his Maker, inasmuch as he has been created, and has not recognized Him Who bestowed the gift upon him, deprives himself of the privilege of continuance forever and ever. And, for this reason, the Lord declared to those who showed themselves ungrateful towards Him: 'If you have not been faithful in that which is little, who will give you that which is great?' (cf. Lk. 16:11) indicating that those who, in this brief temporal life, have shown themselves ungrateful to Him Who bestowed it, shall justly not receive from Him length of days forever and ever."

~ **St. Irenaeus of Lyons (150 AD)**

"'Unless your righteousness shall exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven' (Mt. 5:20). What does 'exceed' refer to? In the first place, we must believe not only in the Father, but also in His Son now revealed; for He it is Who leads man into fellowship and unity with God. In the next place, we must not only say, but we must do; for they said and did not. And we must not only abstain from evil deeds, but even from the desires after them. Now He did not teach us these things as being opposed to the Law, but as fulfilling the law, and implanting in us the varied righteousness of the Law."

~ **St. Irenaeus of Lyons**

"Guard yourself from thoughts, which appear holy and inflame an unreasonable zeal for themselves, of which the Lord speaks allegorically: 'Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravaging wolves. You shall know them by their fruits' (Mt. 7:15-16). Their fruit is the languishing and breaking of the spirit. Know that everything which draws you away from humility and from inner peace and quiet, however beautiful it may seem, is nothing but false prophets who, under the cover of sheep's clothing, that is, of a hypocritical zeal to do good to their neighbors without discrimination, are in truth ravaging wolves who steal you of your humility, peace and quiet, so necessary to every man who desires steady progress in spiritual life."

~ **from Unseen Warfare (15th century)**

"Being come together in the same place, let there be one prayer, one supplication, one mind, one hope, in love and in joy undefiled. There is one Jesus Christ, than Whom nothing is more excellent. Therefore all should run together as into one temple of God, as to one altar, as to one Jesus Christ, who came forth from the Father, and is with and has gone to one."

~ **St. Ignatius of Antioch 110 AD)**