

The Shepherd

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FROM THE FATHERS

“AS MANY of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ (Gal. 3:27). What a great truth does the Apostle Paul show us by these words! Baptised Christians do not clothe themselves in the old man with the passions and lusts, but have put on the new man, have put on Christ Himself, Who now lives in their hearts. And the words, “put on” do not refer to some simple and external garments, but to something deeper, something essential and inalienable. Through our faith in Christ and through our Baptism we put on Christ Himself and become children of God, the habitation of the All-Holy Spirit, temples of God, holy and perfect, gods by grace. Thus have we thrown off corruption from ourselves and been clothed in incorruption. We have put off the man of sin and put on the man of righteousness and grace. We have cast out death and put on immortality... But have we understood our great obligation, which through Baptism we have taken upon ourselves before God? Have we recognised that we should behave like children of God and brothers of our Lord, that we must make our own will the same as God’s will; that as children of God we must abide free from sin, that we must love Him with all our strength from the depths of our hearts and souls, that we must worship Him and impatiently await being united with Him forever? Have we thought about the fact that our hearts should be so filled with love that it will pour out upon our neighbours? Do we have the feeling that we are obligated to become saints and perfect, the image of God, children of God, and inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven? For the sake of all this we must struggle, so that we will not turn out to be unworthy of God’s call and be rejected. Yes, brothers and sisters, let us struggle with zeal and self-denial, that we might be victorious. Let none of us lose his boldness, so that we might not neglect our duty, or be cowardly, not lose heart in the face of the difficulties of spiritual

battle. It is for this that we have God as our helper, Who will strengthen us on the difficult path of the virtues.”

SAINT NECTARIUS OF PENTAPOLIS, + 1920 A.D.



DISCOURSE ON HOLY THEOPHANY

SAINT HIPPOLYTUS OF ROME, +269 A.D.

GOOD, indeed, very good, are all the works of our God and Saviour - all of them that eye sees and mind perceives, all that reason interprets and hand handles, all that intellect comprehends and human nature understands. For what richer beauty can there be than that of the circle of heaven? And what form of more blooming fairness than that of earth's surface? And what is there swifter in its course than the chariot of the sun? And what more graceful chariot than the lunar orb? And what work more wonderful than the compact mosaic of the stars? And what more productive of supplies than the seasonable winds? And what more spotless a mirror than the light of day? And what creature more excellent than man? Very good, then, are all the works of our God and Saviour. And what more requisite gift, again, is there than the element of water? For with water all things are washed and nourished, and cleansed and bedewed. Water bears up the earth, water produces the dew, water exhilarates the vine; water matures the grain in the ear, water ripens the grape cluster, water softens the olive, water sweetens the palm-date, water reddens the rose and decks the violet, water makes the lily bloom with its brilliant cups. And why should I speak at length? Without the element of water, none of the present order of things can subsist. So necessary is the element of water; for the other elements took their places beneath the highest vault of the heavens, but the nature of water obtained a seat also above the heavens. And to this the prophet himself is a

witness, when he exclaims, "Praise the Lord... ye heavens of heavens, and thou water that is above the heavens" (Ps. 148:1,4).

Nor is this the only thing that proves the dignity of the water. But there is also that which is more honourable than all, the fact that Christ, the Maker of all, came down as the rain, and was known as a spring, and diffused Himself as a river, and was baptised in the Jordan. For you have just heard how Jesus came to John, and was baptised by him in the Jordan. O things strange beyond compare! How should the boundless River that makes glad the city of God have been dipped in a little water! The illimitable Spring that bears life to all men, and has no end, was covered by poor and temporary waters! He Who is present everywhere, and absent nowhere, Who is incomprehensible to angels and invisible to men, comes to Baptism according to His own good pleasure. When you hear these things, beloved, take them not as if spoken literally, but accept them as presented in a figure. Whence also the Lord was not unnoticed by the watery element in what He did in secret, in the kindness of His condescension to man. "For the waters saw Him, and were afraid." They well nigh broke from their place, and burst away from their boundary. Hence the prophet, having this in his view many generations ago, puts the question, "What aileth thee, O sea, that thou fleddest; and thou Jordan, that thou didst turn back?" And they in reply said: We have seen the Creator of all things in the "form of a servant," and being ignorant of the mystery of the Economy, we were lashed with fear.

But we, who know the economy, adore His mercy, because He has come to save and not to judge the world. Wherefore John, the forerunner of the Lord, who before knew not this mystery, on learning that He is Lord in truth, cried out, and spoke to those who came to be baptised of him, "O generation of vipers," why look ye so earnestly at me? "I am not the Christ;" I am the servant, and not the lord; I am the subject, and not the king; I am the sheep, and not the shepherd; I am a man, and not God. By my birth I loosed the barrenness of my mother; I did not make virginity barren. I was brought up from beneath; I did not come down from above. I bound the tongue of my father; I

did not unfold divine grace. I was known by my mother, and I was not announced by a star. I am worthless, and the least; but “after me there comes One who is before me” - after me, indeed, in time, but before me by reason of the inaccessible and unutterable light of Divinity. “There comes One mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: He shall baptise you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire.” I am subject to authority, but He has authority in Himself. I am bound by sins, but He is the Remover of sins. I apply the law, but He brings grace to light. I teach as a slave, but He judges as the Master. I have the earth as my couch, but He possesses heaven. I baptise with the baptism of repentance, but He confers the gift of adoption: “He shall baptise you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire.” Why give ye attention to me? I am not the Christ.

As John says these things to the multitude, and as the people watch in eager expectation of seeing some strange spectacle with their bodily eyes, and the devil is struck with amazement at such a testimony from John, lo, the Lord appears, plain, solitary, uncovered, without escort, having on Him the body of man like a garment, and hiding the dignity of the Divinity, that He may elude the snares of the dragon. And not only did He approach John as Lord without royal retinue; but even like a mere man, and one involved in sin, He bent His head to be baptised by John. Wherefore John, on seeing so great a humbling of Himself, was struck with astonishment at the affair, and began to prevent Him, saying, as ye have just heard, “I have need to be baptised of Thee, and comest Thou to me?” What doest Thou, O Lord? Thou teachest things not according to rule. I have preached one thing (regarding Thee), and Thou performest another; the devil has heard one thing, and perceives another. Baptise me with the fire of Divinity; why waitest Thou for water? Enlighten me with the Spirit; why dost Thou attend upon a creature? Baptise me, the Baptist, that Thy pre-eminence may be known. I, O Lord, baptise with the baptism of repentance, and I cannot baptise those who come to me unless they first fully confess their sins. If it be then that I baptise Thee, what hast Thou to confess? Thou art the Remover of sins, and wilt Thou be baptised with the baptism of repentance? Though I should

venture to baptise Thee, the Jordan dares not to come near Thee. "I have need to be baptised of Thee, and comest Thou to me?"

And what saith the Lord to him? "Suffer it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." Suffer it to be so now, John; thou art not wiser than I. Thou seest as man; I fore-know as God. It becomes me to do this first, and thus to teach. I engage in nothing unbecoming, for I am invested with honour. Dost thou marvel, O John, that I am not come in my dignity? The purple robe of kings suits not one in private station, but military splendour suits a king: am I come to a prince, and not to a friend? "Suffer it to be so now for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." I am the Fulfiller of the law; I seek to leave nothing wanting to its whole fulfilment, that so after me Paul may exclaim, Christ is the fulfilling of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth. "Suffer it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." Baptise me, John, in order that no one may despise Baptism. I am baptised by thee, the servant, that no one among kings or dignitaries may scorn to be baptised by the hand of a poor priest. Suffer me to go down into the Jordan, in order that they may hear my Father's testimony, and recognise the power of the Son. "Suffer it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." Then at length John suffers Him. "And Jesus, when He was baptised, went up straightway out of the water: and the heavens were opened unto Him; and, lo, the Spirit of God descended like a dove, and rested upon Him. And a voice (came) from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Do you see, beloved, how many and how great blessings we would have lost, if the Lord had yielded to the exhortation of John, and declined Baptism? For the heavens were shut before this; the region above was inaccessible. We would in that case descend to the lower parts, but we would not ascend to the upper. But was it only that the Lord was baptised? He also renewed the old man, and committed to him again the sceptre of adoption. For straightway "the heavens were opened to Him." A reconciliation took place of the visible with the invisible; the celestial orders were filled with joy; the diseases of earth were

healed; secret things were made known; those at enmity were restored to amity. For you have heard the word of the evangelist, saying, "The heavens were opened to Him," on account of three wonders. For when Christ the Bridegroom was baptised, it was meet that the bridal-chamber of heaven should open its brilliant gates. And in like manner also, when the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove, and the Father's voice spread everywhere, it was meet that "the gates of heaven should be lifted up." "And, lo, the heavens were opened to Him; and a voice was heard, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

The Beloved generates Love, and the Light immaterial the Light inaccessible. "This is My beloved Son," He Who, being manifested on earth and yet unseparated from the Father's bosom, was manifested, and yet did not appear. For the appearing is a different thing, since in appearance the baptiser here is superior to the Baptised. For this reason did the Father send down the Holy Spirit from heaven upon Him Who was baptised. For as in the ark of Noah the love of God toward man is signified by the dove, so also now the Spirit, descending in the form of a dove, bearing as it were the fruit of the olive, rested on Him to Whom the witness was borne. For what reason? That the faithfulness of the Father's voice might be made known, and that the prophetic utterance of a long time past might be ratified. And what utterance is this? "The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory hath thundered, the Lord is upon the many waters" (Ps. 28:3). And what voice? "This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased." This is He Who is named the son of Joseph, and is according to the Divine essence My Only-begotten. "This is My beloved Son" - He Who is hungry, and yet maintains myriads; Who is weary, and yet gives rest to the weary; Who has not where to lay His head, and yet bears up all things in His hand; Who suffers, and yet heals sufferings; Who is smitten, and yet confers liberty on the world; Who is pierced in the side, and yet repairs the side of Adam.

But give me now your best attention, I pray you, for I wish to go back to the Fountain of life, and to view the Fountain that

gushes with healing. The Father of immortality sent the immortal Son and Word into the world, Who came to man in order to wash him with water and the Spirit; and He, begetting us again to incorruption of soul and body, breathed into us the breath of life, and endued us with an incorruptible panoply. If, therefore, man has become immortal, he will also be God. And if he is made God by water and the Holy Spirit after the regeneration of the laver, he is found to be also joint-heir with Christ after the resurrection from the dead. Wherefore I preach to this effect: Come, all ye kindreds of the nations, to the immortality of Baptism. I bring good tidings of life to you who tarry in the darkness of ignorance. Come into liberty from slavery, into a kingdom from tyranny, into incorruption from corruption. And how, says one, shall we come? How? By water and the Holy Spirit. This is the water in conjunction with the Spirit, by which Paradise is watered, by which the earth is enriched, by which plants grow, by which animals multiply, and (to sum up the whole in a single word) by which man is begotten again and endued with life, into which also Christ was baptised, and in which the Spirit descended in the form of a dove.

This is the Spirit that at the beginning “moved upon the waters;” by Whom the world moves; by Whom creation consists, and all things have life; Who also wrought mightily in the prophets, and descended in flight upon Christ. This is the Spirit that was given to the Apostles in the form of fiery tongues. This is the Spirit that David sought when he said, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” Of this Spirit Gabriel also spoke to the Virgin, “The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee.” By this Spirit Peter spoke that blessed word, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” By this Spirit the rock of the Church was established. This is the Spirit, the Comforter, that is sent because of thee, that He may show thee to be the son of God.

Come then, be begotten again, O man, into the adoption of God. And how? Says one: If thou practisest adultery no more, and commitest not murder, and servest not idols; if thou art not overmastered by pleasure; if thou dost not suffer the feeling of pride

to rule thee; if thou cleanest off the filthiness of impurity, and putteth off the burden of sin; if thou castest off the armour of the devil, and putteth on the breastplate of faith, even as Esaias saith, "Wash ye, and seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, and plead for the widow. And come and let us reason together, saith the Lord. Though your sins be as scarlet, I shall make them white as snow; and though they be like crimson, I shall make them white as wool. And if ye be willing, and hear My voice, ye shall eat the good of the land." Do you see, beloved, how the prophet spake beforetime of the purifying power of Baptism? For he who comes down in faith to the laver of regeneration, and renounces the devil, and joins himself to Christ; who denies the enemy, and makes the confession that Christ is God; who puts off the bondage, and puts on the adoption, - he comes up from the Baptism brilliant as the sun, flashing forth the beams of righteousness, and, which is indeed the chief thing, he returns a son of God and joint-heir with Christ. To Him be the glory and the power, together with His most holy, and good, and quickening Spirit, now and ever, and to all the ages of the ages. Amen.



NO SIN CAN SURPASS THE LOVE OF GOD

THE ELDER NIKON OF MOUNT ATHOS

IT IS NOT because we sin that we don't go to Heaven. You have to know that the only sinless One was Christ and no one else. It's not because we commit sins that we don't go to Heaven. While we're still alive and our eyes are open, we sin. We will go to Heaven because we are trying with all of our strength to be what Christ wants us to be, and that kind of effort will save us. Whether we can overcome the temptation to sin or not depends not on us, but on God's grace.

We must ask the Lord to send us His grace. If He sends us His grace, then we will not be angry, commit adultery, steal, and so on. If God does not send His grace, we will not be able to overcome our sins by ourselves. This does not mean that we are not what Christ wants us to be. We fight, we wage war against our sins. We see our sins and think that if we stop committing them, then we will not be sinning anymore... But what about sinning in our minds? Or with our eyes? Or with our ears?

We should not despair and say, "I always fall into the trap of the same sin. Therefore, I won't be able to achieve anything; I'm not doing anything!" We do a lot: we confess, humble ourselves, repent... This is what saves us rather than the virtue in which we have excelled. The devil also possesses virtues. Once, having done something good, I went to tell my elder about it. I was a novice monk then. When he saw me, he immediately realised what the matter was, and, before I could say a word, he said: "My child, why should we boast and be proud? Because we fast? We can never fast more than the devil, because he never eats anything. He is the greatest faster. Or is it because we keep vigil and do not sleep much? We cannot be more vigilant than the evil one, because he never sleeps. Do we abstain, remain chaste out of love for Christ? Do we have this virtue? But we will never become more chaste than the devil, because he does not want carnal pleasures: he does not need them, for he has no body." I was shocked! No matter how many virtues we have, we will never be able to acquire those that the devil possesses. But will these virtues save the devil? No; and they will not save us either.

What do I mean by that? That we shouldn't be virtuous? No. We shall continue struggling in order to acquire the virtues. A true Christian is always virtuous, but not every virtuous person is necessarily a Christian. There are virtuous people among Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Protestants. But virtues in and of themselves are not "salvific". We will be saved through repentance and humility.

But humility is not just about saying empty words such as: "What am I? I'm nothing!" and pretending to be miserable just to make people say to you: "No, no, you are virtuous; look, you

have such and such virtues...”

By pretending to be humble, we make others praise us. Real humility is not just saying humble words, but being a humble-minded person, having a humble spirit and not thinking that we are better than others, for all manner of evil is born first of all in our mind.

If we fall again and again spiritually, we should not despair. There are priests, the priestly stole, repentance... This is what will save us and nothing else. Repentance and humility will save us. This is what the devil fears. He has many “virtues,” but he lacks one—humility; and this is what has given birth to hell and has brought about ruin.

To show the power of humility, as Scripture says, Christ descended from Heaven to earth, humbled Himself, and was obedient to the point of death (Phil. 2:8). He humbled Himself to the point where He agreed to be crucified. This is the humility that we need for our salvation.

We try not to fall into sin, but God deliberately allows us to fall so that we may acquire humility, and while we weep over the sin we have committed, God crowns us with humility for our struggle with sin. Therefore, we must never despair.

Make it a rule for yourself not to repeat your sins again, saying: “I won’t be angry anymore, I won’t do this or that...” And then say: “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner!” And then bow your head under the stole of the priest.

We will understand what we have truly gained when the time comes to stand before God. Man measures things one way, but God has His own way of measuring them.

You should never despair. If you have not achieved something, it does not mean that you have failed. There is no sin that is greater than God’s love; there is no sin that cannot be overcome by God’s love. Confess, receive Communion, and do not withdraw from the Church. It is better to be a sinner in the Church than to be a virtuous person outside of it. It’s better to be a hooligan, but to be together with Christ, than to be a good

guy, but to be together with the devil. Our goodness will not save us, but what will save us is the love we have for Christ and the spiritual struggle that we engage in for His sake.

One day a monk fell asleep during service. Monastic life is harsh, the soul may aspire to the things on high, but sometimes the body does not have the strength to follow after it. The service ended and we left the church. While waiting to be invited to the refectory, another monk, in order to tease his fellow brother, jokingly said to him: "Father, I saw you fall asleep in church." And he answered: "Better to be asleep inside Noah's Ark than to be awake outside of it!"

It is better to be saved by Christ, even if you fall asleep in church, than to be awake out on the street during the flood. Repentance is what will save us and not something else. This is why we must constantly repent. Why is that so? Because we sin all the time, and because we should not be tied to the sins we commit. Saint Dorotheus says that you can even upset someone by the way you look at them and thus commit a sin. So, what are we supposed to do then? Hide in a pit and wait there motionlessly until we die?

As soon as you open your eyes in the morning, say: "Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!" and "Glory to God!" Doing so, you'll make it to Heaven; don't have doubts. For when one says: "Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!" he shows that he wants to be with Christ, that he won't sin by his own will, and that if he does sin, then it'll be against his will. As St. Paul says: *I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from this body of death?* (Rom. 7:23-24). And if we see that even Saint Paul - he who could raise the dead - could not overcome sin, then will we overcome it? No. Then how will we be saved? We will be saved by praying: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me!" and through humility.

Often when we ask God for something, He does not give it to us simply in order to keep us praying, and, when we are finally

given what we had asked for, we find that we have benefited more from the prayers that we had sent up to God rather than from what He has given us. This is why the Lord sometimes delays in giving us what we repeatedly ask Him for.

He often puts us in difficult situations or sends us sufferings - for example, an illness - in order to prevent us from sinning. If we had ended up in a different situation instead, we would have been content and would have sinned. As they say, "no one is happy where they are."



THE COMING MONTH

THE month of January opens with the feast of the **Saviour's Circumcision** which is quickly followed by that of His Baptism in the Jordan, the **Great Feast of the Theophany**, which is why we have already devoted much of this issue to the subject of Baptism. This year because Pascha is rather later, we do not start the Lenten Triodion as often happens this month but in February.

Among the saints we have this month, there are:

Our **Venerable Father Saint Vitalius** (11th / 24th), a monk of the Monastery of Saint Seridus, who arrived in Alexandria when Saint John the Merciful was Patriarch. When Abba Vitalius was sixty years old, he undertook an extraordinary task: he wrote down the names of all the local prostitutes and he began to pray for them. He worked from morning to evening, earning twelve copper coins each day. In the evening the Saint bought a single bean, which he ate after sunset. Then he would give the rest of the money to one of the harlots, whom he visited at night and said, "I beg you, take this money and do not sin with anyone tonight." Then he stayed with the harlot in her room. While she slept, the Elder spent the whole night at prayer, reading the Psalms, and quietly left in the morning. He did this each day, visiting all the harlots in turn, and he made them promise to

keep the purpose of his visit secret. The people of Alexandria, not knowing the truth, became indignant over the monk's behaviour, and they reviled him. However, he meekly endured their scorn, and he only asked that they not judge others. The holy prayers of Saint Vitalius saved many fallen women. Some of them went to a monastery, others got married, and others found respectable work. But they were forbidden to tell anyone the reason why they had changed their life, and thereby stop the abuse heaped upon Abba Vitalius. They were bound by an oath they had made to the Saint. When one of the women began to break her oath and stood up to defend the Saint, she fell into a demonic frenzy. After this, the people of Alexandria had no doubt concerning the sinfulness of the monk. Certain of the clergy, scandalised by the behaviour of Saint Vitalius, reported him to the holy Patriarch John the Merciful. But the Patriarch did not believe the informers and he said, "Cease judging, especially monks. Don't you know what happened at the First Synod of Nicaea? Some of the bishops and the clergy brought letters of denunciation against each other to the Emperor Saint Constantine the Great. He commanded that a lighted candle be brought, and not even reading the letters, he burned them and said, 'If I had seen with my own eyes a bishop sinning, or a priest, or a monk, then I would have veiled such with his garb, so that no one might see his sin.'" Thus the wise hierarch shamed the calumniators. Saint Vitalius continued on with his difficult exploit: appearing himself before people under the guise of a sinner and a prodigal, he led the prodigal to repentance. Once, emerging from a house of ill repute, the monk encountered a young man going there, a prodigal fellow, who with an insult struck him on the cheek and cried out that he was a disgrace to the name of Christ. Abba answered him: "Believe me, that after me, humble man that I be, you also shall receive such a blow on the cheek, that will have all Alexandria thronging to your cry." A certain time afterwards Vitalius settled into a small cell and in it at night he died. At that very hour a terrifying demon appeared before the youth who had struck the saint, and the demon struck the youth on the cheek and cried out: "Here is a knock from Vitalius." The youth fell into demonic madness. In

a frenzy he thrashed about on the ground, tore the clothing from himself and howled so loudly, that a multitude of people gathered. When the youth finally came to his senses after several hours, he then rushed off to the cell of Abba Vitalius, calling out: "Have mercy on me, O servant of God, for I have sinned against you." At the door of the cell he came fully to his senses and he told those gathered there about his former encounter with Saint Vitalius. Then the youth knocked on the door of the cell, but he received no answer. When they broke in the door, they then saw that the Monk was dead, on his knees before an icon. In his hand was a scroll with the words: "Men of Alexandria, judge not beforehand, till the Lord cometh, the Righteous Judge." At this moment there came up the demon-possessed woman, punished by the saint for wanting to violate the secret of his exploit. Having touched his body, she was healed and told the people about everything that had happened with her. When the women who had been saved by Saint Vitalius learned about his death, they gathered together and told everyone about the virtues and mercy of the Saint. Saint John the Merciful also rejoiced, in that he had not believed the calumniators, and that a righteous man had not been condemned. And then together with the throng of repentant women, converted by Saint Vitalius, the holy Patriarch solemnly conveyed his remains throughout all the city and gave them reverent burial. And from that time many of the Alexandrian people made themselves a promise to judge no one.

Our **Venerable Father John the Hut-Dweller** (15th / 28th) was the son of rich and illustrious parents, and was born in Constantinople in the early fifth century. He received a fine education, and he mastered rhetoric and philosophy by the age of twelve. He also loved to read spiritual books. Perceiving the vanity of worldly life, he chose the path that was narrow and extremely difficult. Filled with longing to enter a monastery, he confided his intention to a passing monk. John made him promise to come back for him when he returned from his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and take him to his monastery. He asked his parents for a Gospel so that he might study the words of

Christ. John's parents hired a calligrapher to copy the text, and had the volume bound in a golden cover studded with gems. John read the Gospel constantly, delighting in the Saviour's words.* The monk kept his promise to come back for John, and they went to Bithynia. At the Monastery of the Unsleeping, he received monastic tonsure. The young monk began his ascetic labours with zeal, astonishing the brethren with his unceasing prayer, humble obedience, strict abstinence, and perseverance at work. After six years, he began to undergo temptations. He remembered his parents, how much they loved him, and what sorrow he caused them. He regretted leaving them, and was filled with a burning desire to see them again. He explained his situation to the abbot St Marcellus and he asked to be released from the monastery. He begged the abbot for his blessing and prayers to return home. He bid farewell to the brethren, hoping that by their prayers and with the help of God, he would both see his parents and overcome the snares of the devil. The abbot then blessed him for his journey. Saint John returned to Constantinople, not to resume his former life of luxury, but dressed as a beggar, and unknown to anyone. He settled in a corner by the gates of his parents' home. His father noticed the "pauper," and began to send him food from his table, for the sake of Christ. John lived in a small hut for three years, oppressed and insulted by the servants, enduring cold and frost, unceasingly conversing with the Lord and the holy Angels. Before his death, the Lord appeared to him in a vision, revealing that the end of his sorrows was approaching, and that in three days he would be taken into the Heavenly Kingdom. Therefore, he asked the steward to give his mother a message to come to him, for he had something to say to her. At first, she did not wish to go, but she was curious to know what this beggar had to say to her. Then he sent her another message, saying that he would die in three days. John thanked her for the charity he had received, and told her that God would reward her for it. He then made her promise to bury him beneath his hut, dressed in his rags. Only then did the saint give her his Gospel, which he always carried with him, saying, "May this console you in this

* This Gospel Book is kept today in the Monastery of Pantocrator on Mount Athos.

life, and guide you to the next life.” She showed the Gospel to her husband, saying that it was similar to the one they had given their son. He realised that it was, in fact, the very Gospel they had commissioned for John. They went back to the gates, intending to ask the pauper where he got the Gospel, and if he knew anything about their son. Unable to restrain himself any longer, he admitted that he was their child. With tears of joy they embraced him, weeping because he had endured privation for so long at the very gates of his parental home. The saint died in the mid-fifth century, when he was not quite twenty-five years old. On the place of his burial the parents built a church, and beside it a hostel for strangers. When they died, they were buried in the church they had built. In the twelfth century the head of the saint was taken by Crusaders to Besançon (in France), and other relics of the saint were taken to Rome.

Our Venerable Father Saint Fursey, Enlightener of East Anglia (16th/ 29th). We are printing here the report of the Venerable Bede on Saint Fursey, taken from his Ecclesiastical History: - “Whilst Sigbert still governed the kingdom, there came out of Ireland a holy man called Fursa, renowned both for his words and actions, and remarkable for singular virtues, being desirous to live as a stranger and pilgrim for the Lord’s sake, wherever an opportunity should offer. On coming into the province of the East Angles, he was honourably received by the aforesaid king, and performing his wonted task of preaching the Gospel, by the example of his virtue and the influence of his words, converted many unbelievers to Christ, and confirmed in the faith and love of Christ those that already believed. Here he fell into some infirmity of body, and was thought worthy to see a vision of angels; in which he was admonished diligently to persevere in the ministry of the Word which he had undertaken, and indefatigably to apply himself to his usual watching and prayers; inasmuch as his end was certain, but the hour thereof uncertain, according to the saying of our Lord, ‘Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour.’ Being confirmed by this vision, he set himself with all speed to build a monastery on the ground which had been given him by King Sigbert, and to establish a rule of life therein. This monastery was pleasantly

situated in the woods, near the sea; it was built within the area of a fort, which in the English language is called Cnobheresburg, that is, Cnobhere's Town; afterwards, Anna, king of that province, and certain of the nobles, embellished it with more stately buildings and with gifts. This man was of noble Scottish blood, but much more noble in mind than in birth. From his boyish years, he had earnestly applied himself to reading sacred books and observing monastic discipline, and, as is most fitting for holy men, he carefully practised all that he learned to be right. Now, in course of time he himself built a monastery, wherein he might with more freedom devote himself to his heavenly studies. There, falling sick, as the book concerning his life clearly informs us, he fell into a trance, and quitting his body from the evening till cockcrow, he was accounted worthy to behold the sight of the choirs of angels, and to hear their glad songs of praise. He was wont to declare, that among other things he distinctly heard this refrain: 'The saints shall go from strength to strength.' And again, 'The God of gods shall be seen in Sion.' Being restored to his body, and again taken from it three days after, he not only saw the greater joys of the blessed, but also fierce conflicts of evil spirits, who by frequent accusations wickedly endeavoured to obstruct his journey to heaven; but the angels protected him, and all their endeavours were in vain. Concerning all these matters, if any one desires to be more fully informed, to wit, with what subtlety of deceit the devils recounted both his actions and idle words, and even his thoughts, as if they had been written down in a book; and what joyous or grievous tidings he learned from the holy angels and just men who appeared to him among the angels; let him read the little book of his life which I have mentioned, and I doubt not that he will thereby reap much spiritual profit. But there is one thing among the rest, which we have thought it may be beneficial to many to insert in this history. When he had been taken up on high, he was bidden by the angels that conducted him to look back upon the world. Upon which, casting his eyes downward, he saw, as it were, a dark valley in the depths underneath him. He also saw four fires in the air, not far distant from each other. Then asking the angels, what fires those were, he was told, they were the fires

which would kindle and consume the world. One of them was of falsehood, when we do not fulfil that which we promised in Baptism, to renounce the Devil and all his works. The next was of covetousness, when we prefer the riches of the world to the love of heavenly things. The third was of discord, when we do not fear to offend our neighbour even in needless things. The fourth was of ruthlessness when we think it a light thing to rob and to defraud the weak. These fires, increasing by degrees, extended so as to meet one another, and united in one immense flame. When it drew near, fearing for himself, he said to the angel, 'Lord, behold the fire draws near to me.' The angel answered, 'That which you did not kindle will not burn you; for though this appears to be a terrible and great pyre, yet it tries every man according to the merits of his works; for every man's concupiscence shall burn in this fire; for as a man burns in the body through unlawful pleasure, so, when set free from the body, he shall burn by the punishment which he has deserved.' Then he saw one of the three angels, who had been his guides throughout both visions, go before and divide the flaming fires, whilst the other two, flying about on both sides, defended him from the danger of the fire. He also saw devils flying through the fire, raising the flames of war against the just. Then followed accusations of the envious spirits against himself, the defence of the good spirits, and a fuller vision of the heavenly hosts; as also of holy men of his own nation, who, as he had learnt, had worthily held the office of priesthood in old times, and who were known to fame; from whom he heard many things very salutary to himself, and to all others that would listen to them. When they had ended their discourse, and returned to Heaven with the angelic spirits, there remained with the blessed Fursa, the three angels of whom we have spoken before, and who were to bring him back to the body. And when they approached the aforesaid great fire, the angel divided the flame, as he had done before; but when the man of God came to the passage so opened amidst the flames, the unclean spirits, laying hold of one of those whom they were burning in the fire, cast him against him, and, touching his shoulder and jaw, scorched them. He knew the man, and called to mind that he had received his garment

when he died. The holy angel, immediately laying hold of the man, threw him back into the fire, and the malignant enemy said, 'Do not reject him whom you before received; for as you received the goods of the sinner, so you ought to share in his punishment.' But the angel withstood him, saying, 'He did not receive them through avarice, but in order to save his soul.' The fire ceased, and the angel, turning to him, said, 'That which you kindled burned you; for if you had not received the money of this man that died in his sins, his punishment would not burn you.' And he went on to speak with wholesome counsel of what ought to be done for the salvation of such as repented in the hour of death. Being afterwards restored to the body, throughout the whole course of his life he bore the mark of the fire which he had felt in the spirit, visible to all men on his shoulder and jaw; and the flesh openly showed, in a wonderful manner, what the spirit had suffered in secret. He always took care, as he had done before, to teach all men the practice of virtue, as well by his example, as by preaching. But as for the story of his visions, he would only relate them to those who, from desire of repentance, questioned him about them. An aged brother of our monastery is still living, who is wont to relate that a very truthful and religious man told him, that he had seen Fursa himself in the province of the East Angles, and heard those visions from his lips; adding, that though it was in severe winter weather and a hard frost, and the man was sitting in a thin garment when he told the story, yet he sweated as if it had been in the heat of midsummer, by reason of the great terror or joy of which he spoke. To return to what we were saying before, when, after preaching the Word of God many years in Scotland, he could not well endure the disturbance of the crowds that resorted to him, leaving all that he looked upon as his own, he departed from his native island, and came with a few brothers through the Britons into the province of the English, and preaching the Word there, as has been said, built a famous monastery. When this was duly carried out, he became desirous to rid himself of all business of this world, and even of the monastery itself, and forthwith left the care of it and of its souls, to his brother Fullan, and the priests Gobban and Dicull, and being himself free from all

worldly affairs, resolved to end his life as a hermit. He had another brother called Ultan, who, after a long monastic probation, had also adopted the life of an anchorite. So, seeking him out alone, he lived a whole year with him in self-denial and prayer, and laboured daily with his hands. Afterwards seeing the province thrown into confusion by the irruptions of the pagans, and foreseeing that the monasteries would also be in danger, he left all things in order, and sailed over into Gaul, and being there honourably entertained by Clovis, king of the Franks, or by the patrician Ercinwald, he built a monastery in the place called Latineacum, and falling sick not long after, departed this life. The same Ercinwald, the patrician, took his body, and kept it in the porch of a church he was building in his town of Perrona, till the church itself should be dedicated. This happened twenty-seven days after, and the body being taken from the porch, to be reburied near the altar, was found as whole as if he had died that very hour. And again, four years after, when a more beautiful shrine had been built to receive his body to the east of the altar, it was still found without taint of corruption, and was translated thither with due honour; where it is well known that his merits, through the divine operation, have been declared by many miracles. We have briefly touched upon these matters as well as the incorruption of his body, that the lofty nature of the man may be better known to our readers. All which, as also concerning the comrades of his warfare, whosoever will read it, will find more fully described in the book of his life.”



POINTS FROM CORRESPONDENCE

“I KNOW that priests are not allowed to reveal sins that have been confessed to them. When the person has died, are they allowed to reveal them then? - T.G. by email.

MY, you people do have problems there! What you ask is a little out of my depth, but I will try to help. First of all, the reason why the priest should not reveal the sins heard in confession is, of course, so that people are not embarrassed to

come, thinking that if they do, the whole parish will get to hear what they have done. But I have a feeling that the absolute insistence that he should not reveal sins is probably something taken on later - after all in the early Church confession was public, and perhaps this is more proper as when we sin we injure the whole community and not just ourselves. Also in some monastic communities (not here) the sins of some of the inmates are sometimes told to the others, for their edification, as a warning, - never of course simply as gossip. Having said that, the present practice, and the one we must keep, is that the priest should not tell the sins he hears in confession. I have no idea whether "technically" this prohibition ceases with their death, - I would have thought not, unless for some reason they had been asked by the deceased to do so, and so it would seem to me that your priest did something out of order. However, your problem is how to deal with it. Again I can only give you my thoughts. First of all, bear in mind the "traditional Russian Orthodox" pastime of baiting the priest! So be very careful. I remember, years ago, not in confession, your aunty told me she had been slandered, and to quiet her down, I said "Don't worry about it; think of all the things they say about me." And, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, she snapped back: "That's different, you are the priest!" So, obviously, the priest is just there to be slandered and condemned. Like all of us, he is fallible and has his sins and failings, - our response to that should not be to judge him, condemn him or try and get him into hot water, but to try to help him, support him and pray for him. If there are worries about his conduct in any respect, do not join any campaign against him, and certainly do not sign or get up petitions - that is bringing the ways of a filthy and corrupt political world into the life of the immaculate Church of Christ. How will you answer for that? Rather, speak to him privately about it, and if that does not help, then again in private refer it to the Bishop. But do not discuss it with others - that will generate more heat than light, and the heat will not be from a nice place. You will be led into sin by the people you talk to about it, and you will lead them into sin as well. Hope these thoughts help a little.



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

ADULT BAPTISM AT SAINT EDWARD'S

ON Tuesday, 6th / 19th December, the feast day of Saint Nicolas the Wonderworker, **Dymphna Thompson** of Thame in Oxfordshire was baptised and chrismated at Saint Edward's Church. The celebrant was **Priestmonk Sabbas**, and **Procla Bell** stood as her godmother. Both of Dymphna's parents, **Graham and Carol Thompson** attended the divine services, and Dymphna stayed with the Bells in nearby Ash, so that she could daily attend services here for her eight days of wearing the baptismal garment. During the festal Liturgy on that day at which **Fr Borislav Popov** concelebrated with Fr Sabbas, assisted by **Deacon Ioan Turcu**, the newly-illumined received the Holy Mysteries for the first time. Dymphna is named after the holy **Virgin Martyr Dymphna of Geel**, whose feast day falls on 15th / 28th May. Pray that our new sister in the Faith may contest well, remain faithful and at the last receive the crown of her high calling.

BURIAL AT SAINT EDWARD'S

ON Saturday, 2nd December, **Floredana-Otilia Zongor** of Romford, Essex, was laid to rest in Saint Edward's Cemetery. The funeral service was chanted by the **Priests Constantin Popescu and Adrian Narita** (Patriarchate of Romania), who are both friends of her family. After the interment, the family kindly left the Brotherhood a generous supply of provisions in memory of Floredana. May her rest be with the Saints.

ORTHODOX AID FUND

OUR **Orthodox Aid Fund** this year (2023 n.s.) raised a total of **£15,019.12**, of which **£5,234.56** was donated for

churches and appeals raised by our Church and her Sister Churches, and £4,167.47 for the suffering people in the war-torn Ukraine. The rest was given to a variety of humanitarian, environmental, and local charities to promote their good work. Sadly our total this year was just over £950 less than the amount we raised last year. But our thanks nevertheless to all our parishioners, readers and friends who contributed to our being able to make these gifts. God bless you all and reward you with things eternal for things temporal.

VISITORS

ON Thursday, 21st December, a group of about ten people from the **Woking Ramblers** unexpectedly visited our church and exhibition room and spent some time asking questions.

ON the same day, **Archpriest Joseph Skinner** of the **Russian Orthodox Cathedral in London** at Ennismore Gardens, Knightsbridge, visited Brookwood Cemetery with a number of his parishioners to serve a memorial service for one of their people laid to rest here. After the service at the grave, they came up to visit our church and the exhibition room and to greet us before returning to London.



Practical Tip

MAKE SURE your house is blessed with Theophany Water. In traditionally Orthodox cultures, where the church serves one village or one neighbourhood, after the service there, the priest takes the holy water and walks round the village, entering each house, and sprinkling it with the blessed water while they chant the troparion for the feast. In the situation in which we now live, where people live miles away from the church (and some even choose to move further away), this is impossible, and so we have a short service in each home - after all, having made arrangements for a visit and travelled to get there, it would be rather

churlish just to walk in, round the house and out, and nothing more! For those for whom arranging such visits is impossible, then the head of the household may sprinkle each of the rooms in the house, the outside and the gardens, while chanting the troparion, as it is done with the monthly blessing with the waters blessed at the Lesser Blessing of Waters.



“BRETHREN! In order to believe in our Lord Jesus Christ repentance is needed; in order to remain in this salvific faith, repentance is needed; in order to be successful in it, repentance is needed; in order to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven, repentance is needed. All of this is clearly set forth in the Holy Scripture. Holy Scripture teaches us that ‘God sent His Son into the world ... that the world through Him might be saved,’ that ‘he that believeth on Him is not condemned; but he that believeth not is condemned already.’ ‘That light (Christ) is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved’ (Jn 3:17-20). To those afflicted by the passion of vainglory the Scripture witnesses: ‘How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only?’ (Jn 5:44). Those bound by the passion of greed did not only not believe the Lord, but they even derided Him when He preached to them the important and most holy teaching concerning the remembrance of eternity, and the arranging of earthly matters in accordance to the immortality appointed for man (Luke 16:14). Those attracted to the evil passion of envy did not only not believe in the Lord, but they also conspired to kill Him, and they accomplished this. All those infected with vain and sinful vices, according to the unerring testimony of the Gospel, are cut off from participating in the spiritual wedding of the Son of God, making themselves unworthy of blessed union with Him (Matt. 22:5). ‘Ye cannot serve God and mammon!’ (Luke 16:14); you cannot serve two masters, God and sin! ‘Repent: for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand! Repent, and believe in the Gospel’ (Mark 1:15).

SAINT IGNATIUS (BRIANCHANINOV) OF THE CAUCASUS,

+1867 A.D.