



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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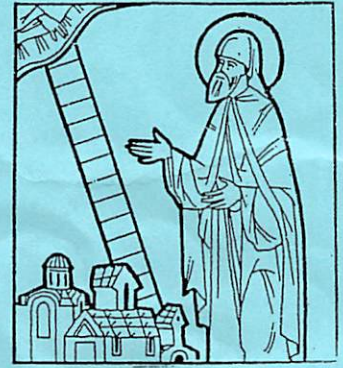
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March 26, 2017

St. John of the Ladder

Synaxis of the Archangel Gabriel

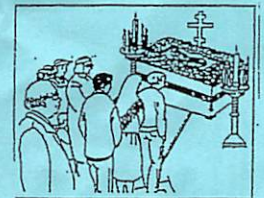
Fifth Week of Great Lent



- ✘ Wed. Mar. 29 ~ 10:00am – Morning Presanctified Liturgy
- ✘ Thurs. Mar. 30 ~ 6:30pm - Great Canon of St. Andrew
- ✘ Fri. Mar. 31 ~ 6:30pm - Matins w/ Akathist to the Theotokos

Holy Week 2017 Schedule

- ✘ Saturday, April 8 10:00am ~ Lazarus Saturday Divine Liturgy
 > Parish Workday following Divine Liturgy & Lunch
 Sat. April 8, 6:00pm: **Palm Sunday Vespers w/ Blessing of Palms**
- ✘ Sun. April 9 **Palm Sunday Matins & Divine Liturgy**
- ✘ Palm Sunday Evening - 5:00pm ~ First Bridegroom Matins
- ✘ April 10/11 - Holy Monday & Tuesday ~ 6:30pm Bridegroom Matins
- ✘ April 12 - Holy Wednesday 6:30pm Holy Unction
- ✘ April 13 - Holy Thursday 10:00am Mystical Supper Liturgy
 6:30pm 12 Passion Gospels
- ✘ **Holy Friday Services** ✘ April 14 - 10:00am Royal Hours
 - 4:00pm Vespers – Shroud to the Tomb
 - 7:00pm - Lamentations at the Tomb
 ✦ *Youth All Night Vigil at the Tomb* ✦
- ✘ Holy Saturday ~ April 15 ~ 10:00am Divine Liturgy
 ✘ The Blessed Sabbath ✘
- ✘ **Holy PASCHA** ✘ Begins Saturday, April 15 at 11:30pm



Fear of death is a property of nature due to disobedience, but terror of death is a sign of unrepented sins.
 ~ St. John Climacus

- > There is no limit in the amount of good you can do, if you don't care who gets the credit. - Ronald Reagan
- > You can change nothing, if you can't change your mind. – George Bernard Shaw

THE ANNUNCIATION – CELEBRATED MARCH 25TH

From the Prologue of St. Nikolai Velimirovich

When the All-Holy Virgin completed the fourteenth year after her birth and was entering her fifteenth year, after having spent eleven years of living and serving in the Temple of Jerusalem, the priests informed her that, according to the Law, she could not remain in the Temple but was required to be betrothed and enter into marriage. What a great surprise to the priests was the answer of the All-Holy Virgin that she had dedicated her life to God and that she desired to remain a Virgin until death, not wanting to enter into marriage with anyone! Then, according to Divine Providence, Zacharias, the high priest and father of the Forerunner, under the inspiration of God, and in agreement with the other priests, gathered twelve unwed men from the Tribe of David to betroth the Virgin Mary to one of them to preserve her virginity and to care for her. She was



betrothed to Joseph of Nazareth who was her kinsman. In the house of Joseph, the All-Holy Virgin continued to live as she did in the Temple of Solomon, occupying her time in the reading of Sacred Scripture, in prayer, in Godly-thoughts, in fasting and in handiwork. She rarely went anywhere outside the house nor was she interested in worldly things and events. She spoke very little to

anyone, if at all, and never without special need. More frequently she communicated with both of Joseph's daughters. When the fullness of time had come, as prophesied by Daniel the Prophet, and when God was pleased to fulfill His promise to the banished Adam and to the Prophets, the great

Archangel Gabriel appeared in the chamber of the All-Holy Virgin and, as some priestly writers wrote, precisely at that same moment when she held open the book of the Prophet Isaiah and was contemplating his great prophecy: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son!" (Isaiah 7:13). Gabriel appeared in all of his angelic brightness and saluted her: "Rejoice, highly favored one! The Lord is with you" (St. Luke 1:28), and the rest in order as it is written in the Gospel of the saintly Luke. With this angelic announcement and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Virgin,

the salvation of mankind and restoration of all creation began. The history of the New Testament was opened by the words of the Archangel Gabriel: "Rejoice, highly favored one" This is to imply that the New Testament was to signify joy to mankind and to all created things. It is from this that the Annunciation is considered not only a great feast, but a joyful feast as well.

TO CONQUER THE ENEMY IS TO CONQUER OURSELVES

By St. Leo the Great (†461)

In the days of Saul and David, it was when the Israelites fell into sin that the Lord allowed the Philistines to oppress them. In order to regain their ascendancy over their enemies, the people were ordered to fast. The Israelites understood that there was no use for them to try to win their freedom by taking up arms; they first had to rid themselves of their sins. So they began to discipline themselves and to conquer the desire of the flesh to be able to conquer their opponents. When they fasted their oppressors gave way before them, when they indulged all their appetites the enemy held them in subjection.



It is the same with us today. We have our own struggles and conflicts, and we can win by using the same tactics. The Israelites were attacked by human beings; we are attacked by spiritual enemies. We can conquer by bringing our lives into line with God's will for us; then our enemies will give way before us. It is not their power but our lack of self-discipline that makes a threat to us, and we shall weaken them by overcoming ourselves. We must ask God's help in this warfare, because our only means of conquering the enemy is to conquer ourselves.



“It is All Grace” by Fr. Thomas Hopko

Fr. Thomas gave his last homily on Forgiveness Sunday, February 22, 2015, in the Holy Transfiguration Monastery chapel. While he needed a walker to stand, he needed no sermon notes. While his voice was soft and raspy due to medications, his message was strong and clear, the message he had been preaching his whole life.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Those of us who have some knowledge of the history of the Christian faith and of Christianity in this world will recognize right away the important place that the Epistle we just heard (Rom. 13:11-14:4) holds in the history of the Church. St. Augustine and his friend Olympius, before they were baptized, while they were searching for the truth, ran into St. Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, who was a very good friend of Augustine's mother, St. Monica. Monica had begged and begged Ambrose that her son would be converted from his licentious life that he was leading and he said to her, "Be at peace, God will not take lightly all of your tears."

One day, Augustine and his friend Olympius were sitting in a garden, and they were actually reading the wonderful sayings of St. Anthony the Great. And then St. Augustine testified in his book called *The Confessions*—where he begins by saying, "Too late have I sought You, O Love of my life," - that at that moment it was as if he heard the voice of a child saying the following words in Latin, "tolle, lege" which mean, "take and read." take and read. So he just opened up the New Testament, and these words from the Epistle to the Romans were what he heard: "Not in debauchery or licentiousness, not in reveling and drunkenness, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to satisfy its desires." Then he went and got baptized. And we know St. Augustine became the greatest of the Western Church Fathers. The Eastern Orthodox Church has quite a bit of trouble with some of the teachings of St. Augustine, but we have no quarrel and have only honor for the conversion of his life, giving his whole life to God, and writing so much about the Christian faith. There was a saying also in Latin that anyone who has said that they have read all of St. Augustine is a liar because he wrote so much. In any case, he is a huge figure in the history of Christianity, especially in the Western church.

Today, we begin the great Lenten season, called the tithe of the year because it's almost literally one tenth of the year. In the Bible the tithe, the 10 percent, especially of harvest and things like that, was always given to God, given to the poor at least at that time of year, for the sake of forgiveness of sins and to make a new beginning. And so now begins the tithe of the year, the 10 percent that we are supposed to offer completely and totally and whole-heartedly as much as we can to God. As Father Nicholas Solak said in his sermon last Sunday, "Lent and repentance are about God, not about us." It's about God, it's about coming to know God.

St. John Cassian said that the whole of life, especially monastic life, is the life of acquiring purity of heart, because the pure at heart see God. "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God." So we want to purify our heart. How often in the Psalms that expression about the heart is there—and I have to say with my condition I pay attention to it a lot more than I used to. In fact, I love that sentence in the Septuagint translation where it says, "I will run in the way of Thy commandments, O

God, when Thou dost enlarge my heart." So I have an enlarged heart, physically at least. But we pray that the Lord says, "My son, my daughter—give Me your heart."

Your heart—in the Hebrew Bible the heart was the center of the person, there was even no separate word for mind. The heart was where you willed, where you thought, where you made your decisions. It was the center of a person's being. To purify the heart is the way that we come to see God. Now regarding the purification of our heart, we can go a little bit further and say, "What is it? How does it look?" And perhaps one of the answers would be that it is purified when it is broken. When it is broken. You know we pray for the enlargement of our heart, we pray for purification of heart, we pray for getting rid of the hardness of our heart, we pray for new and clean heart, we make those prayers all the time. But one line that is so, so famous to all Church people is the line from the most-used psalm in Christian worship, the 50/51st Psalm, ("Have mercy on me, O God, according to Thy great mercy"), the penitential Psalm of David after he had sinned. It says a sacrifice acceptable to God is "a broken spirit, a contrite and a humble heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise."

In the services of the past week that prepare us for the beginning of Lent today (I haven't been able to come up to the church here but have the book at home), there is a wonderful expression called "the grace of Lent." There is a special Lenten grace, a gift, a special power for those who make the effort of praying, fasting, being kind, and forgiving, of course—we begin with forgiveness. St. Theophan the Recluse said, "Of course we have to make this effort, we have to really make this effort of will, but you know once you have made this effort and have come to some type of purification or illumination through it, you realize that even that was grace." Even the grace of making that effort was a gift from God, was the power of God—it wasn't just something that WE did by clenching our fists or gnashing our teeth or whatever. In fact, it is not a revving up, it's a quieting down.

One of the things especially that Lent can teach us is how true the saying of Jesus is in the Sermon on the Mountain, "don't be anxious about tomorrow, for the trouble, the bad things (*kakia* in Greek, actually literally "the bad things of the day") are enough." If we begin Lent by thinking: how in heaven's name are we going to live through these 40 days and still have Lazarus Saturday, Palm Sunday and Holy Week to go through—this thinking will plague us all the time. It will take our attention and we shouldn't put our attention there. Lent is probably one of the best times to learn to live one day at a time and not to be anxious about tomorrow, just get through the day. For you nuns, it could be a very difficult thing: doubling the Psalter, having the extra services, doing the Great Compline, all of those kinds of things. But if we do it one day at a time—just do it when we have to do it and not think about it too much but just open ourselves to it, then we will know that special grace that Augustine finally learned.

You know, he was the great Doctor of Grace. His main teaching against Pelagius was: it is all grace. We make the effort, but in the end, we learn that it is all grace. That is what we learn during Lent, hopefully to have a broken and contrite heart, and to come to realize that it is all grace. And then come to know that double mystery, the mercy of God and the misery of human beings. How miserable we are, look at our world, but we do these things as a gift from the crucified Christ as the service says. Then we realize the truth of all the truths: that we are really capable of sharing the life of God because by His grace this is what He created us to do. Amen. † † †

THE VENERABLE JOHN CLIMACUS

(Remembered on March 30 and Fourth Sunday in Great Lent)

St. John Climacus is the author of "The Ladder of Divine Ascent." St. John came to Mt. Sinai as a sixteen year old youth and remained there, first as a novice under obedience, and afterwards as a recluse, and finally as abbot of Sinai until his eightieth year. He died around the year 563 A.D. His biographer, the monk Daniel, says about him: "His body ascended the heights of Sinai, while his soul ascended the heights of heaven." He remained under obedience with his spiritual father, Martyrius, for nineteen years. Anastasius of Sinai, seeing the young John, prophesied that he would become the abbot of Sinai.

After the death of his spiritual father, St. John withdrew into a cave, where he lived a difficult life of asceticism for twenty years. His disciple, Moses, fell asleep one day under the shade of a large stone. St. John, in prayer in his cell, saw that his disciple was in danger and prayed to God for him. Later on, when Moses returned, he fell on his knees and gave thanks to his spiritual father for saving him from certain death. He related how, in a dream, he heard St. John calling him and he jumped up and, at that moment, the stone tumbled. Had he not jumped, the stone would have crushed him.

At the insistence of the brotherhood, St. John agreed to become abbot and directed the salvation of the souls of men with zeal and love. From someone St. John heard a reproach that he talked too much. Not being angered by this, St. John however remained silent for an entire year and did not utter a word until the brothers implored him to speak and to continue to teach them his God-given wisdom.

On one occasion, when six-hundred pilgrims came to the Monastery of Sinai, everyone saw an agile youth in Jewish attire serving at a table and giving orders to other servants and assigning them. All at once, this young man disappeared. When everyone noticed this and began to question it, St. John said to them, "Do not seek him, for that was Moses the Prophet serving in my place." During the time of his silence in the cave, St. John wrote many worthwhile books, of which the most glorious is "The Ladder." This book is still read by many, even today. In this book, St. John describes the method of elevating the soul to God, as ascending a ladder. Before his death, St. John designated George, his brother in the flesh, as abbot. George grieved much because of his separation from St. John. Then St. John said to him, that, if he [St. John] were found worthy to be near God in the other world, he would pray to Him, that, he, [George], would be taken to heaven that same year. And, so it was. After ten months George succeeded and settled among the citizens of heaven as did his great brother, St. John.

ON FREEDOM FROM ANGER AND ON MEEKNESS

From The Ladder of Divine Ascent

1. As the gradual pouring of water on a fire completely extinguishes the flame, so the tears of true mourning are able to quench every flame of anger and irritability. Therefore, we place this next in order.
2. Freedom from anger is an insatiable appetite for dishonor, just as in the vainglorious there is an unbounded desire for praise. Freedom from anger is victory over nature and insensibility to insults, acquired by struggles and sweat.
3. Meekness is an immovable state of soul which remains unaffected, whether in evil report or in good report, in dishonor or in praise.

4. The beginning of freedom from anger is silence of the lips when the heart is agitated; the middle is silence of the thoughts when there is a mere disturbance of soul; and the end is an imperturbable calm under the breath of unclean winds.

5. Wrath is a reminder of hidden hatred, that is to say, remembrance of wrongs. Wrath is a desire for the injury of the one who has provoked you. Irascibility is the untimely blazing up of the heart. Bitterness is a movement of displeasure seated in the soul. Anger is an easily changeable movement of one's disposition and disfiguration of soul.

6. As with the appearance of light, darkness retreats; so at the fragrance of humility, all anger and bitterness vanishes.

7. Some who are prone to anger are neglectful of the healing and cure of this passion. But these unhappy people do not give a thought to him who said: "The moment of his anger is his fall."¹

8. There is a quick movement of a millstone which, in one moment, grinds and does away with more spiritual grain and fruit than another crushes in a whole day. And so we must pay attention with understanding. It is possible to have such a blaze of flame, suddenly fanned by a strong wind, as will ruin the field of the heart more than a lingering flame.

9. And we ought not to forget, my friends, that the wicked demons sometimes suddenly leave us, so that we may neglect our strong passions as of little importance, and then become incurably sick.

10. As a hard stone with sharp corners has all its sharpness and hard formation dulled by knocking and rubbing against other stones, and is made round, so in the same way, a sharp and curt soul, by living in community and mixing with hard, hot-tempered men, undergoes one of two things: either it cures its wound by its patience, or by retiring it will certainly discover its weakness, its cowardly flight making this clear to it as in a mirror.

11. An angry person is a willful epileptic, who due to an involuntary tendency keeps convulsing and falling down.

12. Nothing is so inappropriate to those repenting as a spirit agitated by anger, because conversion requires great humility, and anger is a sign of every kind of presumption.

13. If it is a mark of extreme meekness, even in the presence of one's offender, to be peacefully and lovingly disposed towards him in one's heart, then it is certainly a mark of hot temper when a person continues to quarrel and rage against his offender, both by words and gestures, even when by himself.

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth!"

¹ Ecclesiasticus 1:22.

St. Paisios of Mt. Athos ~ What are the Passions? {2}

“As such, when we pray with all our heart to be delivered from a particular passion, and He does not help us, then we must immediately understand that an even greater one is hidden behind this passion — and that is pride. In other words, since we do not recognize pride, God allows the easily-recognized passion to remain - for example: gluttony, idle talk, anger and so forth - thus keeping us humble. When we become repulsed by our passions because of our constant falling, recognize our weakness and become humble, then God helps us to climb the spiritual steps two at a time.”

“[Someone said to Geronta:] ‘*Geronta, I am troubled by my passions.*’ [And the Geronta replied:] Do you recognize that there are passions within you? ... That is good; a person who acknowledges his passions humbles himself, and then the Grace of God comes. ‘*But I get upset over constantly making mistakes.*’ [Geronta replies:] You should be glad at being constantly wrong, for you have pride; and this is how you are humbled. Say: ‘*My Lord, this is who I am. Help me. If You do not help me, I will not be able to do anything.*’ Do not despair. Whenever we make a mistake, our real self is revealed; we come to know him and try to correct ourselves. This is how we can move forward confidently, and not live with the false impression that we are doing well.”

“I personally am glad when a weakness of mine displays itself, when my passions sprout up. If they didn’t, then I would have thought that I had become holy while the seeds of the passions would be hidden in my heart. You also, when you get angry or censure someone will be grieved, of course, because you fell. But you should also be glad at the manifestation of your weakness, which will then prompt you to struggle to be delivered from it.”

“[Geronta’s response to the question: *When a passion of mine lies dormant for a period of time, does this mean that the passion no longer exists within me?*] If there is a passion within you, it will display itself at some point. This is why you must be careful, if you know that some passion is hidden inside you. If you know, for example, that there is a snake hiding somewhere outside your monastic cell, you will look around for it, when you step outside, in case it comes out and bites you. It is not dangerous to know that the snake is there and to be aware so that you can kill it when it comes out; it is dangerous if you are not aware and walk carelessly, because it can bite you. In other words, it’s dangerous when a person does not keep track of himself and is not aware of his passions. When one is aware of his passions and carries out the necessary struggle, then Christ helps him to uproot them.”

“When a person is overly sensitive, God does not allow him to recognize his passions all at once. Such a person, you see, is also tempted by the devil who can easily cause him to fall into despair: ‘*Why do you have this passion? Why do you do this? Why that? It is obvious that you are beyond salvation!*’ By putting such thoughts into his mind, the devil can send a sensitive person to the psychiatric ward.”

“Yes, you do have many passions, but you also have your youth and plenty of *pallikaria*(*) to work at uprooting all of the thorny weeds from your garden [your heart] — replacing them with lilies, hyacinths, roses [i.e., what St. Isaac the Syrian calls *the flowers of virtue*], so that you may rejoice in your garden. Now that you are young, the passions are ‘tender’ and can be easily uprooted.”

*) - *Pallikaria* is the composite of bravery, strength, fearlessness, gallantry and fortitude.

On the Grace of God and Human Efforts

St. Theophan the Recluse 1815-1894

A God-pleasing life is nurtured by both grace and zeal inseparably. Grace will not lend any help without our own efforts, nor can our own efforts do anything lasting without God's grace. It is the union of freedom and grace that accomplishes the task. Do not ask which is larger, which smaller; which one begins, which follows because we cannot comprehend this. But simply bear in mind: Both are equally important, for one can do nothing in us without the other.

Hasten to accomplish what is in your power, like the holy Prophet David, who first mentioned zeal, but then called for grace. What is from God is always ready, if only we were ready. For that reason, he does not augment his prayer, but only cries: Oh, that my ways were directed! (Ps. 118 (119):5)

To graft commandments to the heart to such an extent that they will permanently dwell there and direct the heart itself — this is the doing of God's grace. No matter how hard he may try, man cannot do it on his own. Thus, with all man's efforts, the transformation of the heart is achieved through grace and through grace alone. Here is the substantial difference between a Christian and a pagan!

Yet without works and spiritual deeds in fulfilling the commandments, grace will not graft anything to the heart, leaving it as it is, with all its passionate tastes and attractions, even though a person may have been baptized and partakes of other sacraments. Here lies the difference between Christians who toil hard spiritually and those who do not find it necessary to constrain themselves, although they conduct themselves honestly. The law of spiritual life dictates that what a person does not struggle for will it be given by God's grace, although with his own effort alone he will not succeed in anything. (*Psalm 118: A Commentary*)

The goal of human freedom is not freedom itself... but in God... with the intention that man would voluntarily bring it as a sacrifice to God, a most pleasing offering. **St. Theophan the Recluse**

St. Simeon Metaphrastes (10th C) ~ on Synergy

We receive salvation by grace and as a divine gift of the Spirit. But to attain the full measure of virtue we need also to possess faith and love, and to struggle to exercise our free will with integrity. In this manner we inherit eternal life as a consequence of both grace and justice. We do not reach the final stage of spiritual maturity through divine power and grace alone, without ourselves making any effort; but neither on the other hand do we attain the final measure of freedom and purity as a result of our own diligence and strength alone, apart from any divine assistance. If the Lord does not build the house, it is said, and protect the city, in vain does the watchman keep awake, and in vain do the laborer and the builder work (cf. Ps. 127:1-4).

St. John Climacus on Free-will and Perseverance

Someone asked this question of a discerning man: "Why is it that God confers gifts and wonder-working powers on some, even though He knows in advance that they will lapse?" His answer was that God does this so that other spiritual men may grow cautious, and to show that the human will is free, and to demonstrate that on the day of judgment there will be no excuse for these who lapsed.

(Step 26, On Discernment)