



Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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✠ January 15, 2012 ✠

31st Sunday after Pentecost

St. Seraphim of Sarov (O.S. ~ 1833)

St. Paul of Thebes, Egypt (341)

St. John Calavytes (the "Hut-dweller" – 450) St. Gabriel of Lesnovo, Bulgaria (12th C)

Let your soul, then, trust in Christ, let it call on Him and never fear; for it fights, not alone, but with the aid of a mighty King, Jesus Christ, Creator of all that is, both bodiless and embodied, visible and invisible.

St. Hesychios the Priest

⇒ House Blessings continue – see Father for an appointment

⇒ Tues. Jan. 17 6:30pm ~ Inquirer's Class

⇒ Next Sunday, January 22 - Ice Skating Party after Liturgy

⇒ **Sacrament of Holy Matrimony** ~

Theodore Reese & Caterina Wesson ~ Sunday, January 29, 3:00pm ~ St. Thalassios of Libya

A man deadened by the passions is impervious to advice and will not accept spiritual correction.

How Dearly the Lord Loves us...

✠ If all the peoples of the earth knew how dearly the Lord loves man, their hearts would be filled with love for Christ and Christ's humility, and they would seek to be like Him in all things. But man cannot do this by himself – it's only through the Holy Spirit that he can be like unto Christ. The man that is fallen purifies himself through repentance, and is made new by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and in all things becomes like unto the Lord."

Blessed Elder Sophrony the Holy Mt. & Essex, England (+1991)

When you pray for others...

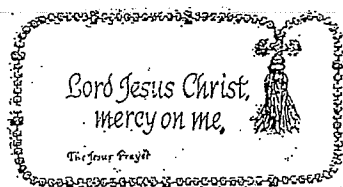
✠ "When you pray either aloud or to yourself for others – for instance, for the members of your household or for strangers, even though they may not have asked you to do so – pray for them with the same ardor and zeal as you would pray for yourself. Remember the commandment of the law: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' (Lev. 19:18). Observe this rule upon all occasions."

St. John of Kronstadt (+1908)

On the Prayer of Jesus

~ Our Holy Father the Venerable Seraphim of Sarov

A CERTAIN BROTHER, by the name of John, approached the holy and great father Philemon, and falling at his feet, said: "What need I do, father, to be saved; I see that my mind wanders and hovers hither and yon, where it should not." The Venerable Philemon, after remaining silent for a while, said: "This weakness derives from exterior things and stays with you because you do not have perfect love for God, for as yet you have not achieved the warmth of the love and knowledge of Him."



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The brother says; "What must I do?" He (Philemon) said: "Go and have hidden in your heart the teaching which is able to cleanse your mind of it." The brother, not understanding what was said, because he was inexperienced, asked the elder: "Father, what is this hidden teaching?" And he, the Elder, said to him: "Go, keep watch in your heart, and soberly in your thoughts say with fear and trembling, Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." And the Blessed Diadochus teaches beginners the same. The brother came away from him, and through God's working with him and the prayers of the father, abiding in quiet, he, in a little while, found delight in this occupation. But soon he weakened and could not do it soberly or pray. Again he came to the Elder and asked him about what had happened. The Elder replied to him: "Look, you have already recognized the way of silence and its action, and have experienced the sweetness which derives from this, then constantly hold in your heart the following: whether you are eating or drinking, whether you are conversing with anyone, whether you are in your cell, or on the road, with sobriety of thought and with a mind untempted do not leave off this prayer or chanting, and you will be granted through the prayers and psalms that even in the most extreme necessity your mind will not be left void, but in a hidden manner it will be instructed and will pray. And through this you will be enabled to understand the depths of the Divine Scriptures and the power hidden in them, and to give the mind constant activity, so that you will thus fulfil the Apostolic injunction, Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:16). Thus pray strict attention and guard your heart lest it receive evil, or any kind of vain or unprofitable thoughts. But always, whether you sleep or get up, whether you eat or drink, whether you are conversing, your heart must in a hidden way be instructed through the psalms, that it pray thus: Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me. And when you are chanting verbally, watch lest you are saying one thing with the lips, but quite another in your thoughts."

The Last of All

✠ He among you who wants to be first and preeminent, let him be the last of all and the servant and slave of all (Mark 9:35), not inviting any glory, honor or praise from the brethren for his service and conduct. He serves the brethren with complete goodwill, with love and simplicity, not with outward show and with an eye to gaining popularity, but regarding himself as a debtor in everything.

St. Macarios of Egypt (5th C)

The Falling Asleep of Archbishop Dmitri

Matushka Anna Hipsch

Unknown people were most welcome in Viadika's home, especially on feast days, and in his last months, on any day, at any time. It was only in his final weeks that the presiding doctor limited visiting hours to evenings in the hopes that His Eminence might regain a little strength and be able to remain with us for just a bit longer. One of my friends visited, and when His Eminence asked their prayers, she responded "Please, your Eminence, we need your prayers. Pray for us all." With that, he sat up in the bed and made a very large and distinct sign of the Cross over all the room before collapsing back into his home hospital bed.

I ended up at His Eminence's house on the night of his repose, though I had not originally planned to be there. For several days anyone who wanted to be there was welcome. The entire house was open. Anyone could come and sit and be with him. Previously in the week Metropolitan Jonah had asked His Eminence if he wanted Him to stick around. He responded that he definitely wanted Met. Jonah to stay. Metropolitan Jonah promptly cancelled all his week's plans to be there.

As it ended up, one of my children had fallen asleep by the time I got there and the rest were threatening to do the same. I decided to lay the kids down in his downstairs. From 9 p.m. onward, I had to note that while it was obvious that His Grace would soon repose, there was no sense of fear or panic. In his room it was very peaceful.

About 1:40 a.m. I offered to step in and read as I was probably the only one in the room who had not served a long period in so doing and thus I was the only "fresh" reader available. I began reading where the last reader had left off—the Gospel of St. John, chapter 14. At the end of chapter 18, he opened his eyes and he breathed his last without any warning. And that was it. It felt like he had been summoned, and it caught everyone in the room and the surrounding rooms, and even in the yard outside, completely off guard. I went back downstairs and I noticed my 3-year old was smiling and laughing in her sleep.

At 6:45 a.m. as I was transferring the kids to our car, my 3-year old whispered to me "I saw Vladika. He's VERY better." I had to smile. A day later Tasked if she had good dreams at Vladika's house. She responded that she had in fact bad dreams. I countered, "But then you saw Vladika." She smiled and nodding added "And Saint Theotokos." A day after that she randomly said to me, "Vladika has new clothes." I asked what color they might be, white? gold? blue? She responded with a small chuckle as if what I said was a bit ridiculous. 'Black' she said definitely. There are lots of other edifying stories along these lines, but I wanted to share with you about my own personal experiences that night. With much love in Christ. — Anna

GRACE ILLUMINING THE SOUL

By Fr. Valery Lukianov, St. Alexander Nevsky Church, Lakewood, New Jersey.

In every man there are two aspects—the outward man and his inward content; or, on the contrary, these two aspects are bound together in complete harmony.

What is the outward man? It is the facade or “image” with which I appear before the world and society. Here, of course, if we show ourselves to others, it is with our most attractive side. Even without inward harmony, the outward man can seem very well brought up, orderly, correct, and polite. But this is only outward “self-control.” Just take away the “world” before which one finds it necessary to show off, and there is revealed the inward content of a man’s heart, which does not at all correspond to his attractive outward image.

This can be seen best of all at home with one’s family, where a man feels himself no longer obliged to restrain his passions. And how sad it is for a spiritual father to find out that in outwardly happy and model families there are often fighting, irritability, crudity, and the storm of passions!...

But what do we see in a man whose outward image is in harmony with his hidden spiritual life? Here we see the beginning of the positive action of God’s grace on a man’s soul, the beginning of a reflection of the light of Tabor about which St. Gregory Palamas teaches. He explains that just as once the Divine light appeared visibly to the Prophet Moses on Mt. Sinai, and just as this light appeared on Mt. Tabor when our Lord Jesus Christ was transfigured, so also this reflection of the light of Tabor can appear even outwardly in a man, but under the unfailing condition that his life is sanctified by the grace of prayer, fasting, and other labors of self-renunciation.

The clearest example of such grace-given illumination of the soul was manifested by the wondrous St. Seraphim of Sarov who was truly “a heavenly man and an earthly angel.” This flaming wonderworker of the Russian Church, who devoted his whole life to acquiring the Holy Spirit, was granted even here on earth the special gift of shining with the light of Tabor—to such an extent that, as Motovilov testifies, it was impossible to look at his face, for it shone and burned like the sun. The same reflection of inward peace and spiritual beauty was shown by the last Tsar-Martyr, Nicholas II, who, as is well known, had especially radiant eyes that won over not only his well-wishers, but even people who, out of spiritual faint-heartedness, were disposed against him.

If one looks attentively at the world around us, we see that God’s Providence has placed an image of spiritual transfiguration even in inanimate nature. Let us remember nature as it is in winter—could anyone imagine that the naked branches of trees; when spring comes, would suddenly awake from a death-like sleep, become covered with new green

leaves, and that on them splendid fruits would come forth to rejoice and feed men? And who has not experienced a special feeling of grace in those wondrous moments of dawn when a man observes how the night ends and a new day begins? What a wondrous, blessed stillness! What a remarkable peace! What joy settles then in the heart of a man when he sees the darkness transformed unnoticeably into light. And, if a sensitive person can take so close to his heart such purely outward manifestations of nature, then how deeply and brightly must a Christian experience those hidden secrets of spiritual existence which open up when there are planted in the heart the grace-given gifts of prayer, repentance, and forgiveness, accompanied by fasting and good deeds.

With our bodily eyes we follow the natural course of life; everything passes away: every happiness, family and social well-being, glory and honor, one’s voice and hearing, memory and intelligence. With the setting of the sun, spring passes over into dead winter! But with our spiritual gaze we follow our earthly pilgrimage—life is not fading away, but on the contrary, an ascent from strength to strength, the acquisition of the spiritual gifts bountifully distributed by the Lord to those who seek Him, given through the Church of Christ.

How sweet is the awareness that still here on earth we have the promise of the victory of good over evil, the pledge of a joyful resurrection. How splendid and consoling is our existence in the Church where a man receives the wondrous opportunity to renew his soul, to tear sin out of his heart with tears, and to be in communion with the spiritual world, in union with Christ.

Let us, then, treasure our joyful communion with the Church, for perhaps the day is not far distant when the Lord will call His faithful children to be confessors. And let us hope that if in this life, because of our unworthiness, the Lord does not illumine our gaze with the clear light of His mercy, then at least He does so during our death. In that frightful hour when the soul is to be separated from the fragile remains of its earthly vessel, and when all sorrows and every vain thing remain behind, our soul might then be illumined by the wondrous light of Tabor so as eternally to be washed in the rays of God’s grace and eternally to send up praise to its Creator together with the angels. Amen.



The priest’s cassock is the flag of the Church of our Christ: for this reason we must try hard to honor it, we who wear it, with a holy life, so that those who don’t wear it will honor and respect it.

Blessed Elder Amphilochios of Patmos

TITHES AND FIRSTFRUITS: AN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING

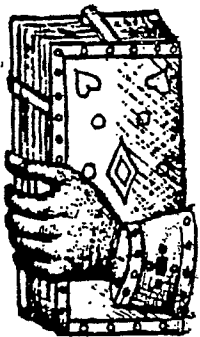
“Honor the Lord with your substance and with firstfruits of all your produce” (Proverbs 3:9).

In ancient Israel, the Church of the Old Testament, the law of Moses instituted the “**tithe**”, also called the offering of the “**firstfruits**.” “Tithe” is merely the Old English word for “**tenth**.” Israel’s tithe was an assessment of one-tenth of all produce for maintenance of the Temple, the support of the priesthood, and the sustenance of the poor (Numbers 18:24; Deuteronomy 12:11 and 26:12). Usually this portion was rendered from the first harvested of the crop, hence the title “**firstfruits**.”

These activities are still necessary parts of Church life. Parishes need suitable places for worship, education, and fellowship; we are still responsible for our priest’s livelihood; and the Lord continually reminds us of our obligation to the needy. Therefore, the practice of good stewardship, represented by the tithe, retains its importance.

The motive behind the old Testament tithe, however, was not merely pragmatic. For the ancient Hebrews tithing was never merely an efficient way to raise money. Rather, they understood that their relationship with God required them to dedicate a substantial portion of the fruit of their labor to His purposes.

Our basic understanding as Orthodox Christians, derived from the Old Testament, is that everything comes from God. All that we have or hope to possess, beginning with life itself, is His gift. We acknowledge this fact in our spiritual life through prayer and fasting and through our struggle to follow His commandments. With regard to our material blessings, we confess that he is their true source by **returning a portion to God**, to worship, the support of those called to His special service, and the aid for the poor. By thus giving a portion of our wealth for His purposes, we **sanctify the remainder**. Through offering a part, we bring the whole our lives into harmony with God’s will.



The Old Testament Law embodied this admission of God’s sovereignty, in the tithe. Nothing in this is changed by the coming of Christ. Tithing is not a purely Old Testament observance revived by Protestants and, therefore, a thing we Orthodox Christians need not worry about. It is true that many Old Testament practices are now understood in a spiritual way fulfilled, transformed, or displaced by Christ’s coming, death and Resurrection. It is also true that, in recent times, some Protestants have stressed tithing as the norm of giving. But in reality, neither of these objections applies to the tithe or denies its validity.

Our Lord criticized the way in which his opponents tithed, but in so doing, He confirmed the tithe itself: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe your mint, dill, and cumin, but have omitted the weightier matters of the law judgment, mercy, and faith. These you ought to have done, without omitting the others” (Matthew 23:23).

Likewise, on of the earliest witnesses to Holy Tradition, The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles (also called, “The Didache), applies the firstfruits to the Church. “Every firstfruit of the produce of

the wine-vat and of the threshing floor, of cattle and flocks, you will take and give as the firstfruits to your prophets; for they are your chief priests...if you prepare food, take and give the firstfruit according to the commandment. Likewise, when you open a jar of wine or oil, take and give the firstfruit to the prophets. Take also the firstfruit of money and clothing and of every possession, as it may seem right to you, and give according to the commandment."

St. Irenaeus, writing toward the end of the 2nd century, notes that Christ Himself "gave directions to His disciples to offer the firstfruits of His own created things not as if He stood in need of them, But that they might be themselves neither unfruitful nor ungrateful."

St. John Chrysostom (+407) contends that the tithe is more binding on us than the Jews. In one of his sermons, he notes that under the Old Testament tithing was the norm. Among Christians, however, it has become a cause of amazement; we exclaim in wonder, "Why, so-and-so tithes!" St. John finds this a sad reflection on our piety and ends with the warning, "if it was a danger to neglect the tithe then, how serious, it must be now!"

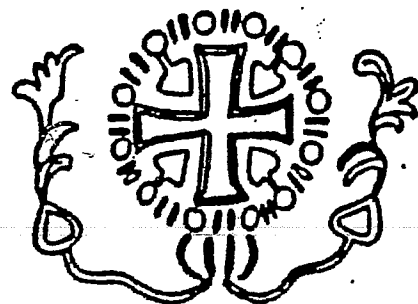
As we said, the Old Testament saints did not see the tithe merely as a way of organizing fund-raising for the Temple and clergy, but as part of their relationship with God. Similarly, we cannot regard our giving merely as providing for our parish's material needs. We must appreciate the spiritual importance of tithing, as the return to the Lord of a portion of His blessings through which we sanctify the remainder for our own use. Thus we acknowledge the lord's claim upon the whole of our life and affirm that the focus of our existence is not of this world but the Kingdom to come.

The tithe, one-tenth, is the **ideal of stewardship** set forth in Scripture in the Old Testament tithe, and in Tradition, represented by the Didache, St. Irenaeus, and St. John Chrysostom. At first, for those not used to the idea of tithing, this amount may seem staggering. The best way to begin is to **adopt a lower percentage and then increase it over time**. First, we should accept the underlying principle behind tithing: that we should not give an arbitrary amount that our contributions should represent a proportion of our income. Once we establish a certain percentage (for example 3%-5%) as our starting point, we can then increase it by one percent a year until we reach the tithe. From the beginning, however, we must adopt the idea that we give a percentage of our treasure; we cannot base it on impulse, giving "a little something" from what "we have left over". Instead, our offering should represent "the firstfruits of our produce" offered because we want to show **our gratitude to God** for His blessings, and because we **acknowledge our part in His work** of redeeming the world.

Fr. Dmitri Cozby

The Time to Tithe is Now: It is a Spiritual Adventure

You will never be in a better position to tithe than you are today. Whether you can tithe has relatively little to do with the amount of your income or the number of your financial obligations. The person who says "After I pay all my bills, I can't afford to tithe," is telling the truth. He or she simply has the cart before the horse. None of us could afford to tithe with what's left. Tithing (10% giving) is a matter of putting first things first, taking our tithe out first, and then wisely managing the rest of our income in a way in which we still pay our bills.



THE RIGHTFUL OMISSION OF Gnostic WRITINGS

By Fr. Barnabas Powell, St. Michael's Orthodox Church.

From the Editor: As we had observed during past pre-Christmas periods, the mass media will once again stand ready to release (in whatever form they consider most effective) "new historically-based" stories or television specials that are based on so-called "ancient Christian manuscripts" that have "finally gained the exposure they deserve." They will tell us that their aim is to make the Bible text more understandable for all humans and to provide that "missing insight" into Jesus. It is our personal contention that their true aim is simply another form of attack on the truth of our Faith. The subject article correctly exposes one such "manuscript" and places it into the perspective that it deserves.

We appeal to all Orthodox Christians that they treat these "ancient Christian manuscripts" with the disrespect that they deserve; they are truly nothing more than religious trash-talk that is being utilized by the Dark Forces of our days. Their aim continues to be the instilment of doubt in the hearts and souls of our brethren towards the great mystery of His Incarnation and the salvific power of our Faith.

† † †

Perusing the religious sections of major bookstores over the years, I've noticed a growing fascination with material that fell to the cutting-room floor as the Church produced a biblical canon. In 100 back-cover endorsements, pop-scholars pose the provocative question "What doesn't the Church want you to know?"

Given our post-modern disillusionment with authority and penchant for conspiracy theories, obsession over "lost" books of the Bible is not surprising. Before we remove such works from the trash, however, it may be worthwhile considering why they were tossed in the first place.

As the apostles' successors continued their work of spreading the Gospel, they were shadowed by a group of revisionists who claimed to possess an arcane knowledge of God that the Church at large wasn't privy to. They were called Gnostics ("gnosis" is Greek for "knowledge"). They rejected the physical world and its Jewish Creator God, denied the incarnation of God in Christ, and promoted a puritanical spirituality that rejected the body and its redemption.

To promote their teachings, they attributed them to Christ by authoring "gospels" under apostolic pseudonyms. No Gnostic work has better captured popular imaginations than the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. Purporting to fill in the years of Jesus' Egyptian childhood, this work titillates us with the prospect of information not included in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. We expect something cute, if not inspiring.

Yet there's nothing endearing about this Gnostic Jesus. An all-powerful brat with a vindictive streak, he strikes a playmate dead for bullying him. When the boy's parents complain to Joseph and Mary, they're struck blind for their trouble. When a rabbi tries teaching Jesus the alphabet, the boy declares his omniscience and mocks his pedagogue. The rabbi raises a hand to rebuke the arrogant cur, and winds up dead. When Jesus channels five mud puddles into a single pool, a Pharisee stamps out his project because it constitutes work on the Sabbath. You guessed it. He, too, ends up dead.

Like the child demigods of Greek mythology and Far Eastern demonology, this Jesus is no innocent babe, but a malevolent and capricious trickster. Why would the Gnostics depict him thus? Their goal was to cast his humanity as mere illusion, a thin cloak barely concealing the divine being within. He only seems to be as we are, only seems subject to human limitations.

The canonical Gospels depict a God who empties himself to the point of suffering and death. The Gnostic deity would never stoop to such depths. Even his childhood is a facade.

Modernist scholars urge us to include such works in our understanding of the "historical Jesus." They accuse the early Church of deliberately covering them up in a prejudiced desire for orthodoxy over diversity. As a member of that same Church, I plead guilty. I'm glad such twisted icons were rejected, because Jesus is, after all, not simply an object of worship. He's the perfect man we seek to become. Imagine if the Gnostic Jesus were part of that model. What kind of Christians would that produce? What kind of Church? Vengeance would be next to godliness; a martyr not so much one who dies for his faith as one who kills for it.

Although secularists exploit isolated, historic aberrations to accuse Christianity of fitting that bill, let's get real. There are other faiths in which such a paradigm is no aberration at all. Their claim to secret knowledge continues to inspire Gnosticism's spiritual successors, who focus today on the secret sex life of Jesus, or whatever the latest cultural psychosis dictates.

Gnosticism may inspire Hollywood blockbusters and New York Times best-sellers, but has never inspired love of neighbor. It produced no saints. Gnostic writings are an interesting read, but there's a reason they didn't make the biblical cut. Christ didn't leave a text. He left a Church, which compiled a text.

Perhaps we can all be convinced now that the Mother Church truly knew what She was doing...



What does it mean to sincerely confess? To hide nothing, speak plainly and not beat around the bush.

St. Ambrose of Optina

Teachings on Prayer by Archimandrite Touma Bitar, Abbot of the St. Silouan the Athonite Monastery in Douma, Lebanon

"If you truly want to bring your prayer back, then you are able to do this in an instant. Through prayer, you acquire prayer. Prayer is an act of will. Pray regularly. A little or a lot? It doesn't matter. With feeling or without feeling? That doesn't matter either... What's important is that you do it attentively. Don't be hasty and don't be slow. Don't raise your voice and don't hush it. Be moderate. Put your mind on what you are saying --- each word. Understand what you are saying. Whenever your mind wanders, even a little bit, bring yourself back."

"Prayer with the body, with the tongue, the hand, the fingers, bending the body in bows and prostrations, keeping attention and understanding the meanings, all of this - and similar things - is the introduction to the prayer of the heart... Prayer is not an issue of temperament. This is why it only comes by force. A person forces himself and it is given to him ... as a gift from above! Likewise, if one waits to be overcome with a desire for prayer in order to pray, then he will never pray. Prayer with desire is - in general - psychological prayer, with no spiritual value. The basic desire for prayer, or you could say spontaneous prayer, only comes with strength and grace from the Most High. The beginning of prayer is not like this."

"Usually, at the beginning of the path, the Lord comforts the one who prays, in order for him to stay firm. However, the comfort does not come when watched. You do not know when it will come to you. Pay attention that you do not wander off into imagination. Do not make room for images and feelings to slander you. That will lead you astray! ... Once you become familiar with prayer, beware of fantasies, images and feelings; because in that is a departure from prayer. Likewise, be careful about sentimentality and mental laxity..."

"Standing before God in prayer is something very serious. Naturally, God is not harsh; but He is not indulgent either. Prayer has its own special characteristics. Its joy is tranquil, and its peace is alert. Its solace is mixed with thanks, a sense of unworthiness and repentance."

"You do not need techniques in prayer. It comes to you of itself, when you insist on standing in the presence of God and when your Lord gives you what you ask. God seeks communion, and calls you to Him, and when you take a step in His direction, He leads you to Him --- just as a father takes the hand of his child, or a guide walks ahead of a traveler. Nothing is closer to the human heart than prayer."

"Man is put together to be a being of prayer. At the deepest level, man realizes - in prayer - his humanity in which God created him. Why does the heart not respond to it spontaneously, from the very beginning? Because the passions of the soul and the body have murdered man's heart, and taken control of it. For this reason, at the beginning, a person needs to force himself to pray, and then his heart will welcome it and take joy in it; because it matches what is deeply rooted in him, even if it was hidden at first."

"So prayer is the greatest gift to man, not only because it connects man to God, but because it is also the need and the solution for all things that man faces. People imagine that their problems can be solved on the horizontal level --- through human capacities. No doubt something of this is necessary, but everything - without exception, all the cares and difficulties - should first be faced with prayer, that is, on the vertical level, by casting them at the feet of Jesus."