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The Agony of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane

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IN A LETTER to his disciple Timothy, the Apostle Paul gives as his last will and testament this admonition: Remember the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 2:8).

The Holy Orthodox Church always contended and continues to strive as often as possible to instil in Her children the fulfilment of this apostolic commandment. If every day and at every gathering of prayer She presents before the spiritual eyes of the faithful the image of our Lord Jesus, then during Great Lent She applies this with particular zeal. In these days our attention is directed specifically to the image of Jesus Christ the Passion-bearer. The very thought of our Holy Redeemer suffering and dying in unspeakable torment for the sins of mankind is capable and powerful enough to cause even the most stony-hearted to reflect on the destructiveness of sin and thoughts of repentance, to which we are called during the fast. Since we find ourselves, dear listeners, in the middle of the fast, I feel today it is appropriate to draw your attention to one of the final, grievous moments in the sorrowful life of our Lord Jesus Christ - His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. This event in particular has always attracted the reverent gazes of the faithful who love the Lord Jesus Christ: the Christian heart cannot imagine, with-

out trepidation and compunction, the Divine Sufferer alone in the Garden of Gethsemane, in the depth of the night, in anguish, exhausted by the extreme burden of some incomprehensible inner torment of the spirit.

Yet for some, those who are the enemies of Christianity, the Gethsemane struggle of our Saviour, in its very mystery and inconceivability, has often evoked perplexity, and sometimes, sadly, even a sense of revulsion. We will not repeat or trouble ourselves about this rejection by those of little faith. We look upon the prayerful Lord Jesus in Gethsemane not with the eyes of Judas, peering through the trees of the garden, but with eyes of faith and love, devotion and reverence, with the eyes of the Apostles, in the light of Divine Revelation in the light of the Christian mystery of redemption. In this light much will become more familiar, clearer, and instructive for us.

If suffering is always instructive, always attracts our attention, would this not be especially so in the case of the suffering of the sinless Son of Man, Who is at the same time the Son of God, Jesus Christ? For His suffering is the very essence of redemption, the essence of Christianity, the cornerstone of the Church, the foundation of salvation. Consequently, it is nothing less than the turning point in the life of the world. So what were these sufferings?

The Evangelists describe them with unusual simplicity and brevity, yet with such great awe that every reader of the Gospel is entranced by them. There is a sense that something truly great is taking place before us, a unique event never to be repeated. Piecing together the accounts of all four Evangelists, one complementing the other, we arrive at the following: (Matt. ch. 26; Mk ch. 14; Lk. ch. 22; Jn ch. 18). Only the verses will be indicated below:

Following the Mystical Supper and His farewell conversation with the disciples: It was night (Jn 13:30) and He cometh unto the disciples (Mt. 40) over the brook Kedron where there was a garden (Jn 1) unto a place called Gethsemane, and He saith unto the disciples, Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder. And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee (John and James), and began to be sorrowful and very heavy (Mt. 36, 37) and sore amazed (Mk 33). Then saith Jesus unto them, My soul

is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with Me (Mt. 38). Pray that ye enter not into temptation (Lk. 40). And He went a little farther (Mt. 39) about a stone's cast (Lk. 41) and fell on His face (Mt. 39), on the ground (Mk 35) and prayed, saying (Mt. 39), Abba, Father, all things are possible unto Thee (Mk 36), if Thou be willing remove this cup from Me, nevertheless, not as I will but as Thou wilt. And He cometh unto the disciples, and findeth them asleep, and saith unto Peter, What, could ye not watch with Me? Even one hour? Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak. He went away again the second time, and prayed again saying, My Father, if this cup may not pass away from Me, except I drink it, Thy will be done. And He came and found them asleep again: for their eyes were heavy. And He left them, and went away again, and prayed for the third time, saying the same words (Mt. 39–44). And there appeared an angel unto Him from heaven, strengthening Him. And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly: and His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground. And when He rose up from prayer, and was come to His disciples, He found them sleeping for sorrow (Lk. 43–45) and saith unto them, Sleep on now and take your rest (Mt. 45) it is enough (Mk 41) behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going: behold, he is at hand that doth betray Me (Mt. 45, 46).

In this manner the Evangelists recount the Gethsemane prayer. Undoubtedly, they preserved for us only a general sense of the event, and not an exactly literal or complete account. This is evident from the Saviour's rebuke of Peter: What, could ye not watch with Me one hour (Mt. 26:40); however, to pronounce the words of prayer as set forth in the Gospel account would take much less time. So we can see that the word "hour" in the Saviour's reproach is not to be taken literally. In any case, overcome by an inexplicable drowsiness, the Apostles had left their Teacher in terrible and utter loneliness and therefore only manage to hear His very first and loudest exclamations of prayer. We can be sure that if any further details were necessary for us, the Holy Spirit, promised to the disciples by Christ for their guidance in all matters of truth (Jn 14:16-26; 15:26) would have inspired them thus. Nevertheless, this brief description captures the moment for us in all its awesomeness and mystical grandeur.

The Lord Jesus, according to His own words, came down to earth to save people through the path of suffering (cf. Jn 3:17, Mk 10:45). At the very start of His ministry, while alone in the desert, He encounters the tempter who offers Him access to the world, not by way of lowliness and humiliation, but through the path of glory and power. The Son of man bravely and steadfastly rejects this temptation by opposing the words of seduction with submission to the will of His Father (cf. Mt. 4:1-11; Lk. 4:1-13). The devil then leaves Him for a season as the Gospel states (Lk. 4:13). Later in His conversation with Nicodemus the Saviour explains the essence of His messianic ministry by indicating the cross as the means for His work of redemption. He answers the secret thoughts of Nicodemus concerning the Messiah as an earthly ruler by saying, And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up (Jn 3:14). Many times in His public ministry the Saviour openly told the Apostles and those gathered around them about His forthcoming sufferings, always speaking calmly and confidently as about an irrevocable decision, (Mt. 16:21; Mk 8:31; 9:12); on occasion He explicitly terms His future trials a cup (Mk 10:38; Mt. 20:23) and expresses His great desire to drink from this cup as soon as possible. Finally, we find the Saviour at the Mystical Supper only hours before the Gethsemane prayer. Here, in the words of Saint John the Theologian Jesus knew that His hour was come that He should depart out of this world unto the Father (Jn 13:1) and He clearly reveals to His disciples that one of you shall betray Me and that His time is at hand (Mt. 26:21,18). He expresses His desire to eat this Passover with you before I suffer (Lk. 22:15), for this will be the final time on earth that He partakes of bread and wine, the fruit of the vine (Lk. 22:18). In relating all this, what peace and calmness He radiates, His every word demonstrating His readiness to follow the path of suffering, what conviction of necessity!

Take eat, this is My Body; drink of this all of you, this is My Blood. This commandment is uttered with such divine tranquillity that perhaps it is in light of this very tranquillity that the disciples do not discern what an unspeakably difficult struggle lies before their Teacher; but even after the Supper, the thought of His imminent death never leaves the Saviour. Children, He implores in His farewell discussion, little children, yet a little while I am with you ... A new commandment I give unto you,

that you love one another (Jn 13:33, 34), and as they near the Mount of Olives He forewarns them, All ye shall be offended because of Me this night (Mt. 26:31). In reply to His favourite disciple's assurance of devotion and willingness to lay down his life for Him the Lord states that he will deny Him three times (cf. Jn 13:38). It is clear that the Saviour went to Gethsemane following the Mystical Supper fully aware that there He would be betrayed into the hands of His enemies. We must recognise, though, that these willing and conscious sufferings of Jesus Christ were not instigated by the power of His enemies or by the shameful betrayal of Judas, but were a result of the exalted "self-giving" of the Son of man to the will of God. Since He had foretold what would occur this night and fully understood it to be His calling, from a human perspective we might expect it all to be accomplished without the need for tears, groans, or bloody sweat. This was not the case. With our mind's eye let us follow our Saviour into the Garden of Gethsemane.

On the east side of Jerusalem, just outside the city, on the slope of the Mount of Olives, one finds vineyards and olive groves. One of them, called "Gethsemane," which in Hebrew means "house of olives" or olive press (i.e., the place where they make olive oil) was a favourite spot of the Saviour's where He liked to be alone and pray when He was in Jerusalem (Jn 18:2).¹ This site lends itself to concentration and feelings of piety. Nothing can be seen to the west save the high city walls of Jerusalem, the rooftops of the sacred buildings of the Temple, and the dreary Antonia Citadel. To the right rises mournfully bare Mount Scopus, and to the left lies the Valley of Jehosaphat [the Kedron Valley] dotted with its tombs and grave stones.

It is here, at a distance from the city, that Jesus wished to spend His last night, shrouded in deep silence amid the mysterious twilight of the garden's shadows. It is here that He wants to endure all the burden of sorrow which engulfs Him, not unlike the olives under the press of Gethsemane. With His eleven disciples He enters the gates leading into the garden. Night covers the earth, nature is silent. After the labours of the day the need for rest appears, but the eyes of Jesus do not close in peaceful sleep. He knows that the coming night will be a turning point in His life. The next day will bring an unjust trial and condemnation, spitting, scorn, every conceivable torture and

taunting, whipping, a disgraceful, agonising death on the cross, and the tomb. This unprecedented act of evil is now set in motion. “Darkness will rise against light, iniquity laughs in the face of virtue, hypocrisy and treachery will triumph over truth, dark ingratitude and base betrayal will overwhelm countless great works of love and mercy.”² The fulfilment of His purpose for coming into the world, for being here in the days of His flesh (Heb. 5:7), in the depths of redeeming humiliation, now stands before Christ the Saviour.

The time has come when, as the Teacher foresaw, His disciples might be scandalised because of Him, and not only His disciples who had not yet witnessed His Resurrection and Ascension, but even many of those later followers who had seen the glory of the Crucified One. The God-man is sorrowful, tormented, and terrified, and the disciples have never seen their Teacher like this before. That serenity which had so recently permeated the essence of Jesus suddenly left Him; His countenance darkened and tears filled His eyes, His whole being trembled in grief and anguish. In His own words His soul is sorrowful unto death and in such a state He wished to pray, to speak with His Father. The human soul of Jesus now, more than ever before, thirsted for communication both with God and with people. Here the truly human nature of Jesus Christ appears in its fullness, “showing that He is a man”³ as the Church often phrases it. Jesus fears loneliness, and seeks the support of His friends, the participation of the disciples. He not only cries “be with Me,” but implores them “pray with Me,” for love for one another is expressed to the greatest degree through the act of praying together. Choosing His three closest disciples He enters deep into the garden with them for prayerful lamentation and inner rending of the spirit. Present at His glory on Tabor, observing Him as Master over death when He resurrected the daughter of Jairus, they, more than the others, are capable of witnessing His agony in Gethsemane without being offended. Jesus, dreading total solitude, asks them to join Him in prayer, but not wishing to be in their immediate presence, He goes deeper into the grove, a stone’s throw away, yet with the apostles still in sight. There He gives Himself over to the first prayer. Deep sorrow overwhelms the soul of the sufferer. “A dual night of terror reigns: one in the surrounding nature, the other in the soul of Jesus. This night emerges as if from the abyss of darkness with

all its horrors, and fear besieges not only the small flock of Christ in Gethsemane, but the Divine Shepherd as well.”⁴ Through prayer the disciples should have been able to see through the darkness of the night and find support and help from the heavenly world, but alas, as the Evangelist keenly observes, they fell asleep from sorrow.⁵ Christ prays alone. He casts His face to the ground (cf. Mt. 26:39); and kneels (cf. Lk. 22:41), giving Himself over completely to prayer to His Father with tears and fervent lamentation (cf. Heb. 5:7), seeking relief from the torments of His soul. But some immeasurable burden weighs heavily on His spirit and He cannot be comforted. Once, twice, and finally a third time He gives Himself to prayer, totally exhausting Himself to the point of sweating blood, an extremely rare occurrence, a precursor of death. Thus, as one of the Evangelists expressed it, He was in agony, yet in this condition He prays even more fervently, and finally His spirit is lightened, He shakes off the darkness, and is imbued with that vivid forbearance which will so amaze us at the judgment and on the cross.

What is the mystery of His sorrow unto death? What brought Him to such a state of prayer, what is the reason for His tormented soul, His horror and grief and anguished heart? The enemies had not yet touched His body in order to nail Him to the cross. Did He really suffer so much at the anticipation of death? Did He truly fear it? If so, then it is here, as the Lord foretold, that we have the possibility of being offended by Him, for history offers thousands of examples of innocent people meeting death face to face, blessing their sufferings, and courageously going to the site of execution. Fully aware of the coming torture, they peacefully, sometimes even joyfully, await the fateful blow. Look, for example at Christ’s own disciples, Stephen, stoned to death; Peter, crucified upside down; Andrew, James, Paul, and many, many others. Did they not astonish the world as they fearlessly faced death? Thousands of martyrs, thousands of heroes, and not only Christians; pagans considered disdain for death to be particularly heroic. Nero was scorned by his contemporaries not so much for his evil deeds as for his cowardice in the face of death.

When contemplating the Gethsemane struggle there are two main themes to keep in mind. First, Jesus Christ is not only perfect God, but perfect and complete man, as the Church has

always clearly confessed. He is a man pure in body and sinless in spirit, in all things like us save sin.⁶ The second point is that Jesus Christ is the Redeemer of mankind Who bore our sins and the punishment for them, our afflictions (Es. 53:4; see whole ch.). Therefore, the soul of Jesus was not only oppressed by the knowledge of His impending, agonising death, but by an incomparably greater burden, that of being the Redeemer. This weight so overwhelmed Him that He sweated blood and was brought to a state of complete exhaustion.

As a man, the Saviour could not be completely indifferent towards death; if the thought of death is terrifying and unnatural for a sinner, how much more so for the sinless Jesus, the most perfect man. God did not create death and man was created for incorruption (Wis. 2:23). Death appeared as a result of sin, as a punishment, and passed upon all men (cf. Rom. 5:12-15). The early Gospel commentator, Saint John Chrysostom, as well as Saint Theophylact of Ochrid (who draws heavily on the works of Saint John) remark: "Death did not enter into mankind by nature, therefore human nature is afraid of it and flees from it." A more recent commentator, the well-known theologian Bishop Michael, clarifies this idea with respect to the person of Jesus Christ. "Death," he writes, "is the result of sin, hence the sinless nature of the God-man should not have been subject to it. For [His nature] death was an unnatural phenomenon, so it stands to reason that the pure nature of Christ is troubled by death, and is sorrowed and anguished in the face of it." As we look upon Jesus in His sorrow unto death we must not forget that He is without sin and all-pure. We must not forget that He cannot be compared to any other human being, for no one among men is sinless. In the first place every sinner is subject to death in accordance with the mortality of his nature. Secondly, because of man's inherent sinfulness no one can in the full sense of the word be considered an innocent sufferer. Only the sufferings of Christ were innocent, for only He in the words of the ancient prophet practised no iniquity, nor craft [lies] with His mouth (Es. 53:9; see also 1Ptr 2:22). Moreover, His whole life and ministry, His miracles, His teachings, His love for people, all of this inspired only love, only devotion, only respect for Him, not disgrace, not floggings, not the cross. Realising all this, how can it be possible for us to equate the afflictions of any man, even one unjustly condemned, with the bitterness of the Lord's suffer-

ings. After all, sufferings themselves become an accepted aspect of our sinful nature, but to the sinless and all-pure flesh of Jesus they are completely alien, ineffably repulsive. It is not easy to suffer for our misdeeds, not easy, dear listeners, to look into the abyss of hatred that others have for us even if it is fully merited. How difficult it is to accept when one wishes us evil or when we are scorned or disdained. Yet none of us can claim that we are not guilty of wishing someone evil, and at times, the truth forces us to admit that people treat us better than we do them, and here is Jesus, anticipating the near future. He sees and knows that they want to kill Him, that He will be mocked, slapped, and spit upon, beaten mercilessly. His enemies will take hellish delight in devising every kind of mockery and derision to inflict upon Him. Herod, the high priests, the scribes, the people, the soldiers, the thieves, and Judas. What has the Divine Passion-bearer done to them? Why such hostility towards Him? Why this betrayal? Why the cross and death? A dreaded picture of the next day's horrors unfolds before the eyes of Christ. How is He, the innocent and all-pure One, to view this maelstrom of hatred swirling about Him? Taking into consideration only the human nature of Jesus, even in this case His sufferings, the like of which have never been seen before, are so great that we cannot even begin to imagine them in all their horrific bitterness - to do so one must be a perfect man as Jesus Christ was. "Here Jesus has divested Himself of His supernatural powers and experienced the infirmity of man to its fullest extent."⁷ It could not have been otherwise; if His self-giving was accomplished in any other manner, could Jesus as perfect man serve as a model for all mankind? Can the dispassionate be an example to the passionate? The strong to the weak? How then could all who lack the steadfastness to fulfil their duty to the end, all who lack the resolve to submit their will to the will of God, look to Jesus in their struggles as the prototype of endurance of sufferings? In reply to the call to imitate the example of Christ would they not argue that He passed through His trials without a battle, that it all came easily to Him. Not easily, dear listeners, not easily! Why else do the Scriptures provide us with this eternal precept: Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow His steps (1 Ptr 2:21). And let us ponder the deep significance of the following inspiring words of the Apostle Paul: But we see Jesus... Who for the suffering of death, [was] crowned

with glory and honour; ... for it became Him for Whom are all things, and by Whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings... He partook of flesh and blood that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage... Wherefore in all things it behooved Him to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself hath suffered being tempted, He is able to succour them that are tempted (Heb. 2:9-10; 14-15; 17-18).

It would be a grave mistake to explain the sufferings of the Saviour in Gethsemane solely in terms of His anticipation of Golgotha, that is, from the perspective of Jesus Christ only as a man, and forgetting about Him as Redeemer. This view is not only unworthy of Jesus but is a misleading and inadequate explanation: He Who experienced such fear at only the anticipation of death, yet the same One Who possessed such divine tranquillity and maintained it throughout His suffering - during the trial, in the midst of mockery, and on the cross, here even refusing to drink the gall that might numb His pain. Discussing the life of the Saviour and reflecting on His prayer in Gethsemane the British theologian Farrar remarks, "There are some people who have the peculiar habit of deriding everything sacred, who discerned faintheartedness and timidity in the Lord's agony in Gethsemane. Faintheartedness and timidity! Could He Who preached life and immortality, patience and courage in the face of evil, and Who from the very onset of His public ministry spoke of His death as an inescapable necessity could He really be so afraid of death? Could He Who retained an irreproachable serenity of spirit during fifteen hours of torment, who kept majestic silence during an unjust trial, who endured the enemies' mockery, disgrace, and the death pangs on the cross without the slightest murmur or complaint, and who with heavenly goodness of heart prayed for His persecutors and opened the gates of Paradise for the repentant Thief could He really be so afraid of death? Could He in Whose name ninety-year-old men, weak women, and small children courageously went to their death, could He really be so afraid of death? Death is not so frightening for those who correctly view life as an entrance into

heaven, a step into eternity.” But there are experiences even more trying than death; such was the cup the Saviour drank from in the garden of Gethsemane. In order to fully comprehend this we must recall the point raised earlier together with the recognition of the humanity of Jesus Christ, namely, that Jesus Christ is our Redeemer.

“The Sinless One had to bear all the wrath of God for sinners, all the punishments which the sinful nature of mankind merited. All of the chastisements and heavenly wrath which the world should have endured for its sins were taken on by the Redeemer of mankind alone. Seven hundred years before the birth of Christ, the Prophet Esaias spoke of this redeeming ministry: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him (Es. 53:5). The punishment which would return to us the peace with God which we had lost was borne by Him. This peace was broken by the sin of Adam, the first created man, and magnified and repeated over and over again by the individual sins of each man born on earth. The righteousness of God demanded punishment for the sins, and the Redeemer, the Son of God, took that punishment on Himself.⁸ Punishment for sins manifests itself in two ways: internally, in the conscience of the sinner, and externally through physical afflictions. Inner torments, such as those experienced by Christ in Gethsemane, are more agonising and torturous. The accumulated sins of every age, of every man, placed an inexplicably great burden on the conscience of Jesus. He had to bear the pangs of conscience as if He Himself were guilty of each sin. In the words of the Apostle, For He hath made Him to be sin for us, Who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21). All atheism and unbelief, all pride, all wickedness, all malice and ingratitude, lies, deceptions, sensuality, and every sort of offensive self-love, every vile and ignominious characteristic of sin past, present, and future, from the fall of Adam until the last moment of the earth’s existence - all of this pressed on the sinless soul of the God-man. Without a doubt, He envisioned the assault on virtue, the persecution of His followers, the rivers of blood of the martyrs, the mocking of believers, the enmity against the Church; He beheld the entire abyss of wickedness, passions, and vices which until the end of time would pervert and distort the divinely given and redeemed human soul, which would crucify the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame (Heb. 6:6). All of this amassed evil, all

the sins of mankind were poured into the bitter, dreaded cup which the Son of God was called upon to drink. This is something far beyond our comprehension. "It was something more deadly than death" (Farrar). "It would not be an exaggeration to say that it was the culmination of all the sufferings and deaths of all mankind. This inner anguish must have been as fierce as the torments of hell, for if even the most base of men are exhausted by the burden of their tortured conscience (e.g., Cain and Judas), tormented only by the thought of their own sinful life, how excruciating it must have been for the most pure soul of the God-man to endure the weight of all the sins of the world, and in such a condition, to ascend the cross and bring redemption through His blood."⁹

But sin is difficult not only because of the gnawing conscience: sin gave birth to the curse, to being banished from God, toward Whom, nevertheless, mankind has always strived and will strive. The Gethsemane passion bearer experienced this exile, this abandonment by the Father. For His sinless soul, which was accustomed to continuous union with God, which tasted and knew the sweetness, beauty and completeness of this union, this separation was, of course, inexpressibly difficult. It was the hell with which God threatens the impious, the hell which we simply cannot begin to imagine, the deprivation of life with God. It was this separation which produced the soul-shattering lament of the Sufferer on the cross: My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me? (Mt. 27:46). Thus, Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, He being made a curse for us... (Gal. 3:13).

And so Jesus, as if He were the worst and most hardened sinner (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21), was forsaken by the Father; like the Israel of old (Jacob), the new Israel is alone in His struggle. Mingled in His bitter cup is the curse of God which hung over mankind. Jesus is alone... with strong crying, according to the Apostle (Heb. 5:7) He flees to the Father covered in the sins of man which He has taken upon Himself, totally spent by the moral torment for their sins... The terrifying darkness of the garden and the silence of the night encircle Him. His disciples, Whom His soul sought and thirsted to be with, sleep nearby. They are asleep, as if to indicate the weakness of human nature. Jesus is alone... no one can hear His deep, sorrowful sighs, His faint voice, weakened by the battle in His soul, and His prayer is burning, it

is aflame. Again and again He calls out: “Father! Father!” No answer. “Simon, are you sleeping?” No response. The prophecy of Esaias is fulfilled to the end: I have trodden the winepress alone, and of the people there was none with Me (Es. 63:3). And I waited for one that would grieve with Me, but there was no one; for them that would comfort Me, but I found none (Ps. 68:25).

In the midst of this agony, while alone in the garden, it is possible that a meeting took place between Christ, as the new Adam, and the ancient tempter. We say it is possible because the Gospels do not mention any such event specifically, but putting together various excerpts from the Gospels we can speak of the likelihood of a temptation in Gethsemane. Following the first temptation in the desert the devil left Jesus for a while (Lk. 4:13) and immediately before His agony in Gethsemane Christ openly says to His disciples: The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in Me, indicating what the temptation will be. Then we hear of the triumph to come: That the world may know, the Saviour continues, that the world may know, that I love the Father; and as the Father gave Me commandment, even so I do (Jn 14:30-31). Where else if not here in Gethsemane would the prince of the sinful world, the devil, confront Jesus in order to tempt Him, yet be defeated because of the Saviour’s love and devotion to the will of the Father? Here in this most trying of situations the temptation would be especially powerful.

Man is tested by two forms of temptation: glory and suffering. The Son of man rejected the first kind in the desert, the second was to be defeated in Gethsemane. Bitter, ineffably bitter was His cup. With all of His strength, the God-man fends off the shame of death which was so completely unnatural for Him, and repulses the burden of sins taken upon Himself, so abhorrent to His pure and sinless soul. At this time, as quick as a flash, could not the thought have occurred in His human consciousness: “In the wisdom and omnipotence of the Father is there really no other way to save mankind, except to lift His Son upon the cross? If it is already not possible to completely remove this cup, cannot these hours of agony be delayed?” Alone in the garden such a thought could provoke the Son of Man, exhausted by the weight of His indescribable tortures, to consider abandoning the struggle. In the first, most strained prayer we heard Father,

Father, everything is possible for Thee! Possible, that means it is possible to save the Son from these unbearable torments: If Thou be willing, remove this cup from Me! In the second prayer this idea is weakened: Father, if this cup may not pass away from Me, except I drink it, Thy will be done! The third prayer, uttered with the same words, resolutely strengthened Jesus in spirit, but brought His body to a state near death, a symptom of which, in some rare cases, is bloody sweat.¹⁰ Even before the trial and the cross He could have died from this spiritual tension, but now as He overcomes the temptation an angel is sent to refresh Him. Arising from prayer Jesus is steadfast in spirit, convinced of the necessity and beneficence of the sufferings to come. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak; from where did He derive this strength of spirit?

The idea of the all-mightiness of the Saviour is contrasted to another one reverberating as clear as thunder through all three prayers: Thy will be done. "The cup which is pleasing to the Father as the only foreordained means for the salvation of man is now pleasing to the Son."¹¹ Now is manifest that which Jesus spoke of all His life - that He came not to do His will but the will of the One Who sent Him, the Father. Freely, steadfastly, and without hesitation He offers Himself as a sacrifice. Thy will be done. This is exactly what the first Adam did not fulfil, inflicting suffering on the whole of mankind because of his disobedience. But now the second Adam fulfils it and by His obedience saves mankind and opens the locked gates of Paradise.

The Gethsemane struggle is finished, but who can measure its depth? Who can comprehend its soul-shaking, limitless tortures? We stated earlier that to be able to understand it from only one point of view one must be a perfect man; but to understand it in its entirety this is not enough, to do so one must be the God-man. This world has been home to many tears, many sighs and misfortunes, but all of them taken together do not fill the cup which Jesus drank. This cup was drunk once and never will be again. The Gethsemane struggle is finished. The betrayer draws nigh. The Son of Man gives Himself into the hands of sinners. The passion on Golgotha begins and will finish with Jesus tasting of death. On Golgotha He will serve as that same surrogate for sinful mankind. He will suffer in body and spirit for the sins of the world, as if they were His own. But now we can be

assured about the outcome, for we know that after Gethsemane the Passion-bearer can endure all, fulfil all, and accomplish all to the end.

This is your hour, and the power of darkness, He said as He gave Himself into the hands of the enemies (Lk. 22:53). But out from the mist of that wretched darkness arises the image of the suffering Jesus which shines forth and will continue to shine forth now, and until the end of the ages. Behold the Man. This is the image of what a man should be. In His sufferings no hypocritical disdain of death, no hard-hearted malice towards His persecutors, no coldness, no haughty posturing, no weakness, no renunciation of duty, no losing oneself in some sort of exalted fanaticism can be found. All of this would have been unnatural to the Saviour and unworthy of Him. "Insensibility is always lower than self-denial" (Bl. Augustine). On the contrary, we find in Jesus the image of truly suffering "man." He knows the cup is bitter and speaks openly about it; He is fully aware of the entire horror of it, but through prayer and union with the Father He draws the courage and steadfastness to drink that cup to the very last drop, to fulfil the higher will to the end. His Passion was without precedent, a magnificent, mysterious, divine solemnity never witnessed before in the world, a miracle of the infinite love of God and His compassion for mankind. It will never be repeated again. For all those who suffer, He serves as a support, a comfort, and an example of faithfulness to one's calling and to God. He is an example of self-denial and love. He does not judge or reproach His disciples for their infirmity, but sympathises with their weakness of flesh; but by this He serves to remind them and us that vigilance of spirit, prayer, and devotion to God and His will should never leave a man. All of this He as Chief and Leader demonstrated first of all. The Gethsemane agony is the apogee of the moral greatness of mankind found in the person of Jesus Christ. It is the crown of His personal destiny and perfection, the foundation of His right to save sinners (cf. Heb. 4:15). Having passed through suffering unto glory (cf. Jn 17:1-5) the Saviour has indicated to us the way to this glory (cf. Rom. 8:11, 34, 37). And the Apostle Paul, who especially understood the power of the cross, i.e., the meaning of Christ's suffering, concludes: Who in the day of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death, and was heard that

He feared; though He were a Son, yet learned He obedience by the things which He suffered. And being made perfect, He became the Author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey Him (Heb. 5:7-9).

Translated from "The Collected Works of Archpriest John Vostorgov," Vol. II.

Notes:

1. There is an opinion that the Garden of Gethsemane was owned by the same person in whose house the Mystical Supper took place. He was most likely a secret disciple of Jesus Christ (see Archpriest Popov, *The Life of Jesus Christ*). This garden still exists today, and among its centuries-old trees there may still be some silent witnesses of the agony of the God-man (Lopukhin, *Biblical History of the New Testament*).
2. Innocent, Archbishop of Kherson, *The Final Days in the Life of Christ*. 3. 9th Ode, Canon of St. Andrew of Crete
4. Innocent, Archbishop of Kherson, *The Final Days in the Life of Christ*.
5. Great sorrow often causes deep sleep. It is a well-known fact that criminals awaiting execution the next day often sleep so soundly the night before that they have to be awakened just before being taken from the prison to execution.
6. It is interesting to note that when the early Church Fathers engaged in arguments with the Monophysites concerning the dogma on the human nature of Jesus Christ they often referred to the Gospel passage describing the bloody sweat of the Saviour in Gethsemane. It is well known that the Armenian Church, which had Monophysite tendencies, audaciously tried to omit this part of the Gospel. (See the doctoral dissertation of I. Troitsky, "Exposition of the Faith of the Armenian Church", St. Petersburg) Nonetheless, current Armenian Gospels read correctly at this passage (Luke 22:44)! 7. Bishop Michael, *Expository Gospel*, ch. 1 (Matt. 26:36-38).
8. Innocent, *The Final Days in the Life of Christ*. 9. *Ibid.* 10. *Ibid.* 11. *Ibid.*



THE COMING MONTH

THE MONTH is naturally dominated by **Holy and Great Week** and the celebration of **the Lord's Pascha**, and for that reason we have included the first article in this issue, and we will doubtless be inundated with pieces on Pascha, so in the space available this month we will simply concentrate on the saints of the month.

The **Holy Martyrs of the Kvatakhevi Monastery in Georgia** (10th / 23rd): In the 14th century, during the reign of King Bagrat V (1360-1394), Timur (Tamerlane) invaded Georgia seven times. His troops inflicted irreparable damage, seizing centuries-old treasures and razing ancient churches and monasteries. Timur's armies ravaged Kartli, then took the king, queen, and the entire royal court captive and sent them to Karabakh (in present-day Azerbaijan). Later Timur attempted to entice King Bagrat to renounce the Christian Faith in exchange for permission to return to the throne and for the release of the other

Georgian prisoners. For some time Timur was unable to subjugate King Bagrat, but in the end, being powerless and isolated from his kinsmen, the king began to falter. He devised a sly scheme: to confess Islam before the enemy, but to remain a Christian at heart. Satisfied with King Bagrat's decision to "convert to Islam," Timur permitted the king to return to the throne of Kartli. At the request of King Bagrat, Timur sent twelve thousand troops with him to complete Georgia's forcible conversion to Islam. When they were approaching the village of Khunani in southeastern Georgia, Bagrat secretly informed his son Giorgi of everything that had happened and called upon him and his army to massacre the invaders. The news of Bagrat's betrayal and the ruin of his army infuriated Timur, and he called for immediate revenge. At their leader's command, his followers destroyed everything in their path, set fire to cities and villages, devastated churches, and thus forced their way through to Kvatakhevi Monastery. Monastics and laymen alike were gathered in Kvatakhevi when the enemy came thundering in. Having forced open the gate, the attackers burst into the monastery, then plundered and seized all its treasures. They captured the young and strong, carrying them away. The old and infirm were put to the sword. As the greatest humiliation, they mocked the clergy and monastics by strapping them with sleigh bells and jumping and dancing around them. Already drunk on the blood they had shed, the barbarians gave an ultimatum to those who remained: to renounce Christ and live or to be driven into the church and burned alive. Faced with these terms, the faithful cried out: "Go ahead and burn our flesh - in the Heavenly Kingdom our souls will burn with a divine flame more radiant than the sun!" And in their exceeding humility, the martyrs requested that their martyrdom not be put on display: "We ask only that you not commit this sin before the eyes of men and angels. The Lord alone knows the sincerity of our will and comforts us in our righteous afflictions!" Having been driven like beasts into the church, the martyrs raised up a final prayer to God: "In the multitude of Thy mercies shall I go into Thy house; I shall worship toward Thy holy temple in fear of Thee. O Lord, guide me in the way of Thy righteousness; because of

mine enemies, make straight my way before Thee (Ps. 5:6-7) that with a pure mind I may glorify Thee forever....” The executioners hauled in more and more wood, until the flames enveloping the church blazed as high as the heavens and the echo of crackling timber resounded through the mountains. Ensnared in a ring of fire, the blissful martyrs chanted psalms as they gave up their spirits to the Lord. The massacre at Kvatakhevi took place in 1386. The imprints of the martyrs’ charred bodies remain on the floor of the church to this day.

The **Holy Martyr Tounom the Emir** (18th April / 1st May): In 1846 the Monk Parthenius wrote the following record of the Miracle of the Holy Fire in Jerusalem and the Martyrdom of Saint Tounom. “Let me tell you about this. At the Great Gates [of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre] themselves, on the left side, stands a column made out of marble with a fissure from which the grace, that is, the Holy Fire, came forth. This column is honoured by Orthodox as well as non-Orthodox, and even the Armenians. I would like to write a little about this incident, how the Orthodox Eastern Christians unanimously speak of it and the Turks themselves confirm it. In the wall there is an inscribed marble slab, and they say that this very incident is written on it; but we could not read it because it is written in Syrian letters, in the Arab tongue; and I only heard about it, but did not read it. But the incident happened something like this: At one time when the Greeks were completely oppressed by the Turkish yoke, some rich Armenians took it into their heads to force the Greeks out of the Holy Sepulchre and out of the Church of the Resurrection. They gathered a large sum of money and bribed the Ottoman Porte and all the Jerusalem authorities, assuring the unbelievers that the Holy Fire comes forth not simply for the sake of the Greeks [the Orthodox], but for all Christians, and ‘if we Armenians [Monophysites] are there, we also will receive it!’ And the Turks, who are greedy for money, accepted the bribe and therefore did as the Armenians wished, and they affirmed that only the Armenians would be allowed to receive the Holy Fire. The Armenians rejoiced greatly and wrote to all their lands and to their faithful, that more of them should go on a pilgrimage. And a great multitude of them did come. Holy

Saturday approached: the Armenians all gathered in the church, and the Turkish army drove the poor Greeks out. Oh, what unspeakable grief and sorrow filled the Greeks! There was only one comfort for them - the Grave of the Saviour, and they were being kept away from it, and the Holy Gates were locked to them! The Armenians were inside the church and the Orthodox were on the streets. The Armenians were rejoicing and the Greeks were weeping. The Armenians were celebrating and the Greeks were bitterly lamenting! The Orthodox stood opposite the Holy Gates on the court and around them stood the Turkish army, watching so that there would not be a fight. The Patriarch himself with all the rest stood there with candles, hoping that they would at least receive the Fire from the Armenians through the window. But the Lord wished to dispose things in a different way, and to manifest His true Faith with a fiery finger and comfort His true servants, the humble Greeks. The time had already come when the Holy Fire issues forth, but nothing happened. The Armenians were frightened and began to weep, and ask God that He send them the Fire; but the Lord did not hear them. Already a half hour had passed and more, and still no Holy Fire. The day was clear and beautiful; the Patriarch sat to the right side. All of a sudden there was a clap of thunder, and on the left side the middle marble column cracked and out of the fissure a flame of fire came forth. The Patriarch arose and lit his candles and all the Orthodox Christians lit theirs from his. Then all rejoiced, and the Orthodox Arabs from Jordan began to skip and cry out, 'Thou art our one God, Jesus Christ; one is our True Faith, that of the Orthodox Christians!' And they began to run about all of Jerusalem and raise a din, and to shout all over the city. And to this day they still do this in memory of the incident and they jump and shout, running around the Holy Sepulchre, and they praise the one true God, Jesus Christ, and bless the Orthodox Faith. Beholding this wonder, the Turkish army, which was standing around on guard, was greatly amazed and terrified. From amongst them one named Emir, who was standing at the St. Abraham's Monastery on guard, immediately believed in Christ and shouted, 'One is the true God, Jesus Christ; one is the true Faith, that of the Orthodox Christians!'

And he jumped down to the Christians from a height of more than 35 feet. His feet landed on the solid marble as if though on soft wax. And to this day one can see his footprints imprinted as though in wax, although the non-Orthodox tried to erase them. I saw them with my own eyes and felt them with my own hands. And the column with the fissure still bears the scorch marks. As for Emir the soldier, having jumped down, he took his weapon and thrust it into the stone as though into soft wax, and began to glorify Christ unceasingly. For this, the Turks beheaded him and burned his body; the Greeks gathered up his bones, put them into a case and took them to the Convent of the Great Panagia, where they gush forth fragrance until this day. The Armenians in the Holy Sepulchre received nothing and were left only with their shame. The Pasha of Jerusalem and other Turkish authorities were greatly displeased with them and wanted to slaughter them all, but they feared the Sultan. They only punished them heavily: they say that they made each one to eat dung as he left the church.



POINTS FROM CORRESPONDENCE

*“I have been visiting your site and reading things there and so thought I would write and ask your opinion. You do not know me or my church, and I thought I would thus get an independent opinion. As is the custom our family went to confession in the first week of Lent. Later my younger sister told me that she had corrected the priest when he was trying to advise her. This struck me as wrong, and I wonder what your thoughts on it are. - N.K., **Redditch**.*

I CAN only answer in the most general terms, knowing so little about the situation. It would seem that if the priest misheard her and was then speaking about a sin or passion which she had not confessed, she was right to set the record straight. But if he was addressing what she had confessed, and she simply

would not accept his advice and counsel, then it would appear that she was adding sin to sin and also denying herself one of the blessings that we receive by going to confession. She was probably then also engaging in yet another sin, and one of the most deadly ones, pride, by demonstrating that she thought she knew better than him.



*NEWS from the Richmond
Diocese of the Church of the Genuine
Orthodox Christians of Greece*

ARCHPASTORAL VISIT

OUR BISHOP, **Metropolitan Ambrose of Methoni**, is planning to celebrate the **Great Feast of the Annunciation** in England. D.V., he will be arriving in the country on Thursday, 4th April n.s., and leaving on Tuesday, 9th n.s. The archpastoral celebration of the Great Feast will be at Saint Edward's with the chanting of the Vigil at 6 p.m. on Saturday, 6th April, n.s., and the celebration of the Hierarchal Divine Liturgy on the Sunday, the feast day itself, 7th April n.s. at 10 a.m.

NEW CATECHUMEN

ON Forgiveness Sunday, 4th / 17th March, **Carol Thompson of Thame** made her vows as a catechumen at the end of the Parish Liturgy. She was named Osyth, after **Saint Osyth of Chich**, a royal lady from the Anglo-Saxon period who became a nun in Essex (feast day: 7th / 20th October). Please pray for the new catechumen Osyth that she continue steadfastly on her path to Holy Baptism.

BURIALS AT SAINT EDWARD'S

ON 7th March, **Elena Stepavoi from Kingston-upon-Thames** was laid to rest in our cemetery. The funeral service was chanted by the **Archpriest Silviu-Petre Pufulete** and **Priestmonk Dometian** (Romanian Patriarchate). Fr Dometian had specially come from Romania for the funeral and burial.

ON 13th March, **Styliani (Stella) Lang of Kingston Hill** was laid to rest here alongside her husband Lucas who predeceased her in 1996. May Elena and Styliani find rest with the Saints and Memory Eternal.

NEW ICONS

TWO very large and beautiful icons have been placed in Saint Edward's Church narthex. They were donated by one of our people and commissioned from the **Convent of the Holy Angels, Afidnai, Greece**. **Anastasia Panagiotidou** kindly brought them to us and they fortunately arrived while the workmen from **Ekon Building, Max and Gabi**, were working here. They are able to turn their hands to anything, and mounted the icons on boards, framed them and erected them in the church. They depict Saints of the Old Testament. On the men's side of the church we have our Forefathers Adam, Noah and Abraham, the Righteous Joseph the All-Comely, the Righteous Job, and the Prophet, King and Psalmist David, and the Prophets Esaias and Daniel. On the women's side we have our Foremothers Eve and Sarah, the Righteous Rebecca, Rachael, and Ruth, the Prophetess Hannah, the Righteous Judith, and the Prophetess Elizabeth the Mother of the Forerunner.

WORK IN THE CHURCH

IN THE CHURCH, we recently had the sacristan's room and the boiler/store room renovated. **Deacon Ioan Turcu** fitted a new water heating system there, and the rooms, which had largely been neglected, were stripped down, partly re-plastered and painted. Rather than having pieces of furniture there, they

were fitted with built-in cabinets and drawers, so that we can keep more of the vestments there and not have to take them back and forth to the house. In doing this work, Max and Gabi found that there was a serious damp problem near floor level and replaced several of the structural timbers. They then investigated outside and to alleviate the problem they dug trenches alongside the walls and filled them with pea-shingle, replastered the bottom of the exterior walls and repointed them higher up. Also, at our request they treated the weather boarding on the porch above the main entrance.

FORTHCOMING PROJECTS

WITH THE BLESSING of Metropolitan Ambrose, we are proposing to organise a **Two-day Orthodox Young Adults Conference** for those aged 17 to 30-ish from Friday, 6th to Sunday, 8th September. The conference will be held at the **Canadian Pavilion, Bisley, Surrey**, which is just two miles from Saint Edward's Church. The Pavilion is offering accommodation for around 30 participants as well as communal areas for the talks, meals and socialising. It also has a garden with barbecue facilities and space to relax. Talks will be given by **Archimandrite Daniel (Toyne)** on topics relevant for young adults with plenty of opportunity for questions. During the conference the participants will attend services at St Edward's Church. The price will be £150 per person, to include accommodation for two nights and all meals. The conference is open to all young adults of the St Edward's community and also to young people from other Traditional Orthodox parishes. The talks will be in English. **ALL enquiries** to our parishioner, **Rima Lewis**, who is kindly organising this event: rima.lewis@sky.com

VISITORS

ON Tuesday, 12th March, **John Leech** of the **Brookwood Cemetery Society** brought a group of about 40 people to see the church as part of the tour of the whole cemetery.

ON Thursday, 21st March, unexpectedly **Camberley Diamond Women's Institute** visited the church, led by **Kim Lowe** of the BCS. There were about eight people in the group, and they showed a lively interest in the church.



Practical Tip

AS we come to the end of the Great Lent, people naturally come to confession to prepare for their celebration of the festival. Many often mention, “I have kept the fast.” But stop there! Have you? Consider. Keeping the fast is not only a matter of just keeping the dietary regulations. Have you also paid more attention to your prayer life, engaged in more spiritual reading, attended the lenten services as assiduously as you can? Have you increased your almsgiving, have you tried to help others in need, visited the sick, visited the lonely and elderly? Have you tried to curb your passions, to maintain peace, to remain quiet? Keeping the dietary regulations is only step one. If you have not attempted the rest, you have not kept the fast as you should have. Then **look at what the Church prescribes for celebrating Pascha**, not feasting and merry-making, socialising and squandering all that the fast may have brought us, but rather the 66th canon of the Council in Trullo enjoins: “From the holy day of the Resurrection of Christ our God until New Sunday (Thomas Sunday) for a whole week the faithful in the holy churches should continually be repeating psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, rejoicing and celebrating Christ, and attending to the reading of the Divine Scriptures and delighting in the Holy Mysteries. For in this way shall we be exalted with Christ; raised up together with Him. For this reason on the aforesaid days there should by no means be any horse races or any other public spectacle.”

“He who is not zealous for salvation is a non-participant in salvation” - Saint Theophan the Recluse