

Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

3101 Clairmont Ave. Birmingham, AL 35205 Church Tel. 930-9681 / 854-4235 Visit stsymeon.com & birminghamorthodox.com

₩ February 5, 2012 ₩

Sunday of the Publican & Pharisee

Martyr Agatha of Palermo (251) St. Theodosius of Chernigov (1696)





Looking Ahead: Pre-Lent and Lent

- ⇒ No Services this week Father Alexander is away
- ⇒ Workday next Saturday, Feb. 11 10:00am
- ¥ Sat. Feb. 18 10:00am Memorial Saturday Liturgy
- ¥ Sun. Feb. 19 Meatfare Sunday Dinner after Liturgy
- ₩ Mon. Feb. 20- 25 * Cheesefare Week *
- ₩ Sun. Feb. 26 Forgiveness Sunday
- ₩ Mon. Feb. 27 Great Lent Begins ...

₩ GREAT CANON OF ST. ANDREW – Feb. 27 thru Mar. 1, 6:30pm

- ₩ Fri. Mar. 2 6:30pm First Presanctified Liturgy
- ¥ Sun. Mar. 3 ~ Sunday of Orthodoxy Vespers at the Cathedral
- Sat. Mar. 10 11:30am ~ Lenten Retreat at St. Symeon's

* Dr. Tristan Englehardt * Retreat Schedule:



11:30-12:00 Prayer service

12:00-1:00 Session 1

1:00-2:00 Lunch

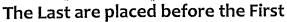
2:00-3:00 Session 2

3:00-3:30 Coffee break/table discussion

3:30-4:30 Q&A session

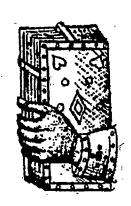
4:30-5:55 Snacks and informal talk

6:00 - Vespers: St. Gregory Palamas Sunday



It is possible for those who have come back again after repentance to shine with much luster, and oftentimes more than those who have never fallen at all, as I have demonstrated from the divine writings. Thus at least both the publicans and the harlots inherit the Kingdom of Heaven, thus many of the last are placed before the first.

-St. John Chrysostom



"The True Worshippers"

Excerpt from Elder Paisios of Mt. Athos, Spiritual Awakening

Some people will say, "In this small and peaceful Church I can really experience the Divine Liturgy; in a huge cathedral I cannot. If I am in a simple, white-washed country Chapel, I feel nothing; but if it has frescoes and a beautiful iconostasis, that's where I can truly experience the Divine Liturgy!" Such things are for a person who has no appetite and who needs a little salt, a little pepper to whet his appetite.

- So, Geronda, do you mean that such things play no role and don't help in our worship?
- I am not saying they don't; they do help, but we must not get caught up with such things. Otherwise, people will be looking to experience God only in a contrived manner. They will seek a darkened monastic cell, a vigil oil lamp with very dim light, a beautiful and inspirational Church. Without them, they will not be able to pray. But for one who is praying it should make no difference if he is on the train or in the cave or on the road; it should be the same for him. God has made each one of us into a small temple,9 and we can always have it with us wherever we go.

Everybody is seeking peace of mind, but this comes from within. Those poor people who go from one shrine to another seeking to find Christ do not realize that He is always near them. And while they could find Him without effort, they weary themselves with pointless journeys and still don't find Him. A truly spiritual person does not find peace of mind by wandering around to see various places of interest. This is for those who are suffering, who need to leave their worries behind. A spiritual person who finds divine consolation in his faith does not need this. And if he does not have this divine consolation, then he is no different from a worldly person. His perspective and his interests will still be worldly; they will not be spiritual. He will still be seeking peace of mind in something worldly.

Many come to the Holy Mountain, visit various Fathers, become enthused with what they hear from each, interpret them in their own way, muddle them up in their heads and then say, "We had a really good time." Whereas, if they visited only one Father, heeded his advice and tried to apply all that he said to their life, they would have some positive help. Now what they are doing is spiritual tourism; they are wasting their time, exhausting themselves without gaining anything. How restful and beneficial it would be if they stayed with one Father and applied what he told them! They could experience the soul's inner repose, whereas now they wander from place to place, enjoying the Holy Mountain's beautiful green landscape just like worldly people.

Vitamins for the Soul

- ₩ We do not need great knowledge to be devout. If we concentrate and meditate on the few things we know, our heart will be spiritually embroidered. One may be profoundly affected by a single hymn, while another may feel nothing, even though he may know all the hymns by heart, as he has not entered into the spiritual reality. So, read the Fathers, even one or two lines a day. They are very strengthening vitamins for the soul. ~ Elder Paisios of Mt. Athos (+1994)
- If you will master the Prayer of Jesus, cultivate contemplation on Scripture, and exercise yourself in true penitence, humility, and trust in God, the serenity of mind will come in due course. When you attain it you will be able to see the world from a very different angle than you do now.

 Elder Michael of Valaam (+1954), Interior Silence

Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee

The Pharisees were an ancient and outstanding sect among the Jews known for their diligent observance of the outward matters of the Law. Although, according to the word of our Lord, they "did all their works to be seen of men" (Matt. 23:5), and were hypocrites (ibid. 23: 13, 14, 15, etc.), because of the apparent holiness of their lives they were thought by all to be righteous, and separate from others, which is what the name Pharisee means. On the other hand, Publicans, collectors of the royal taxes, committed many injustices and extortions for filthy lucre's sake, and all held them to be sinners and unjust. It was therefore according to common opinion that the Lord Jesus in His parable signified a virtuous person by a Pharisee, and a sinner by a Publican, to teach His disciples the harm of pride and the profit of humble-mindedness.

Since the chief weapon for virtue is humility, and the greatest hindrance to it is pride, the divine Fathers have set these three weeks before the Forty-day Fast as a preparation for the spiritual struggles of virtue. This present week they have called Harbinger, since it declares that the Fast is approaching; and they set humility as the foundation for all our spiritual labors by appointing that the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee be read today, even before the Fast begins, to teach, through the vaunting of the Pharisee, that the foul smoke of self-esteem and the stench of boasting drives away the grace of the Spirit, strips man of all his virtue, and casts him into the pits of Hades; and, through the repentance and contrite prayer of the Publican, that humility confers upon the sinner forgiveness of all his wicked deeds and raises him up to the greatest heights. All foods are allowed the week that follows this Sunday.

Calling us to Himself

The Lord never ceases calling us to Himself: "Come unto Me, and I will give you rest." He nourishes us with His most precious Body and Blood. In His mercy He schools us by His Word and the Holy Spirit. He has revealed His mysteries to us. He lives in us and in the Sacraments of the Church, and leads us to where we shall behold His glory.

But this glory shall each one behold according to the measure of his love. The more a person loves, the ardently does he set his face towards God, yearning to be with the Beloved Lord, and therefore he will approach the nearer to Him; while the one who loves but little will have but little desire for the Lord, and the one who does not love at all will neither wish nor aspire to see the Lord, and will spend his life in darkness.

St. Silouan the Athonite (1938)

To be a Fool for Christ

₩ What is it then to be a fool for Christ? It is to control one's thoughts when they stray out of line. It is to make the mind empty and free so as to be able to offer it in a state of readiness when Christ's teachings are to be assimilated, swept clean for the words of God that it needs to welcome.

St. John Chrysostom (407)

Obedience for Christ's Sake

"Be free, though you are bound in a body, and for Christ's sake show forth obedience in your freedom. But also be prudent in your simplicity, lest you be plundered. Love humility in all your activities, that you be delivered from the imperceptible snares that are always found outside the pathways of humble men. Do not reject afflictions, for through them you will enter into the knowledge of the truth; and do not fear temptations, because therein you will find precious things. Pray that you enter not into the temptations of the soul, but with all your strength prepare yourself for those of the body. Without these you cannot draw nigh to God, because divine rest is laid up within them."

Be the Doorkeeper

⚠ Be the doorkeeper of your heart and do not let any thought come in without questioning it.
 Question each thought individually: "Are you on our side or on the side of our enemies?"
 And if it is one of ours, it will fill you with tranquility.
 -Evagrius of Pontus (5th C)

THE TRIODION BEGINS

During the three week pre-Lenten season the Church prepares us for repentance. She urges us to prepare ourselves through gradual diet modification and instructing us with themes of humility, judgment, repentance and forgiveness. The period is bounded by four Sundays.

1. February 5: Publican and the Pharisee (Luke 18:10-14)

This Sunday emphasizes humility as a key attitude for repentance. The Greek word for repentance is metanoia, which means a change of mind. To repent we must not boast of our spiritual feats, but humble ourselves like the Publican who longs for a change of mind. We are called to learn this secret of the inward poverty of the Publican rather than the self-righteousness of the Pharisee who is convinced of his perfectness and not open to change because of his pride. There is no prescribed fasting for this week.

2. February 12: Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)

This Sunday teaches us about our need to return from exile. This parable shows us the mercy of the Father who with open arms receives his son, whose behavior he does not return, but is joyous of his return home. We are encouraged to examine ourselves in the period of Lent to purge ourselves of sin and "come home." The week that follows is called Meat Week (Kreatini) as it is the last week we are to eat meat. In the villages of Greece this was the traditional week to slaughter the family pig and the leftovers were smoked to be eaten after Pascha. The normal rule of fasting are applied to this week, fast on Wednesday and Friday.

"Saturday of the Souls"

Saturday of this week is the first Saturday of Souls where those who have fallen asleep in the hope of resurrection and eternal life are remembered at a special service "Saturday of the Souls." Parishioners bring small dishes of kollyva to the church and submit a list of first names of deceased ones to the priest. We commend to God all those who have departed before us, who are now awaiting the Last Judgment. This is an expression of the Churches love. We remember them because we love them.

3. February 19: Judgment (Meatfare) Sunday (Matt 25:31-46)

This Sunday emphasizes the Last Judgment. We are reminded of our individual responsibility for love. We are encouraged not to eat meat this week, but we can eat eggs, cheese and other dairy products, including on Wednesday and Friday.

4. February 26: Forgiveness (Cheese-Fare) Sunday (Matt 6:14-21)

This Sunday emphasizes forgiveness and how we must forgive others if God is to forgive us so we can break the chains of sinful tendency which we inherit from the Adam and Eve. This is the last day of preparation as the traditional Lenten fast begins on the following day where no meat, dairy or eggs are to be eaten according to the Church tradition.

5. Monday, February 27: Great Lent Begins

Great Lent (or the "Great Fast") is the period that the Church has in her wisdom set aside for us to intensify and renew our own spiritual growth through fasting, prayer and worship. If you follow the Church guidelines on fasting, make time to attend the services and intensify your own prayer life, you will be rewarded with a greater closeness to God and a renewal of your spirit.

Eastern Christians Fleeing the Middle East

A Grim Christmas by Srdja Trifkovic • December 25, 2011 (Chronicles - excerpt)

Egypt's eventual transition to what passes for democracy in the Muslim world is going to make matters far worse for the Coptic Christians who are fearful the army and courts will no longer be able to shield them from ever-greater discrimination and harassment. The writing is on the wall...The adherents of political Islam, in other words, have captured 86 percent of all seats contested. Their spiritual leader is Sheikh Ali Gomaa, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, who in a recent video reminded the faithful that Christians are kuffar, or infidels. After quoting Quran 5:17 ("Infidels are those who declare God is Jesus, son of Mary") he went on to declare that any association between a human and God (shirk) is the greatest sin: "Whoever thinks Christ is God, or the Son of God, not symbolically—for we are all sons of God—but attributively, has rejected the faith which God requires for salvation."

The Sheikh's position is eminently mainstream in the Muslim world, which may explain the fact that he is still hailed in the West as a moderate. Three years ago, in a U.S. News article titled "Finding the Voices of Moderate Islam," Lawrence Wright described him as "a highly promoted champion of moderate Islam": "He is the kind of cleric the West longs for, because of his assurances that there is no conflict with democratic rule and no need for theocracy." His assurances, indeed... On this form watch out for the Coptic Exodus of 2012, on par with that of the Christians in Iraq since the "liberation" of 2003.

Iraq's dwindling Christian population marked Christmas on Sunday with religious leaders calling for peace, days after attacks across Baghdad killed dozens. A week after US forces completed their withdrawal from the country, a senior bishop noted that little was being done to prevent a continuing Christian exodus from Iraq. As worshippers gathered for Sunday morning Christmas services, their churches were guarded by armored security vehicles, heavily-armed soldiers and policemen patrolling the surrounding streets and guarding rooftops. "Our faithful are like everyone in Iraq—they have fear," Chaldean Bishop Shlemon Warduni told AFP. "They feel there is no peace, no security, so they go where they can live in peace. We don't agree, we don't want them (to go), but they say, 'If we don't go, can you ensure my life, can you ensure my job, can you ensure the future?' ... The government cannot ensure their lives, how can we ensure their lives?" The Christian community in Iraq was some two million strong before the US-led invasion of 2003. Up to four-fifths are estimated to have left the country in recent years following a series of attacks by Muslim extremists. On October 31, 2010, an Al-Qaeda assault on a Baghdad church left 44 worshippers, two priests and seven security force members dead. "We have concerns about the US withdrawal, despite the security forces saying it will be safe," says Louis Sako, Chaldean archbishop of Kirkuk. "There has been a failure to ensure the safety of Christians—the security forces are not sufficiently prepared to ensure the protection of Christians. Even though we have repeatedly asked to raise the level of security, the results are not encouraging." According to Sako, 57 churches and houses of worship in Iraq have been attacked since the invasion, with more than 900 Christians killed and more than 6 000 wounded.

Syria has the largest Christian community in the region, some 2.5 million strong. Most of them are supporting President Bashar Al Assad amidst ongoing protests in the country. A Syrian Christian explained that they prefer "a brutal dictator who guarantees the rights of religious minorities to the uncertain future that Assad's departure might bring." It is not to be doubted that if the Obama Administration is successful in its stated objective of bringing Assad down, the Christians in Syria will follow their Iraqi brethren into exile.

...Pakistan has a constitution that guarantees religious freedom, but murders, discrimination, and violent harassment of its small Christian minority are persistent. Any dispute with a Muslim—most commonly over land—can become a religious confrontation. Christians are routinely accused of "blasphemy against Islam," an offense that carries the death penalty. Charges of blasphemy can

be made on the flimsiest of evidence—one man's word against another, and since it is invariably a Muslim's word against that of a Christian, the outcome is preordained. The ease with which blasphemy charges can be made to stick has led to a spate of malicious complaints motivated by personal enmity and greed, especially for the Christians' land. On many occasions Christians charged with blasphemy have been murdered before their cases reached the courts. The scene is the same in Alexandria, Aceh, Istanbul, Prishtina, Karachi, Nazareth... Heavily armed police guard churches as hostile crowds look on. Wherever Muslim numbers dominate, Christians have reason to fear for their safety.

... Thirteen centuries of Islam have effectively eliminated Christianity from the land of its birth. The terminal decline of the Christian remnant in the Middle East has been accompanied by the indifference of the post-Christian West to its impending demise. Once-thriving Christian communities are now tiny minorities, and in most countries of the region their percentages have been reduced to single digits. Whether they disappear will partly depend on Western leaders belatedly expressing their outrage at Christian persecution.

According to David Parsons, media director for the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem, there is clear historic precedent for such outside intervention in the Arab/Muslim world to protect Christian communities:

As Ottoman rule over the Middle East began to wane, the Great Powers moved into the region, each concluding deals with the Sultanate in Istanbul to provide protection to various imperiled Christian denominations. British envoys arrived to safeguard Protestant interests, France the Lebanese Christians, Russia the Orthodox folds. The Vatican also stepped in to aid certain sects... These Western interlocutors all brought with them schools, hospitals and other modern institutions, thus vastly improving the education, health and job opportunities of the local Christians. With this benevolent influx also came advances for all peoples of the region. Some locals are sure to object to any renewed Western intervention on behalf of Middle East Christians as a form of neocolonialism. But no one has territorial designs here anymore.

It is just a matter of plain human decency, Parsons concludes: "No coddling of Islamist regimes! Sanctions if necessary! Someone has to do something to help stop the endless bleeding of Eastern Christianity." It is a near-certainty, however, that that "someone" will not be the U.S. Administration of President Barack Obama.

If the Jewish or Muslim population of America or Western Europe were to start declining at the rate at which Christian communities are disappearing in the Middle East, there would be an outcry from their coreligionists all over the world. There would be government-funded programs to establish the causes and provide remedies. The endangered minority would be awarded instant victim status and would be celebrated as such by the media and the academy.

By contrast, when the President of the United States visited Jerusalem in October 1994, he was steps away from the most sacred Christian shrines but did not visit any of them. He did not meet a single representative of the Christian community, which remained invisible to him. A decade later, as busloads of American evangelicals stare at the Western Wall dreaming of a rebuilt temple that will provide an eschatological shortcut through history, the remnant of that community is on the verge of extinction—unseen and unlamented...

Internet Commentator: Imagine if there were a Christian state that ruled like Saudi Arabia and forbade 'non-Christians' to worship. However, poor Serbia is castigated (and bombed) by the same western secular elites for defending its ancient Christian homelands against murderous and church-destroying squatting Islamists. ... As a Christian, I can only explain the confusion and contradictions by the demonic. There is no other explanation.

On Thoughts

"Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12)

As Orthodox, we should be aware of what our Church Fathers refer to as logismoi (λ o γ i σ µo ι). This term, meaning "thoughts" is not used to describe simple thoughts, but rather assaultive or tempting ones. They refer to those thoughts we must guard against that lead us to temptation.

By the sixth century, a listing of evil thoughts became known as the "Seven Deadly Sins" — temptations from which all sinful behavior springs. They include: gluttony, fornication, avarice, slothfulness, anger, envy, and pride. The Fathers of the Church outline five stages through which these thoughts seek to tempt and overtake us:

- Assault: A tempting thought first attacks a person's mind
- Interaction: A person opens up a dialogue with the assaultive thought
- Consent: A person consents to do what the temptation urges him to do
- Defeat: A person becomes hostage to the temptation and finds it more difficult to resist
- Passion or Obsession: The temptation becomes an entrenched reality within the nous (what Orthodox Church Fathers refer to as the "eye of the soul" or "heart") of a person.

It is important to recognize that it is possible to rebuke these thoughts at any stage. Once we reach the stage of Consent, however, sin is realized and spiritual damage has been done. If a person is of weak temperament, he is unlikely to be able to resist the temptation at the Interaction stage.

Our prayer life is the primary means by which we combat these tempting thoughts. We pray the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me." Likewise, we strive to become indifferent to these harmful thoughts and ignore them, and avoid being overtaken by fear.

Towards this aim, there is an instructive story of a Spiritual Father on Mt. Athos who used positive thoughts to combat logismoi. He lived on the Holy Mountain during a period when passenger planes were being routed over Mt. Athos as they flew in and out of Thessaloniki. When he was asked if the noise from these planes angered him for disturbing his peace, the elder responded: "Why should I be angry? I hear a loud noise from heaven, I look up, and I see a cross."

Fr. James Tsahakis, Atlanta

HOMILY ~ On Weeping in the Evening and Joy in the Morning "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning." (Psalm 30:5)

God rebukes, and God makes glad. Just one repentant thought eases the wrath of God; for God is not angry at men as an enemy is angry, but His anger toward men is as that of a father toward his children. His anger is momentary, and His mercy is infinite. If He rebukes you in the evening, He causes you to rejoice in the morning; men know Him best in His rebuking and in His mercy. O my brethren, if men constantly knew and recognized God as the Doer of good, they would never know Him as Rebuker and Judge. Behold, God rejoices more when we recognize Him by His mercy than by His anger. However, there are very ungrateful and thoughtless people who never remember God when He grants mercy, but remember Him only when He chastises and rebukes them through sickness, death in the family, failure and shame before men, fire, the sword, earthquake or flood, or numerous other punitive rods and sticks with which He chastens the unawakened, reminds the ungrateful, brings the errant to their senses, and reminds everyone that He is the Creator and Lord, the Giver of Gifts and the Judge.

~ St. Nikolai of Serbia, from the Prologue

"Keep Your Mind in Hell, and Despair Not"

Many of us have wondered what on earth St. Silouan meant when he said (and apparently said often) "Keep your mind in Hell1, and despair not." Perhaps a regular experience of recovering alcoholics in Alcoholics Anonymous gives us a clue. For the recovering alcoholic never allows himself or herself to forget the alcoholic hell out of which he or she has been delivered. But at the same time, recovering alcoholics "despair not," knowing that if they faithfully keep working the AA program (which includes "making a decision to turn your life and your will over to the care of God"2) they will stay sober. It is often said that "fear alone will not get you sober or clean." True. But a little healthy fear (as distinguished from "paralyzing terror") is quite helpful. For whenever the temptation to drink comes one's way, just remembering for a split second the hell of active addiction is often enough to enable the recovering alcoholic to repulse that temptation.

We Orthodox often talk about logismoí, the Greek word for thoughts (in this case referring to the harmful thoughts that incessantly seek to enter our minds.) The recovering alcoholic dare not interact with a logismós that whispers, "Just take one little drink. It won't hurt you." To use imagery that seems to have been a favorite with Elder Paisios of Mount Athos, the alcoholic cannot allow such a potentially destructive logismós to "land on his or her runway." One needs to bat that logismós into outer space, so to speak, before it lands on one's "runway."

To relate this principle to spirituality in general, fear of Hell by itself will not save us. But if we maintain a healthy awareness that toying with a harmful logismós tends to lead to destructive actions and eventual Hell, and if we couple that awareness with firm trust in God's instantly-given help in times of spiritual need, we will quickly be able to repel the harmful logismós. It seems to us that St. Silouan is speaking in similar terms when he says, "Keep your mind in Hell and despair not." In effect he is saying, "Remember that destructive logismoí and the actions that follow them put one on a path that leads to Hell. So keep your mind keenly aware of the very real possibility of Hell, but don't despair: God will deliver you from the evil effects of those logismoi if you are willing to repulse them instantly. Don't despair, for if you repent and cooperate with God, you will be saved from hell, in every sense of the word.

THE HOLY ORTHODOX FATHERS ON ABORTION

From the Editor: On January 22nd, our Nation will observe the grievous 38th anniversary of that ungodly Supreme Court decision that has given legal status to the slaughter of God's most precious and innocent human beings. In the defense of the millions who may yet perish before our civilized Western culture recognizes this murderous act for what it truly is, we present a handful of related writing by the Church's Holy Fathers on this evil act. May His divine mercy be upon all of us and may 2011 become a year of renewed interest and activism by all Orthodox Christians against the evil practice of abortion.

Thou shall not slay thy child by causing abortion, nor kill that which is begotten; for "everything that is shaped, and has received a soul from God, if it be slain, shall be avenged, as being unjustly destroyed."

Ante-Nicene Fathers: Vol. VII, Moral Exhortations oncerning women who commit fornication, and destroy that which they have conceived, or who are employed in making drugs for abortion, a former decree excluded them until the hour of death, and to this some have assented. Nevertheless, being desirous to use somewhat greater lenity, we have ordained that they fulfill ten years [of penance], according to the prescribed degrees.

Tcannot bring myself to speak of the many virgins who daily fall and are lost to the bosom of the Church, their mother... Some go so far as to take potions, that they may insure barrenness, and thus murder human beings almost before their conception. Some, when they find themselves with child through their sin, use drugs to procure abortion, and when, as often happens, they die with their offspring, they enter the lower world laden with the guilt not only of adultery against Christ but also of suicide and child murder.

396 AD, Jerome Letters 22:13

And near that place I saw another strait place... and there sat women... And over against them many children who were born to them out of due time sat crying. And there came forth from them rays of fire and smote the women in the eyes. And these were the accursed who conceived and caused abortion.

The law, moreover enjoins us to bring up all our offspring, and forbids women to cause abortion of what is begotten, or to destroy it afterward; and if any woman appears to have so done, she will be a murderer of her child? by destroying a living creature, and diminishing humankind.

Flavius Josephus, Against Apion, Book 2:25 hristians marry, like everyone else, and they beget children, but they do not cast out their offspring.

250 AD, Letter of Diognetus 5:6

¹ Belief in *hell* is the "flip side" of belief in free will. We do not believe God throws us into hell (of any sort), but rather, we put ourselves there by our own free choices.

² From Step 3 in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.