

The Shepherd

*An Orthodox Christian
Pastoral Magazine*

VOLUME XLIV

NUMBER 6

FEBRUARY 2024





FROM THE FATHERS

“EXCESSIVE laughter is a sign of want of moderation and the motion of an unrestrained spirit; but ever to express the feelings of our heart with pleasantness of countenance is not unseemly.”

SAINT BASIL THE GREAT, + 379 A.D.

“BUT tell me, why are you distracting yourself and wasting yourself away with pleasures, who must stand before the dread judgment, and give an account of all things done here?”

SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, + 407 A.D.

“WHEN the demons find...people cheerfully abusing others, indulging in idle and inept talk, laughing at the wrong time, uncontrollably angry or desiring vain and empty glory, they join forces to attack them. Using love of praise in particular as a pretext for their evil schemes, the demons slip into the soul - as through a window at night - and despoil it.”

SAINT DIADOCHUS OF PHOTIKI, C₅TH

“DO NOT listen gleefully to gossip at your neighbour’s expense or chatter to a person who likes finding fault. Otherwise you will fall away from Divine love and find yourself cut off from eternal life.”

VEN. MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR, + 662 A.D.

“IF those are happy who always hunger after the works of righteousness, they on the other hand are counted as unhappy, who pleasing themselves in their own desires (see Luke 6:25), suffer no hunger after the true good.”

VEN. BEDE OF JARROW, + 735 A.D.

“NOTHING is more unsettling than talkativeness and more pernicious than an unbridled tongue, disruptive as it is of the soul’s proper state. For the soul’s chatter destroys what we build each day and scatters what we have laboriously gathered together. What is more disastrous than this ‘uncontrollable evil’ (Jas. 3:8). The tongue has to be restrained, checked by force and muzzled, so to speak, and made to serve only what is useful. Who can describe all the damage that the tongue does to the soul? ... Untimely talk sometimes provokes hatred in those who listen, sometimes - when they note the folly of our words - abuse and derision. Sometimes it defiles our conscience, or else brings upon us God’s condemnation and, worst of all, causes us to offend against the Holy Spirit.”

VEN. PHILOTHEUS OF SINAI, C⁹TH OR 10TH

“BY *corrupt communication* (Eph. 4:29) the Apostle means speech that is rash, frivolous, foolish or inappropriate. We will be judged, not only by our evil deeds, but by our speech as well. As the Lord Himself told us: *Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give good account thereof in the day of judgment* (Matt. 12:36).”

SAINT THEOPHYLACT OF OCHRID, + 1107 A.D.

“LET us forsake verbose and idle talk and vain company, because these things drive away repentance, according to St Isaac: ‘Repentance joined with conversations is a shattered vessel.’”

VEN. NICODEMUS OF THE HOLY
MOUNTAIN, + 1809 A.D.

On Idle Talk and Gossip

I SAY unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.

(Matt. 12:36)

YOU COMPLAIN, Sister, about the trials which are overtaking you, which are arising, according to your words, from certain misunderstandings, suspicion, and indiscretion in conversations. The last, I think, is the effective and chief cause of all your trials and the source of all the evil. On this subject I want to write you a few words about the harm arising from the idle talk and gossip so common among you. This is something you yourself don't even notice; you speak too much, without discerning whether it is necessary or unnecessary, profitable or harmful, provided only that something is spoken. It is as if you are afraid of silence, which in fact is a nun's first obligation,^{***} the chief condition of her success and the adornment of her whole life.

Deeply rooted in people is the love of idle talk, i.e., empty, unnecessary conversations, and it has become a beloved pastime among them. It seems we don't know and don't believe that idle talk is a sin, and a serious sin, which gives birth to a multitude of other sins: quarrels, conflicts, gossip, slander, condemnation, calumny, and the like. Indeed, all the various confusions which fill human life to overflowing, all the disturbances of the inner quiet of the soul, have as their source this same idle talk, which has crept into all of everyday life, as though it were its indispensable property and requirement. If any sin or any passion knows how to clothe itself in an attractive form, it is precisely idle talk.

It begins under the pretext of conversing, of discussing some business, but then we proceed imperceptibly to an altogether unnecessary, empty, and sinful conversation. Like a deeply-

^{***} This was evidently written to a nun, but it applies equally to lay people - remember Saint John of the Ladder's words: *"Angels are a light for monks, and the monastic life is a light for all men."*

rooted infection, this sickness does not easily submit to healing. It has penetrated all layers of social and private life; it is active in people of every age and gender, every class and social position, and has not even spared monasteries.

One deeply thinking pastor, contemporary to us, writes the following on idle talk, among other things: “How heedlessly, how carelessly we use our words, which should be highly valued as a great gift from God! But on the contrary, what do we least esteem, if not the spoken word? In what are we fickle, if not in the spoken word? What do we throw out every minute, as though it were dirt, if not the spoken word? O Christian! Value your words, be attentive to them!”

In our words, which we regard so carelessly, so thoughtlessly, will be either our justification or condemnation, as our Lord Jesus Christ Himself says: *By thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned* (Matt. 12:37); *I say unto you, that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment* (Matt. 12:36). If even one idle, i.e., empty, unnecessary word will be subject to accounting in the day of judgment, then to what condemnation and punishment will we be subject, who talk idly continually and constantly, restrained neither by place nor time, nor by the presence of outsiders, who, perhaps even against their will, we make participants in our empty conversations, and in such a manner draw them into sin. So, drawing them into sin, we are subject to a double condemnation - both for idle talk and for being a cause of temptation, for *woe*, it is said, *to that man by whom the offence cometh* (Matt. 18:7). We don't think about this, we don't take care at all! We misuse our natural faculty of speech, which was given to us for this purpose above all: that we might praise our Creator, thank and glorify Him with words, as is proper to a rational creature. Even mute nature glorifies Him with its grandeur and harmony, not deviating in the least from the laws appointed to it by the Creator: *The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament proclaimeth the work of His hands* (Ps. 18:1).

The gift of speech was also given to us that we might under-

stand one another, not through instinct, like the dumb animals, but through intellect. Thus we verbally express our ideas, which are abundantly and clearly opened to us by our God-enlightened mind, the source of thought and word, in order that we might conduct intelligent, mutual, brotherly conversation on the aim of daily life and its regulation, for mutual edification and benefit, in support and consolation of each other, and the like. It was not given to us that we might talk idly; or judge, slander, and condemn our neighbours, pronouncing judgments on them like unmerciful judges and torturers rather than considering ourselves as their brothers, weak and sinful as they, if not still worse. *Thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest, says the Apostle, for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things. And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God? (Rom. 2:1,3). He that judgeth his brother, says another Apostle, judgeth the law; but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge (James 4:11).* And what great evil results from empty and idle conversations and gossip! Sometimes one heedlessly spoken word causes a whole storm of unpleasantness and fills the heart of the one referred to with indignation and hatred. So even a word that was not ill-intentioned, one we counted as nothing, can strike a mortal sin, just as a small spark often turns into a great fire burning whole villages. *How great a matter a little fire kindleth, says the Apostle James. Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things (cf. James 3:5); it is a fire, a world of iniquity: ...it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell (James 3:6). The tongue is an untameable evil, full of deadly poison. Therewith bless we God and therewith curse we men, which are after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be! Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter? (James 3:8-11). Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge ... let him show this out of his works, through good conduct, and not by condemning others. But if ye have bitter*

envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth (i.e., don't consider yourself wise). This is not the wisdom that descends from above, but is earthly ... devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work (cf. James 3:13-16). Behold the harm from all our idle talk and gossip! And if they are improper to Christians in general, are they not even less pardonable for nuns, who have voluntarily renounced the world with all its worldly sinful ways, who have retired within their monastic gates for a more unhindered attention to their salvation? The enemy of everyone's salvation, knowing the infirmity of men, who notwithstanding their readiness towards a life of pleasing God, are ever inclined to seek indulgences and consolations, is not slow even here to sow his tares amid the wheat of God. You nuns by your departure from the world have also left all its consolations and pleasures permitted to lay people.

The only true consolation for you should consist in your close fellowship and heart to heart talks. Your superiors, as wise and kind guides, don't restrain you, don't forbid you these innocent consolations: you are permitted to visit one another, to go for walks together in your free time, and when you gather for common monastery obediences, you may converse with one another unhindered. But you abuse this liberty, you derive from it not profit and true spiritual consolation, but the opposite: harm, quarrels, gossip, and discord, which like a spark kindles a great fire, which burns away all your monastic labours and struggles. In such a manner you lose your salvation. Or do you not know the apostolic saying: *Every one of us shall give account of himself to God (Rom. 14:12), Who is ready to judge (1 Ptr 4:5)?* Oh, if only you would gather together, like the ancient nuns, for spiritual edification and mutual instruction, you would not converse about irrelevant things and affairs which don't concern you, but only about this, how each of you will work out your own salvation (Phil. 2:12): what sort of cell rule to have and how to perform it, what struggles to undertake. Thus you would edify and support one another on your slippery path, stretching out a helping hand to each other, and the words of the all-wise Solomon would be realised in you: *A brother helped by a*

brother is as a strong city (Prov. 18:19). And your assembly would be like the assembly of the angels, who in spite of their great multitude have one common holy will, one striving - how to fulfil the will of the Creator.

O Sister, not for nothing is our monastic order called the angelic order! ... Surely each of us who has gathered in the holy monastery in the name of the Lord has one and the same will, one striving common to us all: how he may please the Lord (1 Cor. 7:32). We have no earthly fetters binding us to the world, there are no anxieties and worldly cares to entangle our wings and hinder our flight to our Heavenly Bridegroom! We are free, like the birds of the air, *which sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; but our heavenly Father feedeth us* (cf. Matt. 6:26). Let us then remember our angelic calling, and walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:1-3), as the holy Apostle teaches.

Abbess Thaisia of Leushino

From Letters to a Beginner: On Giving One's Life to God

(Platina, CA: St. Xenia Skete Press, 1993)



A Lenten Commentary on Humour, Laughter, and Frivolity

ARCHBISHOP CHRYSOSTOMOS OF ETNA

IT SEEMS to me that now, as we begin the journey through the Great Fast towards Holy Pascha, may be an appropriate time to comment on something about which many of you have asked me: the delicate question of the positive nature of humour and laughter and their negative transformation into frivolity.

Let me begin by saying that I am very fond of humour and believe that wholesome laughter is spiritually, psychologically, and even physically healthy. I am, indeed, personally uncomfortable around individuals who lack a sense of humour and who do not laugh. One might respond, with regard to my statement, that many ascetics and holy people have argued that humour and laughter detract one from spiritual sobriety and opine that Christ, the Archetype of the perfected man, never laughed, there being no evidence in Scripture of His having had a sense of humour.

I would respond to this, not by saying that we humans are imperfect or that we should not imitate Christ in our spiritual lives; that would be foolish. We certainly should aspire to perfection in Christ and, of course, emulate His actions, whether we be monastics, clergymen, or lay people. Rather, I would say, first, that we are not Biblical literalists. Simply because some trait or quality in Jesus Christ is not mentioned in Scripture does not mean that it was absent in Him. Unless it is a trait incompatible with His Theanthropic Nature, as Perfect Man and Perfect God, we cannot dismiss qualities in, and behaviours of, Christ simply because we do not read about them in the New Testament. I would also suggest that a sense of humour and laughter are not inherently evil or inconsistent with the Christian view of perfection in Christ. After all, we know of Saints and holy men and women in our own days who were given to refined and delightful humour, and the holy Fools-for-Christ have often used humour to make known their hidden wisdom.

Secondly, with regard to the witness of ascetics, they constitute a class of remarkable and special individuals, called by Christ and gifted with special Grace, who serve to set the standard of Christian *praxis* and who, by virtue of the Grace dwelling in them, take solace in Divine comforts and rise above the weaknesses-even the more innocent weaknesses-that mark the majority of us Christians. As well, they see Christ in a higher and more exalted way than we, and are drawn into His Presence, as it were, in a manner that transcends our trifling encounters with Christ. If they opine that Christ never smiled or

laughed, or that He did not have a sense of humour, this rises out of the purity of their vision. And while I would not dispute the words of such holy personages, their individual views do not have definitive or dogmatic authority, with regard to Christ as He dwelled on earth; nor, in respecting their words, are we obliged to condemn laughter and humour on this account.

Thus it is that St John Chrysostom, in one of his homilies on Hebrews, [2] while doubting that Christ could have laughed during his earthly life, nonetheless tells us that laughter is not evil or harmful (*"ou kakon ho gelos"*). Indeed, he points out that laughter has been implanted in us (*"enkeitai en hemin"*) by God, so that we might with a smile comfort those who are despondent or afraid (*"anomen autous to meidiamati"*). Further, he tells us that laughter has been so implanted in us that the soul might thereby be given respite at times (*"hula anetai pote he psyche"*). In other words, laughter can comfort the suffering and can soothe our own souls. However, such is true only when our laughter is not immoderate (*"para metron"*) or untimely (*"akairon"*), the Divine Chrysostom tells us, and when we avoid breaking out in uproarious laughter (*"anakanchazomen"*) or laughing endlessly (*"aei gelomen"*) or frivolously.

Here then, Saint John the Golden-Mouthed brings us to a crucial distinction between laughter and humour that, as we have observed, can comfort us and others and frivolity - characterised by immoderation out of season - which he tells us to control (*"kratoumen autes"*). As healthy as humour and laughter in moderation are for us spiritually (when we use them to comfort the distressed), psychologically (as they give respite and comfort to our souls), and physically (since health in the soul promotes health in the body), frivolity, witless laughter, cackling, and the indulgence of humour at the cost of spiritual sobriety are not salutary things. When we look upon the Saints and holy men and women of our day who had a good sense of humour and enjoyed refined comedy, the one thing that characterises them, above all else, is their corresponding lack of frivolity and silliness. In keeping with Saint Paul's description of the proper Christian, they are "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing."

Witless laughter and the frivolity and humour that it spawns, the Divine Chrysostom tells us, lead to such a deranged state (“*paraplexia*”) that those who fall to it cannot even be rebuked for their humour. They find even chastisement for their senselessness something humorous. So insidious in his day, Saint John tells us, was this silly and fruitless laughter that even in prayer people would cultivate laughter. He observes that daily affairs and polite exchanges were infused with silly laughter. [3] Indeed, as he says in another of his homilies on Hebrews, [4] so mad had people become, that they would laugh at things about which they should actually have sighed (“*stenein*”). Of such laughter, he reminds us, Christ Himself spoke with this fearful warning: “Woe to them that laugh, for they shall weep” (Luke 6:25).

If all that the Divine Chrysostom tells us about people, in his times, who exceeded the boundaries of healthful humour and laughter seems hyperbolic, I would ask you to attend to the nature of private and public discourse in our day. I constantly hear telephone conversations in which every comment, whether humorous or not, is either introduced or brought to a close with meaningless laughter and cackling. Face-to-face conversations are likewise peppered with completely inappropriate laughter. And even in instances where humour might properly provoke laughter, the latter is so drawn-out and witless, with long guffaws and cackles, that it obviates further intelligent discourse. Without our noticing it, frivolity has become so much a part of our modern society that people do not respond to serious matters or serious discussions in a mature way. They have become like children on the playground who speak and act in childish ways. [I wonder if he had heard a recording of our people during the buffet style breakfast here on a Sunday! - Ed.]

I listened, recently, to an interview (recorded from the Public Broadcasting System) by the “chat host” Charlie Rose with Jeff Bezos, CEO and founder of the immensely successful company, Amazon.com. This individual is an exceedingly gifted and bright individual, as well as a potential source of sound and productive advice in a world facing one of the worst economic

meltdowns in history. I was dismayed that, in the style of the contemporary interlocution that I have described, throughout this interview, even when discussing important and interesting economic or scientific issues, Mr Bezos would break into almost uncontrolled laughter, to which his interviewer would respond with equally inordinate laughter. Thus, otherwise cogent observations took on the character of flummery and babble.

What Saint John Chrysostom said to Christians in his own day applies, then, to our era, when we are surrounded by the superficialities of a society that cannot respond to the greater issues or ills of human life with instructive or palliative humour. We have placed humour, laughter, and comedy outside the realm of moderation and circumspection, depriving ourselves of a wonderful part of human discourse by abusing it. It behooves us, therefore, almost sixteen centuries after he chastised our Christian forebears, to apply Saint John's chastisements to ourselves and to take care that we do not squander the riches of our Faith on foolishness in the name of humour, allowing giddy, imbecilic behaviour to discredit and despoil our witness to our fellow man and to the world. Following the admonition of Scripture, too, let us be "sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience" (Titus 2:2), as we appropriately "rejoice with joy unspeakable" (1 Peter 1:8).

Endnotes:

1. This commentary was written by Archbishop Chrysostomos of Etna and distributed to the clergy and faithful of the American Exarchate of our Church at the beginning of Lent, 2009.
2. See "Homily XV," *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. LXIII, cols. 12 1-122.
3. "Homily XV," *op. cit.*
4. See, "Homily XXIII," *PG.*, Vol. LXIII, col. 164.

From Orthodox Tradition, Vol. xxvi, No. 2 (2009).



“THE righteous have no sorrows that are not turned into joy,
as sinners have no joy that is not turned into sorrow.”

SAINT DIMITRI OF ROSTOV, +1709 A.D.

THE COMING MONTH

FEBRUARY opens with the **Great Feast of the Meeting of the Lord in the Temple** (2nd / 15th), which celebrates the event recorded in St Luke's Gospel (2:22-40). Thus, this feast, falling here about midway between Christmas and Great Week, both completes the Gospel sequences about the infancy of our Saviour in His incarnate dispensation, and anticipates His Passion. It also beautifully points out to us the great love for Him of His all-holy Mother. Speaking of these mysteries a work attributed to the holy Hieromartyr Methodius of Olympus declares: "For if to the ark, which was the image and type of thy sanctity, such honour was paid of God that to no one but to the priestly order only was the access to it open, or ingress allowed to behold it, the veil separating it off, and keeping the vestibule as that of a queen, what, and what sort of veneration is due to thee from us who are of creation the least, to thee who art indeed a queen; to thee, the living ark of God, the Lawgiver; to thee, the heaven that contains Him who can be contained of none? For since thou, O holy virgin, hast dawned as a bright day upon the world, and hast brought forth the Sun of Righteousness, that hateful horror of darkness has been chased away; the power of the tyrant has been broken, death hath been destroyed, hell swallowed up, and all enmity dissolved before the face of peace; noxious diseases depart now that salvation looks forth; and the whole universe has been filled with the pure and clear light of truth. To which things Solomon alludes in the Book of Canticles, and begins thus: 'My beloved is mine, and I am his; he feedeth among the lilies until the day break, and the shadows flee away' (Cant 2:16,17). Since then, the God of gods hath appeared in Sion, and the splendour of His beauty hath appeared in Jerusalem; and 'a light has sprung up for the righteous, and joy for those who are true of heart.'"

Among the Saints celebrated in February, we have: Our **Venerable Father Isidore of Pelusium** (4th / 17th) who lived during the fourth and fifth centuries. He was a native of Alexandria, and was raised among pious Christians. He was a

kinsman of Theophilus, Archbishop of Alexandria, and of his successor, Saint Cyril. While still a youth he quit the world and withdrew to Mount Pelusium, which became the site of his monastic efforts. Saint Isidore's spiritual wisdom and strict asceticism, combined with his broad learning and innate knowledge of the human soul, enabled him to win the respect and love of his fellow monks in a short time. They chose him as their head and had him ordained a priest. (The earliest sources for his life, however, say nothing of him being an abbot). Following the example of Saint John Chrysostom, whom he had managed to see and hear during a trip to Constantinople, Isidore devoted himself primarily to preaching, that "practical wisdom" which, in his own words, is both "the foundation of the edifice and the edifice itself," while logic is "its embellishment, and contemplation its crown." He was a teacher and willingly provided counsel for anyone who turned to him for spiritual encouragement, whether it was a simple man, a dignitary, a bishop, the Patriarch of Alexandria, or even the Emperor. A large portion of his letters reveal profound theological thought and contain morally edifying interpretations of Holy Scripture. St Photius (February 6) calls Isidore a model of priestly and ascetic life, and also a master of style. His love for Saint John Chrysostom resulted in his supporting him when he was persecuted by the Empress Eudoxia and Archbishop Theophilus. After the death of Saint John, Isidore persuaded Theophilus' successor Saint Cyril to inscribe the name of Saint John in the Church diptychs as a confessor. Through the initiative of Saint Isidore the Third Ecumenical Council was convened at Ephesus, at which the false teaching of Nestorius concerning the person of Jesus Christ was condemned. Isidore lived into old age and died around the year 436. The Church historian Evagrius (sixth century) writes of Saint Isidore, "his life seemed to everyone the life of an angel upon the earth." Another historian, Nicephorus Callistus (ninth century), praises him thus, "He was a vital and inspired pillar of monastic rules and divine vision, and as such he presented a very lofty image of most fervent example and spiritual teaching." Saint Isidore wrote many epistles, even to Emperors and those in authority, summoning them to be mind-

ful of their duties. He commented on many books of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. He shredded Jewish arguments and errors of interpretation. The gifts of the Holy Spirit were abundantly present in him. The practical philosophy of the disciples of Christ he upheld. He advocated withdrawal from the world, voluntary poverty, and abstinence. He felt that the soul could not discern God in the bustle of everyday life; only in the utmost emancipation from worldly wants could the soul approach divine freedom. He believed, however, that asceticism and flight from the world did not alone suffice: the garland of the virtues must be woven into the monastic conduct. Although our holy father had retired from the world, still he participated in the current needs and perils of the Orthodox. He did not fail in his duty to support and exhort the flock, wherever he could reach with his written words. Father Isidore, the ascetic and writer, wrote more than three thousand commentaries on theology, dogma, philosophy, Sacred Scripture, and monasticism. He also was not timid to put in writing the specific abuses of each of the clerical ranks. He was instrumental in bringing forth reforms in the Church. He was revered by his contemporaries as a standard of spiritual perfection. Hierarchs, including Patriarch Cyril of Alexandria, his kinsman, esteemed him as their father. We have two thousand and twelve of his letters, which reveal the godly Isidore to be a vessel of the Spirit and of great theological learning. According to the statements of Nicephorus the historian, Saint Isidore wrote more than 10,000 letters to various individuals in which he reproached some, counselled some, and comforted and instructed others. In one letter Saint Isidore writes: "It is more important to teach by a life of doing good than to preach in eloquent terms." In another, he says: "If one desires that his virtues appear great, let him consider them small and they will surely manifest themselves as great." The first and basic rule for Isidore was this: "First do, then teach according to the example of our Lord Jesus." His writings are in such eloquent Greek that some enthusiasts wished to have his writings replace the classics in the study of the Greek language. Saint Photius the Great also commends Isidore's style and erudition. Despite all the acclaim

and reverence that surrounded him during his lifetime, he maintained his prudence and humility. Most of Isidore's writings were collected at the Monastery of the Akoimetoι or Unsleping Ones at Constantinople. Father Isidore also wrote to Patriarch Cyril regarding the hypostatic union, and warned him against contemporary tendencies toward Monophysitism. His epistles were also translated into Church Slavonic. In 433, following the condemnation of Nestorius at the Ephesian Synod, Father Isidore noted a sharp manner in Cyril's talks with John, Patriarch of Antioch. Isidore counselled his kinsman to make reasonable allowances for the sake of peace in the Church: "As your father," he wrote, "since you are pleased to address me with this name, or rather as your son, I adjure you to halt the dissension, lest there should result a lasting schism under the pretext of piety." In his epistles - mostly brief notes, but frequently of great length - it is evident that he was a highly esteemed spiritual counsellor, thoroughly enlightened by God. He manifested himself a shepherd of souls and a teacher versed in Scripture.

The **Right-believing Princess Anna of Novgorod** (10th / 23rd), who before becoming a nun was called Ingegerd, was the eldest daughter of the Swedish king, Olaf Shotkonung, and Estrid of the Obotrites. In 1008, the king, his family and retainers received Holy Baptism. Ingegerd received an exceptional education for a woman of that time: she studied Scripture, literature, and history. She was a true daughter of the Scandinavian Viking Age and therefore from an early age enjoyed great freedom, participated in the public life of her homeland, travelled, received guests, and had a good command of weapons. Historical sources especially note her intelligence, courage, and great influence on others. King Olaf subsequently arranged for the marriage of Princess Ingegerd to the powerful Grand Prince Yaroslav I the Wise of Novgorod with whom Sweden had a flourishing trading relationship. The marriage took place in 1019. Once in Kiev, Ingegerd had her name changed to the Greek name Irene. According to several sagas, she received as a marriage gift Ladoga and adjacent lands, which later became known as Ingria, probably a corruption of

Ingegerd's name. She arranged for her father's cousin, jarl Ragnvald Ulfsson, to rule in her stead. Irene and Yaroslav had six sons and four daughters; three of the latter becoming Queens of France, Hungary, and Norway. The whole family is depicted in one of the frescoes of the Cathedral of Saint Sophia in Kiev. Irene had a great influence on and good relations with the northern countries of Europe. She sheltered in Kiev the exiled sons of the English king Edmund, Edwin and Edward, as well as Prince Magnus of Norway. The latter did not return to his homeland until the Grand Duchess was convinced that the Norwegians would give him his father's throne and respect his rights. The Russian state at that time played a significant role in the life of Europe, its authority and influence were more than ever before, and the great merit of the Grand Duchess was a crucial factor in this. King Yaroslav decided to establish Kiev as the capital and make it into a city of God, an earthly reflection of the Heavenly Jerusalem. Irene initiated the building of Saint Sophia's Cathedral in Kiev (foundation laid in 1037) to be the centre of the capital. Hilarion, Metropolitan of Kiev, wrote in his famous "Words of Law and Grace," addressing the already deceased Saint Vladimir the Enlightener of Russia: "Look at your daughter-in-law Irene, look at your grandchildren and great-grandchildren, how they live, how God keeps them, how they keep the faith that you bequeathed to them, how they praise the name of Christ!" It is known that the Grand Duchess founded a monastery in Kiev in the name of her patroness - the Holy Great Martyr Irene and, according to the custom of that time, had to not only take care of it, but also manage it. In 1045, she went to Novgorod with her son Vladimir to initiate the construction of the Cathedral of Saint Sophia there. In Novgorod, Grand Duchess Irene received the monastic tonsure with the name Anna. This was the first tonsure in a grand ducal house; it began the tradition of tonsuring Russian princes and princesses after they had performed the duty of the rulers of the people. Here, in Novgorod, the Holy Princess Anna died on 10th February, 1051 and was laid to rest in Saint Sophia Cathedral. Soon next to her, the body of her son, Prince Vladimir of Novgorod, also rested. The Holy Princess Anna and her son Vladimir were glorified

through the ministry of Archbishop Euthymius of Novgorod in 1439.

The **Holy New Martyr George** (11th / 24th) was born in 1497 in Kratovo of Serbia. His parents were Demetrius and Sarah. Young George received a fine upbringing, he attentively studied the Holy Scriptures, and he was pious and chaste. His father died when he was ten, so he had to support his family by taking on the trade of a goldsmith. Being a handsome young boy, in order to avoid being abducted, molested and indoctrinated by the Turks, he fled with his mother's approval to Sofia in Bulgaria when he was twelve. There he lived with a devout priest named Peter. Under Father Peter the young George continued his education and worked at his craft as a goldsmith. Certain Muslims took notice of him and desired to convert him to Islam. A certain knowledgeable Muslim one day went to George to persuade him to convert, but as a pretext he went with enough gold to commission from George a piece of jewellery. He received a considerable sum for this work, including food and a large tip in order to win George's affection. The money George received he put aside for his mother. However, the Muslim scholar remained in the shop and began a religious dialogue with George. Little did the Islamic scholar know that George at eighteen years old was well versed in both the teachings of his own Orthodox Christian faith as well as that of his Muslim neighbours. As they talked, George showed the Muslim how what he offered were temporary pleasures, riches and glory in this world, but what he sought was to live a virtuous life on this earth in order to live eternally with Christ. He thus put the Muslim to shame and left him dumbfounded. Instead of conceding, the Muslim sought vengeance. He therefore gathered some friends and accused George before the judge in Sofia. He was accused of blaspheming and mocking the Muslim religion and disdaining the authority of the Sultan. To get George to appear before the judge, the Muslim scholar told him that he had found employment for George through the judge who sought to commission certain ornaments for his house. When the young and innocent George who merely sought to support his family appeared before the judge to render his services, the

judge said that he will give him the work only if he first became a Muslim. Filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, the young George again began to refute all the arguments of the Muslims, and remained steadfast in his Orthodox Christian faith. The judge and those with him became enraged by George, and ordered him to be imprisoned. As he was being led to prison, he was mocked and kicked and beaten by the Muslims on the way. Father Peter saw this and sought George's release. The prison guard, who was acquainted with Father Peter, merely allowed them to meet and talk. Their conversation was one of encouragement for the young George, who was certain to die for his faith. Father Peter encouraged him to remain faithful and strong till the end, and endure for a short moment the pain in order to gain eternal rest and reward. A few days passed in which George was continuously urged to convert or die, but he remained steadfast and put the Muslims to shame. Never had George been at the centre of such unbridled hatred. The mob wanted to tear him to pieces, but the judge held them back. Seeing that George would not convert, the judge finally asked the mob what should be done with him. They replied that he should be consumed by fire and his ashes scattered to the wind. The judge thought the judgment harsh, but eventually left it to the crowd. The crowd therefore tied George's hands behind his back, put a chain around his neck and dragged him to the marketplace. An Islamic herald then called for the faithful Muslims to gather and bring wood for the burning. The wood was gathered by the multitude and they brought George to the Church of Hagia Sophia in Sofia. Father Peter followed him and encouraged him to endure and remain faithful to the end, and George asked for his prayers that God would strengthen him. Some Muslims overheard them speaking, and they dragged Father Peter away. However, there was a certain Crypto-Christian who appeared like a Muslim that Father Peter knew, and Father Peter asked him to get as close as possible to overhear anything that George said and what was said to him, and to report it back to him. The crowd piled the wood and lit a great fire. The Muslims dragged George to the fire, and after his flesh burned for a bit, they would take him away, mocking him

and wanting to torture him, but George assured them that he neither feared this fire nor the eternal fire of hell. The fire eventually burned the rope that bound his hands, which allowed George to raise his hands in prayer, do his cross, and surrender his spirit to the Lord. Suddenly a Muslim hit George over the head with a piece of wood, and immediately killed him. A cloud then came over the fire and released a heavy rain to put out the flames. This took place on 11th February, 1515 on Meatfare Sunday. Father Peter then gathered the Christians and they took the body of George to bury him. However, the Muslim mob was not satisfied. They wanted the body of George to be consumed in flames. They therefore proceeded to build another fire greater than the first. The body of the martyr was then cast into the flames, but no matter what they tried, the body would not be consumed. The guards then took the carcasses of animals and threw them into the flames, so the Christians could not distinguish between the bones of George and those of the animals. The body of the martyr however continued to remain sound and intact. The guards informed the Christians to go home and allow the body to burn for a whole day. While the Christians went home, one Christian informed them that he would stay and try to take the body and bring it to the house of the priest. Somehow he was able through a clever operation to take the body and he brought it to the Cathedral of Holy Great Martyr George. The priest then received permission from the judge, who now looked on George as a saint, to bury the body. On 26th May, 1515, the holy relics of Saint George were removed from the grave, placed in a coffin, and then brought into the Church of Saint Marina with due honour. The life of Saint George was eventually written by Father Peter between 1515 and 1523. The work was published by the Serbian intellectual Stojan Novaković in 1867, transcribed from a manuscript held in the National Library of Serbia in Belgrade. Milan Milićević wrote a work on George in 1885. In Bulgaria, where he is known as Saint George the New of Sofia, he became especially honoured during the Bulgarian National Revival, after Paisius of Hilandar included him in the list of Bulgarian saints, in his *Istoriya Slavyanobolgarskaya* (1762). In 1855 Nikola Karastoyanov

from Samokov printed the Life of Saint George the New, based on a manuscript kept in the metropolitan library of Sofia. Saint George of Kratovo is celebrated on 11th February and 26th May.



POINTS FROM CORRESPONDENCE

*“WE were wondering if you are going to bless us to do the three days fast at the beginning of Clean Week of which Metropolitan Demetrius was talking in his latest video.” P.M.,
By email.*

WELL, I am the last person to ask even at the monastery in the USA, I could hardly ever manage it as I got dreadful headaches. When I was there we had a Greek lay woman who used to come to church; she was a hairdresser (quite a tiring job, I would think), she had two boys who were just about to enter their teens (this was in the 1970's when mothers gave their children Bovril and so they had sense - unlike more modern children, - and they were terrors) and she had two girls about six years younger than the boys who made the boys look like Angels of light and goodness; her husband was Greek but anti-church, and if you saw her you would never have guessed she had ever entered a church - she looked like a barmaid from a soap opera, blonded hair piled high - but she would come every day in Great Lent, make prostrations more vigorously than we monks could and she ate only once on Wednesdays after the Pre-sanctified and on Saturdays and Sundays all through Great Lent, but I suspect that there is a cultural element... if she had been trained to do that since she was five, then I suppose in that respect it was easier for her. So if you take this plan up be aware of that, if you have not been trained to do it. If you feel really ill stop. At that monastery the monks tried to keep it, but everyday food was put out for anyone, like me, who could not manage - perhaps do the same. Ask when you go to confession. Pray, try as hard as you can, but do not get ill.



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

BAPTISM AT SAINT EDWARD'S

ON Saturday 7th / 20th January, the Synaxis of Saint John the Baptist, **Joanna**, the infant daughter of **Stefanos and Aspasia Deskas of Basingstoke**, was baptised and chrismated at Saint Edward's Church. The celebrant was **Archimandrite Daniel**, and **Sofia Popova** stood as her godmother. Joanna's grandparents also attended the Mysterion, having come over from Greece to do so. After the service refreshments were offered to all those who participated in the mortuary hall, and on the next day, the Sunday, **Joanna** was brought up to receive the Holy Mysteries for the first time at the Divine Liturgy. May the newly-illuminated Joanna, under the guidance of her godmother and parents, be instructed in the Orthodox Faith and in piety, and remain steadfast therein until the end of her days. *Many Years!*

NEW CATECHUMEN

ON the Sunday of the Genealogy, 18th / 31st December, **Theresa Harvey** made her vows as a catechumen at the end of the Divine Liturgy, and was renamed **Ann**, in honour of the holy and just ancestress of God, Ann, the mother of the All-holy Theotokos. The **Priestmonk Sabbas** received her into the catechumenate. Please keep her in your prayers that she may receive instruction and be guided to come to Holy Baptism.

CELEBRATION OF THE GREAT FEASTS

THIS YEAR, **Christmas Day** fell on a Sunday, and for the services on both the eve of the Great Feast and the day itself

the church was full. The Vigil service was led by **Archimandrite Daniel** assisted by **Deacon Ioan**, and for the festal Liturgy on Christmas Day they were joined by **Priestmonk Sabbas** and **Fr Borislav Popov**. After the Gospel reading, instead of the usual sermon, Fr Daniel read the **Nativity Message** issued by our Synod of Bishops. This year the Lord Pirbright Hall had been already booked when we applied, and so the Festal Breakfast was held in the Brookwood Memorial Hall, in which we had rather less room, but it sufficed. During it Alex and Ecaterina Spiroglou led their Sunday School children in singing carols, and they put on a short play. Some then returned to the brotherhood for the short Vespers service in the late afternoon. The second day of the feast, the Synaxis of the all-holy Mother of God, thus fell on a Monday, but nonetheless was very well attended and at the parish breakfast afterwards a beautiful choir of Romanian children sang carols in English and Romanian for us, all sung by heart. The deacon then sang a translation of a traditional Romanian carol.

On the eve of the **Theophany**, 5th/18th January, while Fr Sabbas did the proskomidi, Frs Daniel and Ioan served the Royal Hours, and they all celebrated the Vespers Divine Liturgy together. Then Fr Sabbas did the Great Blessing of the Waters which is held in church. On the day of the feast, they were again joined by Fr Borislav, and after the festal Liturgy, everyone made their way to Chertsey, to the home of **Robin and Mary Haigh**, who in their customary and extraordinary hospitality had again invited us to use the riverside site of their home to bless the waters in the **Abbey River** which flows into the Thames. After the ceremonies the Haighs, assisted by some of our parishioners, prepared refreshments for the participants which were shared in the medieval barn which stands on their property, and which belonged to the medieval abbey which was built upon the site of the earlier Anglo-Saxon and Orthodox one.

BURIAL IN SAINT EDWARD'S CEMETERY

ON Tuesday, 3rd/16th January, **John Namu-Fetha** was laid to rest in the Orthodox cemetery within our property. The

funeral had been held earlier in the day at the **Russian Orthodox Cathedral of the Dormition, Ennismore Gardens, London**, and led, as was the interment, by **Archpriest Maxim Nikolsky**. May the reposed find mercy and may his loved ones be comforted in their bereavement.

NEW ICONS DONATED TO THE CHURCH

TWO hand-painted icons have been given to our church by **Alexandra Galbeaza**. They were painted in Romania by nuns and are of our **Holy Father Hosius of Cordova** (feast day 27th August / 9th September) and of the **Seven Sleepers of Ephesus** (feasts: 4th / 17th August & 22nd October / 4th November).

COLLECTION FOR THE MISSION IN KENYA

ON 13th January (n.s.) we sent round an appeal, composed, rather floridly but apparently effectively, by Deacon Ioan, for our **Metropolitan Ambrose's mission in Kenya**. To date (23rd January), that is within ten days, we have managed to raise and send £2,900 to the Metropolitan, and we have a little more left over which we will hold for a while in case there are other late donors. God bless you all for responding so readily and generously.



Practical Tip

ONE of the nicer things about Sunday and Great Feast-day Liturgies, is that the younger people appear to join in in reciting the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, and sometimes quietly they follow along with the chanting. On weekdays our congregation is understandably made up of the older people, and they do not appear to have the voice for that. Yet, paradoxically within seconds of their leaving church at the end of the Liturgy, even those of us still in the altar at the far end of the church from the door, can hear they do have strong voices; laughter, cackling,

guffawing break out almost immediately. I will not mention the hullabaloo at the buffet breakfasts when more than about seven people attend. As quiet is an essential part of our spiritual life and particularly necessary as we approach the season of repentance, we have dedicated the greater part of this issue to the Church's teaching on being quiet and still, a teaching which reaches back to Old Testament times - *Be still, and know that I am God* (Ps. 45:10), and still is essential today. Make it part of your life.



Mrs Vasiliki

VASILIKI is another amazing model of patience. She came to the Convent as a pilgrim to venerate the Panagia. She was microscopic, hunched and reduced to mere skin and bones. She was courageous just like the small boats tossed about by the sea, yet, unbeaten by time and hardships. Her eyes which were half-faded from cataracts and seemed to behold another sight, more acute and distant. This little old lady had attended the Divine Liturgy on the Sunday of the Myrrh-bearing Women. After the Holy Liturgy she opened up her soul and the treasures of her heart poured out. She said: "I have lived a life of martyrdom, but I thank the Lord! I was an orphan, my uncle married me off and gave me a Golgotha! A whole life of beatings and disdain. This is my son who is mentally disabled." She showed a man with white hair in a wheel chair. "Pray for him. He will put me up, into the Kingdom of God!" A nun asked her: "Grandmother, what can we do to be saved, to win the Kingdom of God?" "In the desert, my child!" she said. "What is the desert, grandmother?" "To see and not see, to hear and not hear, and to keep silent." All marvelled at her. Only a Holy Father from the Philokalia like Saint Macarius the Egyptian would be able to speak such words. She ended by saying: "We mustn't lose the Kingdom of Christ, His Kingdom. He must pull us up to be saved!"

A piece kindly sent us from the Holy Angels' Convent, Afidnai, Greece