

# *The Shepherd*

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## FROM THE FATHERS

“IF, according to the example of Abraham and Job, we think that we are earth and ashes, then we shall never be robbed, but we will always have something to give to others: not gold and silver, but an example of humility, patience, and love toward God. May there be glory to Him forever. Amen.”

VEN. BARSANUPIUS THE GREAT, 6TH CENTURY

“IN the mercy of God, the little thing done with humility will enable us to be found in the same place as the saints who have laboured much and been true servants of God.”

SAINT DOROTHEUS OF GAZA, + 620 A.D.

“NOTHING is more opposed to God than pride, for self-deification is concealed in it, its own nothingness or sin. Thus more than anything humility is acceptable to God, which considers itself nothing, and attributes all goodness, honour, and glory to God alone. Pride does not accept grace, because it is full of itself, while humility easily accepts grace, because it is free from itself, and from all that is created. God creates out of nothing. As long as we think that we can offer something of ourselves, He does not begin His work in us. Humility is the salt of virtue. As salt gives flavour to food, so humility gives perfection to virtue. Without salt, food goes bad easily, and without humility, virtue is easily spoiled by pride, vainglory, impatience - and

it perishes. There is a humility which a man gains by his own struggles: knowing his own insufficiency, accusing himself for his failings, not allowing himself to judge others. And there is a humility into which God leads a man through the things that happen to him: allowing him to experience afflictions, humiliations, and deprivations.

#### SAINT PHILARET OF MOSCOW, +1867 A.D.

“THE LORD, humiliated and spat upon, succeeded, through bowing to His Cross and Tomb, in truly raising the whole human race by His love, and saving it forever from vanishing away and being annihilated. Christ’s act is incomparably greater than the act of any lonely mother in the world, His love for the human race being immeasurably greater than the love of any mother in the world for her children. Although a mother, out of her great love and sorrow, always has tears to shed, she takes her remaining tears with her when she herself goes down into the grave. The Lord Jesus, though, shed all His tears for His children, to the last drop, and all His blood to the last drop. Never, O sinner, will more precious tears be shed for you, neither living nor dead. Never will a mother, or wife, or children, or homeland, pay more for you than Christ the Saviour paid.”

#### SAINT NICHOLAS (VELIMIROVIĆ) OF ŽIČA, +1956 A.D.

“THOUGH a man may be found in a weak state, that does not at all mean that he has been abandoned by God. On the cross, the Lord Jesus Christ was in trouble, as the world sees things. But when the sinful world considered Him to be completely destroyed, in fact He was victorious over death and hades. The Lord did not promise us positions as victors as a reward for righteousness, but told us, ‘In the world you will have tribulation - but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world’ (Jn. 16:33).”

#### SAINT JOHN OF SHANGHAI, +1966 A.D.

# *About Humility*

## *A Homily on Saints John Climacus and Mary of Egypt*

THE NEW HIEROMARTYR, THE PRIEST SERGEI  
MECHEV, +1942 A.D.

THE HOLY CHURCH concludes its guidance as we pass through the great school of Lent, pointing us to the examples of two great ascetics whom we should imitate: Saints John Climacus and Mary of Egypt. Nevertheless, on the last Sunday, the Church also reminds us of another necessary condition for spiritual labour.

You heard in today's Gospel reading how Christ, on the path to Jerusalem, told His disciples: *The Son of Man shall be delivered unto the chief priests, and unto the scribes... And they shall mock Him, and shall scourge Him, and shall spit upon Him, and shall kill Him* (Mk. 10:33-34). And the disciples were amazed; and as they followed, they were afraid (Mk. 10:32).

But when they heard about the Resurrection, the Sons of Zebedee came to Him and said: *Master, we would that Thou shouldest do for us whatsoever we shall desire*. And He said unto them, *What would ye that I should do for you?* They said unto Him, *Grant unto us that we may sit, one on Thy right hand, and the other on Thy left hand, in Thy glory*. After He told them that it was not given to them, but to them for whom it is prepared, the other disciples, hearing the request of the Son of Zebedee, were indignant, and the Lord called them all and said: *Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be*

*ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many* (Mk.10:35-35).

This Gospel narrative includes one of the necessary conditions that ensures that the path offered to us by the Church in these days not be in vain (the other I tried to reveal during Lent as much as I could). The Lord, in coming to earth, came to serve us: For even the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many (Mk.10:45).

And the Lord calls us to learn from Him: *Learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart* (Mt. 11:29).

“Learn this humility, for you are ruled by the prince of this world, and the best of you, the Apostles James and John, are overcome by vanity and pride.”

And so, on this day, the Holy Fathers have appointed the reading of this Gospel, which provides us with the necessary conditions for our spiritual work.

After all, one can follow the path indicated by Saints John Climacus and Mary of Egypt and in the end still fall into great pride. Warning us against this, the Holy Fathers point us to the example of the Lord and the disciples.

“For God is manifested not in labours but in simplicity and humility,” says St. John Climacus (Ladder of Divine Ascent 26.52). Only he who walks the path of humility can receive gifts.

So, we are called to walk the path of humility. But what is humility? Let us turn to the one whom the Church gives us as a teacher during Great Lent.

It [humility] is of a quality that baffles all description. This treasure has an inscription, which is incomprehensible because it comes from above, and those who try to explain it with words give themselves great and endless trouble. And the inscription runs thus: Holy Humility.

Let all who are led by the Spirit of God enter with us into this spiritual and wise assembly, holding in their spiritual hands the God-inscribed tablets of knowledge. We have come together, we

have investigated, and we have probed the meaning of this precious inscription. And one said: "It means constant oblivion of one's achievements." Another: "It is the acknowledgement of oneself as the last of all and the greatest sinner of all." And another: "The mind's recognition of one's weakness and impotence." Another again: "In fits of rage, it means to forestall one's neighbour and be first to stop the quarrel." And again another: "Recognition of Divine grace and Divine compassion." And again another: "The feeling of a contrite soul, and the renunciation of one's own will." But when I had listened to all this and had attentively and soberly investigated it, I found that I had not been able to attain to the blessed perception of that virtue from what had been said. Therefore, last of all, having gathered what fell from the lips of those learned and blessed fathers as a dog gathers the crumbs that fall from the table, I too gave my definition of it and said: "Humility is a nameless grace in the soul, its name known only to those who have learned it by experience. It is unspeakable wealth, a name and gift from God, for it is said: Learn not from an angel, nor from man, nor from a book, but from Me, that is, from My indwelling, from My illumination and action in you; for I am meek and humble in heart and in thought and in spirit, and your souls shall find rest from conflicts and relief from thoughts" (cf. Mt. 11:29) (25.2-3).

Thus, we should learn humility not from angels, not from men, not from the great books of the Gospel, but from Christ Himself, for He calls us to this. "Humility is Christ's spiritual doctrine, noetically introduced into the inner chamber of the soul by those who are counted worthy of it. It cannot be defined by perceptible words" (25.41).

So how can we know anything about humility now in the sense of one understanding of it or another? The Holy Fathers say that we can know humility not by its essence, but by its action.

"We cannot describe the power and essence of this sun, humility, but from its properties and effects we can explain its intrinsic nature" (25.25).

“Humility is a Divine shelter to prevent us from seeing our achievements” (25.26).

The humble man does not see his achievements, but only his sins. There is a veil covering over his achievements.

How can we check whether we have humility or not?

Saint John Climacus says that, “Most of us call ourselves sinners, and perhaps really think it; but it is indignity that tests the heart” (25.33).

“It is not he who disparages himself who shows humility (for who will not put up with himself?), but he who maintains the same love for the very man who reproaches him” (22.17).

Here is the sign that can reveal the state of a soul regarding humility:

“A sign of the deepest humility will be to abase ourselves by pretending to have faults that we do not possess” (25.44).

If we not only tolerate humiliation, but consider ourselves worthy of it, then we will have humility.

The Lord says that humility must be learned from Him: For I am meek and lowly in heart (Mt. 11:29). Jesus Christ came to earth in order to “raise up the image of the fallen forefather”—fallen because man fell due to his pride.

The Lord came, taking the form of a slave in everything save sin, becoming like us—He humbled Himself, humbled Himself to death, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross (Phil. 2:8).

He constantly testifies to His disciples that He came not to fulfil His own will, but the will of the Father, and in the Garden of Gethsemane He prays: Father, if Thou be willing, remove this cup from Me: nevertheless not My will, but Thine, be done (Lk. 22:42).

And in the prayer that the Lord gave us, He teaches us to say: Thy will be done. He Himself gave us a great example of what kind of attitude to have towards the will of God; He showed that our actions are based on this.

We must do the will of God, and to do it, we must know what it is.

This knowledge is acquired by discernment, for “discernment is, and is recognised as, the certain understanding of the Divine will on all occasions, in every place and in all matters” (26.1). But it’s given to those who are already on the path of labour, who are ascending the path of humility. We must follow the path of obedience, the path that Saint Mary of Egypt walked, having surrendered her will to that of her Faithful Guardian.

What do obedience and humility have in common? This is what Saint John Climacus says:

“I once asked one of the most experienced fathers, and pressed him to tell me how humility is obtained by obedience. He said: ‘The obedient man who has discernment, even if he raises the dead and receives the gift of tears and freedom from conflict, will still think that it is the prayer of his spiritual father that has done it, and he remains foreign and alien to vain presumption. For how could he possibly pride himself on what is done, as he himself admits, by the help of his father, and not by his own effort?’ (4.55).”

Thus, an obedient man is one who constantly attributes what he has in terms of certain achievements to his guide. You know from the life of Saint Mary of Egypt that she considered all her spiritual deeds as a gift from the Mother of God.

This is the condition that helps us in the struggle to acquire humility, and we have to remember that it’s not according to our merits that the Lord gives us certain gifts. We receive humility according to the degree that we struggle against pride.

“By the ineffable providence of God, some have received holy returns for their toiling before their labours, some during their labours, some after labours, and some at the time of their death. It is a question which of them was rendered more humble?” (26.88).

And so, Saint John Climacus says that the Lord gives spiritual gifts according to the extent of our humility, so we must fight for humility; we have to remember that everything that the holy



Church taught us in the days of Great Lent will serve for our salvation only if we have humility as our foundation; for we know that it's possible to fall from Heaven, but David was pardoned for humility alone: I was brought low and He saved me (Ps. 114:6).

“If the pride of some of the angels made them demons, no doubt humility can make angels out of demons. Wherefore, let those who have fallen take courage! (25.63).”

So, all of us who are fallen, all of us who have come to God in repentance, and who yesterday called out for the last time: “Open to me the doors of repentance, O Lifegiver,” must remember that no labours, no spiritual feats will help us if we don't walk the path of humility.

Therefore, the Gospel that's appointed for us to read today gives us that foundation without which our labours are in vain.

Yes, we need to know what can ruin us. It's only in humility that we can receive a reward and a crown from Christ.

When we come to the Dread Judgment, the Lord won't demand gifts from us, but only humility. He'll ask us whether we learned humility from Him.

“Many,” says Saint John Climacus, “have received salvation without prophecies and revelations, without signs and wonders; but without humility no one will enter the marriage chamber” (25.52).

When we receive prayer from God, or the ineffable joy of loving people, we consider it our own property; we don't consider that the Lord gave us this gift, but that it's our acquisition, and we start condemning others and exposing ourselves, and then, through pride, our gift is exhausted and destroyed.

We have to remember that the Church calls us along the path of prayer and the Sacraments, through illumination by the light of Tabor, through bearing the cross and imitating the saints.

We must remember that we can learn humility by reading the Holy Fathers, for reading those who knew what humility is, although they couldn't express it in words, their soul is evident in their writings. And then, let those near to us be our teachers

of humility, for they know our wounds better than we do. Let us be attentive to those who reveal our shortcomings to us, and take their instructions as God's instructions. They reveal our transgression to us; they humble us. And if someone says something to us in vain, it brings us into communion with the Lord, Who was wounded for our transgressions [and] bruised for our iniquities (Es. 53:5). Those who want to walk the path of ascent must constantly remember that it's not only necessary to walk it, but to always bear in mind that our efforts may prove to be in vain if humility isn't acquired.

Let us learn from Him Who came to raise us to Heaven and Himself ascended there in glory, and only under this condition will our spiritual labour have a crown, which is received by those who have striven well on earth.

It's not in vain that the Church now gives us the image of these two disciples, the Sons of Zebedee, who were infected with pride and vanity and incited the other Apostles. And the Lord instructs not only them, but all of us, that whoever wants to be first must be the servant of all.

This is the covenant that Christ gives us; this is what it means to walk the path of humility; these are our examples for learning humility.

*Thy will be done* - this must not only be our prayer, but also our work.

*Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven* (Mt. 5:3), but not only those who labour in caves, deserts, and abysses of the earth, but also all those who commit their every deed in humility - they will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, while others will be cast out.

Let us remember that without fulfilling this covenant, not a single virtue will serve unto salvation, and that in fulfilling it, we mustn't be proud of our gifts.



*From the spiritual directions to the nuns of Abbess Seraphima (†2004),  
foundress of the Protection Convent in Knyazhevo, Sofia (Bulgaria) and spiritual  
daughter of Saint Seraphim of Sofia (†1950).*

# On the Orthodox Faith & living according to it

My children, you know how much emphasis Dyado/Grandfather Vladyka\* Seraphim would place on the purity of the faith. He used to tell us that the sin against the Orthodox faith is the heaviest of sins, because it proceeds from spiritual pride and cannot be justified by the weakness of human nature, as some other sins can. It weighs the most because it deprives the person of the grace of the Holy Spirit and separates him from God. It is only through grace that we can we draw near to God, enter into communion with Him and become dwellers in His heavenly kingdom.

Remember how it was that our forefathers fell into sin. The devil uttered a lie, a slander against God. They believed it; vain-gloriously they wished to become ‘gods’ and so they deprived themselves of their communion with God. Every single heresy, every deviation from the true faith is a lie against God and separates man from Him. God is Truth, and there can be no communion between truth and falsehood.

But, my dear children, how can we guard ourselves against falsehood when we are so weak and stupid? How can we preserve ourselves so that we don’t become apostates? At the moment I’m reading a history of the early Church and what do I notice, my dear children? It strikes me that even when fighting for the

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**Footnote:**

- *Dyado* mean grandfather, *Vladyka* master. Used by the Orthodox in Bulgaria as a respectful and affectionate way to address a bishop (*Dyado* only if he is past a certain age).

truth in defence of the faith, if a man isn't God-fearing, if grace does not cover him, he can easily go astray: he can himself fall into heresy, especially if he is proud. No man can ever guarantee that he won't err, albeit in a minor thing; he can always go astray. Today there is so much apostasy and compromise of the faith, so much widespread falsehood! How are we to protect ourselves so that we don't become traitors to the Lord?

You know, my children, Dyado Vladyka Seraphim continually taught us that Orthodoxy is the right faith and requires a life according to this faith (in uprightness). You cannot hold on to the right faith and live contrary to it. If you behave like this, it is a lie, hypocrisy, and one day, if you do not repent, you will certainly deviate (in your Orthodox confession) and you will betray the Lord.

Living according to the faith means to live in accordance with what the Lord has laid down for us in the holy Gospel tidings. No one can enter into the Kingdom of God without love for the Lord. But what does it mean to love the Lord? Some kind of sentimentalism? No, children, no! The Lord Jesus Christ says: "If you love Me, keep My commandments." And what does He promise us in return for this? "And I will beseech the Father, and He will give you another Comforter, to abide with you forever, the Spirit of truth... Who... abideth with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you" (Jn 14: 15-18). See what a promise the Lord gives to those who keep His commandments: the grace of the Holy Spirit, which is able to guard us in Truth and lead us to the Kingdom of Heaven. Dyado Vladyka Seraphim told us all this many and many times over.

And so, my dear children, we are aware of the widespread apostasy from the faith that's happening everywhere, what a powerful and devilish wave is pouring out. So how can we sin while the Church is on fire...? When we sin, we become allies with the apostate assembly.

For the Lord's sake, for the sake of the purity of our faith, let us work hard to live according to God's way, rejecting the suggestions of the demons; let us pray more! Yes, our individual

prayers may be worthless, but when we all pray in unison - now this means something. This is to what God has called for. We, my children, are united with such a bond, like no other in the world. Only monasticism can unite in this way. Despite the skirmishes among you - these, of course, must be put to bed - at the same time you are united by love, you are united in a communal readiness to confess the pure faith without compromise. If, however, we are not praying, if we are not vigilant, if we are not labouring to do the spiritual work we can go astray very easily. We should have absolutely no confidence in ourselves. But whoever labours spiritually will receive help by the grace of God, and will be sheltered by it.



## THE COMING MONTH

IN March, every year we mainly concentrate on the lenten commemorations appointed for each week of the Great Fast. There will be sermons and articles about these galore on the internet, so this year we are limiting ourselves to the saints commemorated according to the Menaion.

Our **Venerable Father Gerasimus of Jordan** (4<sup>th</sup> / 17<sup>th</sup>) was born in Lycia, into a wealthy family; he was called Gregory in the world. He left family, wealth and the world and became a monk with the name Gerasimus in the desert of the Thebaid in Egypt and later, around A.D. 450, came to the banks of the Jordan River in Palestine, where he founded a lavra and became its abbot. The lavra was divided into two parts, the cœnobium and the cells. The cœnobium was for younger monks who were training to be anchorites, while the more advanced anchorites were allowed to live in their cells under very strict conditions. Abba Gerasimus had around seventy anchorites living in their cells and he himself was an example to everyone in this strict Christian way of life, and even exceeded all those who were under him. By eating little and sleeping little, he subdued his passions and

became a model of virtue to all and a vessel of the Grace of the Holy Spirit. During Lent he would even go and live with a disciple alone in the inner desert, eating nothing, but taking the Holy Gifts on Sundays. For nine years it was Saint Cyriacus the Anchorite, who would accompany him into the desert during Great Lent. In the time of Emperor Marcian and Empress Pulcheria, Saint Gerasimus, due to his simplicity and ignorance, was deceived by the Monophysite Theodosius, who also led many of the great anchorites into error, and became inclined to accept the Monophysite heresy of Eutychius and Dioscorus. However, not long after, he visited Saint Euthymius who rescued him from heresy, causing him to bitterly lament his error. When Saint Euthymius reposed in A.D. 473, Saint Gerasimus had a vision in which he saw his soul taken up into heaven by angels. Saint John Moschus reports that he was told that Gerasimus was walking one day by the banks of the holy Jordan when he met a lion, roaring mightily with pain in its paw. The point of a reed was deeply embedded in it, causing inflammation and suppuration. When the lion saw the elder, it came to him and showed him the wounded paw, whimpering and begging healing from him. When the elder saw the lion in such distress, he sat down and, taking the paw, he lanced it. The point was removed, and also much pus. He cleansed the wound well, bound it up and dismissed the beast. But the healed lion would not leave the elder. It followed him like a noble disciple wherever he went. The elder was amazed at the gentle disposition of the beast and, from then on, he began feeding it, throwing it bread and boiled vegetables. Now the lavra had an ass which was used to fetch water for the needs of the elders, for they drank the water of the holy Jordan; the river is about a mile from the lavra. The fathers used to hand the ass over to the lion, to pasture it on the banks of the Jordan. One day when the ass was being pastured by the lion, it went away some distance from its keeper. Some camel-drivers on their way from Arabia found the ass and took it away to their country. Having lost the ass, the lion came back to the lavra and approached Abba Gerasimus, very downcast and dismayed. The abba thought that the lion had devoured the ass. He said to it: "Where is the ass?" The beast stood silent, hanging its head, very

much like a man. The elder asked it: "Have you eaten it? Blessed be God! From henceforth you are going to perform whatever duties the ass performed." From that time on, at the elder's command, the lion used to carry the saddle-pack containing four earthenware vessels and bring water. One day an officer came to ask the elder for his prayers; and he saw the lion bringing water. When he heard the explanation, he had pity on the beast. He took out three pieces of gold and gave them to the elders, so that they could purchase an ass to ensure their water supply, and that the lion might be relieved of this menial service. Sometime after the release of the lion, the camel-driver who had taken the ass came back to the Holy City to sell grain and he had the ass with him. Having crossed the holy Jordan, he chanced to find himself face to face with the lion. When he saw the beast, he left his camels and took to his heels. Recognising the ass, the lion ran to it, seized its leading rein in its mouth (as it had been accustomed to do) and led away, not only the ass, but also the three camels. It brought them to the elder, rejoicing and roaring at having found the ass which it had lost. The elder had thought the lion had eaten the ass, but now he realised that the lion had been falsely accused. He named the beast Jordanes and it lived with the elder in the lavra, never leaving his side, for five years. When Abba Gerasimus departed to the Lord in A.D. 475 and was buried by the fathers, by the providence of God, the lion could nowhere be found in the lavra. A little later, the lion came, and searched for the elder. The elder's disciple, Abba Sabbatius saw it and said to it: "Jordanes, our elder has left us orphans, for he has departed to the Lord; but come here, eat something." The lion, however, would not eat, but continually turned his eyes this way and that, hoping to see its elder. It roared mightily, unable to tolerate this bereavement. When Abba Sabbatius and the rest of the fathers saw it, they stroked its mane and said to it: "The elder has gone away to the Lord and left us," yet even by saying this they did not succeed in silencing its cries and lamentations. The more they tried to mollify and to comfort it by their words, the more it roared. The louder were its cries by which it expressed its grief; for it showed by its voice, its countenance and by its eyes the sorrow which it felt at not being able to see

the elder. Then Abba Sabbatius said to it: "Since you do not believe us, come with me and I will show you where our elder lies." He took the lion and led it to where they had buried the elder. The spot was about half a mile from the church; Abba Sabbatius stood above the grave of Abba Gerasimus and said to the lion: "See, this is where our elder is," and he knelt down. When the lion saw how he prostrated himself, it began beating its head against the ground and roaring, then it promptly died, there, on top of the elder's grave. This did not take place because the lion had a rational soul, but because it is the will of God to glorify those who glorify Him, and to show how the beasts were in subjection to Adam before he disobeyed the commandment and fell from the comfort of paradise. According to the Jerusalem typicon, Saint Gerasimus is commemorated on 4<sup>th</sup> March, while some manuscripts list him under 5<sup>th</sup> March which was the actual day on which he reposed. The earliest known icon is a fresco in the Cathedral of the Nativity of the Theotokos in Novgorod at Saint Antony's Monastery which dates to around 1125. From the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the life cycle of Saint Gerasimus began to be depicted. The earliest such icon is in the Church of Saint Nicolas Orphanos in Thessaloniki and dates to 1309-1319. The Orthodox Monastery of Saint Gerasimus in Deir Hajla near Jericho commemorates Saint Gerasimus, whose lavra was nearby. The original Lavra of Saint Gerasimus of the Jordan was abandoned. The present one until the 13<sup>th</sup> century was called the Monastery of Kalamon, but then renamed Saint Gerasimus. The history of the monastery is linked to another Christian tradition: Mary, Joseph, and the infant Christ were said to have found refuge in a cave here during their flight from Herod the Great. An underground chapel was built on the spot where it is believed they spent the night. The Mother of God called it a 'good abode,' and it was for this reason it received the name Kalamon.

Our **Holy Father Felix of Burgundy, Bishop of Dunwich, Enlightener of East Anglia** (8<sup>th</sup> / 21<sup>st</sup>) was born in the Burgundy region of Gaul. It was he who converted Sigebert, King of East Anglia, while he was in exile in Gaul. He was forced to flee there, in order to save himself from the intrigues of his kinsmen. When Saint Sigebert was summoned home to claim



his ancestral crown, he invited his spiritual father, Saint Felix, to leave Gaul to assist him in converting his idolatrous subjects to Christianity. In A.D. 631, Felix was consecrated as Bishop of Dunwich by Archbishop Honorius of Canterbury. The new bishop was very successful in his ministry. After seventeen years he had converted almost the entire region. He established churches, monasteries, and a school for boys with the help of King Sigebert, and Saint Honorius provided him with teachers from Canterbury. Because of this, some regard him as the founder of the University of Cambridge. Saint Felix also established schools at Felixstowe and at Flixton, Suffolk. After two years, King Sigebert abdicated in favour of his cousin Egric, and entered the monastery at Cnobersburgh, now Burgh Castle in Suffolk, the monastery he had founded for Saint Fursey, who had lived there for about ten years. In 642, after Saint Sigebert was killed in battle against King Penda of Mercia, Saint Fursey made a pilgrimage to Rome. Then he travelled to Gaul, where he established a monastery at Lagny-sur-Marne, near Paris, around the year 644. Saint Felix reposed in A.D. 648 and was buried at Dunwich, but his relics were transferred to Ramsey Abbey in Huntingdonshire in A.D. 971. He is mentioned by Saint Bede, who records the success of Felix's work in East Anglia, known for his great piety and hard work, as both a missionary and educator, Felix, in Bede's words delivered East Anglia from long-standing unrighteousness and unhappiness. As a pious cultivator of the spiritual field, he left behind abundant faith in a believing people. In no part of England was Christianity more favourably introduced. He continues: "He did not fail in his purpose and like a good farmer reaped a rich harvest of believers. He delivered the entire province from its age-old wickedness and infelicity and brought it to the Christian faith and works of righteousness, and in full accord with the significance of his own name, guided it towards eternal felicity." Dunwich was once a large city, with fifty-two churches, but was gradually swallowed up by the sea in the fourteenth century. The remains of the steeples may still be seen, underwater, about five miles from shore. The mortal remains of the saint were later exhumed and taken to Soham monastery which he had founded. This was a precautionary

measure for fear that heathen flames would take possession of them. In King Canute's time, about A.D. 1031, the relics were moved a second time for the same reason by a monk named Etheric to Ramsey in Huntingdonshire, and there solemnly enshrined by Abbot Athelstan. While the relics were being carried across the water a miracle is said to have happened. A chronicler at Soham or Ramsey wrote: "In those days Saint Felix, formerly Bishop of East Anglia lay buried in the royal manor of Soham for at this place the saint while still alive had built and dedicated a beautiful church and gathered together a goodly company of monks. These monks subsequently, after their good father was dead... carried his precious remains from Dunwich and laid them with great honour in their own church at Soham. Afterwards, however, when this same church had been utterly destroyed and the monks killed by the Danes, this saintly man had met with less reverence and honour. This continued up to the time of King Canute, when Etheric, hearing of it, pointed out to Abbot Athelstan and the monks of Ramsey how, by the expenditure of a little labour, they might win for themselves inexhaustible riches and so urged them by the spur of self-interest to carry out his purpose. Athelstan therefore taking with him Agerinus, his prior, set out by water for Soham which possessed the relic of such value, and overawing by the combined authority of the King and bishop the resistance of those who were for opposing him, he placed the sacred remains and bones of the saint on board and began his voyage homeward to Ramsey amid the strains of joyous psalmody. The men of Ely, however, on hearing of this, grudging us so valuable a relic, manned their boats with a strong band, hoping by their large numbers to carry off from the smaller party the remains which they had removed from Soham. In order that it might be clearly seen that the removal was taking place rather by Divine than by human wishes, it came to pass that just as the ships of either party were approaching one another under a bright and cloudless sky, suddenly, to the discomfiture of the large force and the benefit of the smaller, a dense fog arose which separated the two parties. And so, while their adversaries were vainly wandering in different directions, our boat was carried onward in a straight course and

safely deposited by the aiding waters on the bosom of our native shore. You may find it hard to believe this miracle... yet, reader, you are compelled to suspect it by no necessity as long as you are at all events convinced of the undoubted fact that the relics of Saint Felix were, on King Canute's yielding to the prayers of Bishop Etheric, transferred from the aforesaid town of Soham to the church at Ramsey and reburied with great reverence; and there, even to this day, does that holy man bestow on worshippers many benefits. If you desire further to learn anything of his origin, his life or his good deeds, you must consult Bede who has composed a history of the English in admirable style, and among other men of the highest sanctity whom he there commends, has deemed our saint worthy of praise."

**Saint Ypomoni (Patience), Empress of the Romans** (13<sup>th</sup> / 26<sup>th</sup> March) was in the world named Helen Dragaš. She was the daughter of Constantine Dragaš, one of the many inheritors of the large Serbian kingdom of Stefan Dusan. She came from a royal and blessed genealogy. Many of her ancestors were saints. Her father assumed the leadership of what is today the Bulgarian portion of northeast Macedonia. Her upbringing and formation were greatly influenced by the Byzantine ideal. Above and beyond this, she was raised with the family tradition of the unshakeable Orthodox faith. This faith guided and illumined her, and would inspire her life which would be full of sorrows and trials. She was about 19 years old when she married Manuel II Palaiologos, a few days before he became Emperor. This new life showed itself to be a Golgotha for her. Many times she had to drink the cup of insults by her husband's side, not only from those of other religions, but from the Christians of the Western nations. Helen showed herself to be an outstanding person who gathered together many great virtues and spiritual strength. She loved the people. She was the Great Mother whom all could approach. She shared the anxieties and concerns of her fearful nation and whatever she did was accompanied by prayer. George Gemistos-Plethon writes of her: "This Queen with much humility and perseverance addressed the two ways of life. Neither at the time of testing was she swayed, nor when she was granted rest, but in each case she did what was required. She joined together intel-

ligence and bravery, more than any other woman. She was distinguished for her chastity. She had completely deep righteousness. She did not know how to do evil to anyone, either man or woman. Instead we know that she did much good to many.” She was worthy of her Christ-loving husband, Manuel, and worked with him for 35 years. Everything was held in agreement and harmony. Co-spirits of Christ in holiness of struggles, they managed to honour virtue with words and deeds. To this blessed couple God granted eight children. From the six boys two of them ascended the throne, John VIII and Constantine XI. The mother who had so many children and who loved them so much, nurtured them with the faith and the sweet teaching of our Orthodox Church, taking them to holy shrines and sacred monasteries, and sought prayers for them from the holy ascetics and elders. She raised them “in the law of the Lord from youth,” and never “ceased with tears of prayer and love to instil the law in each one.” She managed, with others, to end years of conflict between the members of the Imperial Family. Her love of the monasteries was special. There she felt rest and she drew strength and courage for what would follow. This she imparted to her family. Her husband ceded the throne to his first-born son John two months before his death and entered the Pantocrator Monastery, where he was tonsured a monk with the name Matthew. She, after the death of her husband became a nun in the Lady Martha Monastery, with the name Ypomoni (Patience). Three of their children became monks. Together with her father she had built the Holy Monastery of Panagia Pammakaristos in the city of Demetrovgrad in Serbia. She was associated with the Holy Monastery of the Honourable Forerunner of Petra, where the holy relic of Saint Patapius the Righteous was kept, to whom she showed a special reverence. The Monastery was founded by the fellow ascetic of Saint Patapius in Egypt, Vara the Righteous, outside of the Roman gate before 450 A.D. With Saint Ypomoni’s help a female old-age home with the name “The Hope of the Hopeless” was established there. Gennadius Scholarios, first Œcumenical Patriarch after the Sack of Constantinople, writes: “This blessed Queen when she was visited by someone wise, he would leave amazed from her unique wisdom. When she met

some ascetic, he would leave after the meeting, shamed by his poor virtue and ashamed by her virtue. When she met someone intelligent, he would be struck by her greater intelligence. When she would meet with a legislator, they became more prudent. When she spoke with some lawyer, they believed that they had before them the Rule of Law in practice. When someone brave would meet her, they would feel defeated feeling amazed by her patience, wisdom and strength of character. When she was approached by some philanthropist, they were struck by her greater and perceivable feeling of philanthropy. When she met some friend of amusements, they would gain wisdom, and coming to know their humility before her, repent. When she met some zealot of piety, they would gain greater zeal. Every one suffering, after meeting with her, received some relief of their pain. Every arrogant person berated his great self-love. And in general there was no one who came into contact with her and did not become better.” God granted her to not live through the last tragic moments of the Empire. He called her close to Him on 13<sup>th</sup> March, 1450, having lived 35 years as Empress and 25 years as a nun. Her servant John Eugenikos, the brother of Saint Mark Archbishop of Ephesus, wrote: “As for your eternal Lady Mother, everything as long as she lived was excellent: faith, works, child-bearing, her way life, word and everything together was pure and worthy of divine honour, and as she lived as a partaker of divine Providence, thus she ended.” Her holy skull is kept today at the Holy Monastery of Saint Patapius in Loutraki of Corinth.

We will finish with a saint commemorated both according the Menaion (30<sup>th</sup> March / 12<sup>th</sup> April) and according to the Lenten Triodion, on the fourth Sunday of Lent - this year that falls on 17<sup>th</sup> / 30<sup>th</sup> March. Our **Venerable Father John of the Ladder** was a great ascetic and author of the renowned spiritual book, “The Ladder of Divine Ascent,” from which he derives his title - Climacus in Greek. There is almost no information about Saint John’s origins. John went to Sinai when he was sixteen, submitting to Abba Martyrius as his instructor and guide. After four years, he was tonsured as a monk. Abba Strategius, who was present at the tonsure, predicted that he would become a great luminary in the Church of Christ. For nineteen years Saint John

progressed in monasticism in obedience to his spiritual Father. After the death of Abba Martyrius, Saint John embarked on a solitary life, settling in a wild place called Thola, where he spent forty years labouring in silence, fasting, prayer, and tears of penitence. It is thus from his own experience that Saint John teaches us about tears of repentance: “Just as fire burns and destroys wood, so pure tears wash away every impurity, both external and internal.” His holy prayer was strong and efficacious, as may be seen from an example from the life of the God-pleasing saint. Saint John had a disciple named Moses. Once, the saint ordered his disciple to bring dung to fertilise the vegetable garden. When he had fulfilled the obedience, Moses lay down to rest under the shade of a large rock, because of the scorching heat. Saint John was in his cell in a light sleep. Suddenly, a man of remarkable appearance appeared to him and awakened the holy ascetic, reproaching him, “John, why do you sleep so heedlessly, when Moses is in danger?” He immediately woke up and began to pray for his disciple. When Moses returned in the evening, Saint John asked whether any sort of misfortune had befallen him. The monk replied, “A large rock would have fallen on me as I slept beneath it at noon, but I left that place because I thought I heard you calling me.” The saint did not tell his disciple of his vision, giving thanks to God. Saint John ate the food which is permitted by the monastic rule, but only in moderation. He did not sleep very much, only enough to keep up his strength, so that he would not ruin his mind by unceasing vigil. “I do not fast excessively,” he said of himself, “nor do I give myself over to intense all-night vigil, nor lie upon the ground, but I restrain myself... and the Lord soon saved me.” The following example of Saint John’s humility is noteworthy. Gifted with discernment, and attaining wisdom through spiritual experience, he lovingly received all who came to him and guided them to salvation. One day some envious monks reproached him for being too talkative, and so Saint John kept silence for a whole year. The monks realised their error, and they went to the ascetic and begged him not to deprive them of the spiritual profit of his conversation. Concealing his ascetic deeds from others, Saint John sometimes withdrew into a cave,

but reports of his holiness spread far beyond the vicinity. People from all walks of life came to him, desiring to hear his words of edification and salvation. After forty years of solitary asceticism, he was chosen as abbot of Sinai when he was seventy-five. Saint John governed the holy monastery for four years. Toward the end of his life, the Lord granted him the gifts of clairvoyance and wonderworking. At the request of another Saint John, abbot of the Raithu monastery, he wrote the incomparable Ladder, a book of instruction for monks who wished to attain spiritual perfection. Knowing of the wisdom and spiritual gifts of Saint John of Sinai, John of Raithu had requested him to write down whatever was necessary for the salvation of those in the monastic life. Such a book would be “a ladder fixed on the earth” (Gen. 28:12), leading people to the gates of Heaven. Saint John felt that such a task was beyond his ability, yet out of obedience he fulfilled the request. The thirty steps of spiritual perfection correspond to the thirty years of the Lord’s age. When we have completed these thirty steps, we will find ourselves with the righteous and will not stumble. The Ladder begins with renunciation of the world, and ends with God, Who is love (1 Jn 4:8). Although the book was written for monks, any Christian living in the world will find it an unerring guide for ascending to God, and a support in the spiritual life. Saints Theodore the Studite, Sergius of Radonezh, Joseph of Volokolamsk, and many others relied on it as an important guide to salvation. The twenty-second step therein deals with various forms of vainglory. Saint John writes: “When I fast, I am vainglorious; and when I permit myself food in order to conceal my fasting from others I am again vainglorious about my prudence. When I dress in fine clothing, I am vanquished by vanity, and if I put on drab clothing, again I am overcome by vanity. If I speak, vainglory defeats me. If I wish to keep silence, I am again given over to it. Wherever this thorn comes up, it stands with its points upright. A vain person seems to honour God, but strives to please men rather than God. People of lofty spirit bear insult placidly and willingly, but only the holy and righteous may hear praise without harm. When you hear that your neighbour or friend has slandered you behind your back, or even to your face, praise and love him. It is not the one who reproaches him-



self who shows humility, for who will not put up with himself? It is the one who is slandered by another, yet continues to show love for him. Whoever is proud of his natural gifts, intelligence, learning, skill in reading, clear enunciation, and other similar qualities, which are acquired without much labour, will never obtain supernatural gifts. Whoever is not faithful in small things, is also unfaithful in large things, and is vainglorious. It often happens that God humbles the vainglorious, sending a sudden misfortune. If prayer does not destroy a proud thought, we bring to mind the departure of the soul from this life. And if this does not help, let us fear the shame which follows dishonour. "For whoever humbles himself shall be exalted, and whoever exalts himself shall be humbled" (Lk. 14:11). When those who praise us, or rather seduce us, start to praise us, let us recall our many sins, then we shall find that we are not worthy of what they say or do to honour us." In *The Ladder* Saint John describes the ascent toward spiritual perfection, which is essential for anyone who wishes to save his soul. It is based on the collected wisdom of many wise ascetics, and on his own spiritual experience. The book is a great help on the path to truth and virtue. The steps proceed gradually on the path of perfection. The summit is not reached suddenly, but gradually, as the Saviour says: "The Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force" (Mt.11:12).



*NEWS*

## ***ADULT BAPTISM CELEBRATED***

ON the **Great Feast of the Meeting of the Lord in the Temple** (2<sup>nd</sup> / 15<sup>th</sup> February), **Osyth Thompson** was baptised and chrismated immediately before the reading of the Hours and the celebration of the Divine Liturgy, at which for the first time she received the Holy Mysteries. **Priestmonk Sabbas** was the celebrant of the mysteria and **Tatiana James** is Osyth's godmother. After the services, a generous meal was provided by



the family of the newly-illuminated and by the parishioners attending the celebration. Please remember Osyth in your prayers that she remain steadfast all the days of her life, and pray for Tatiana that she might be aided in her new responsibilities.

### ***NEW CATECHUMEN ENROLLED***

ON the **Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee** (27<sup>th</sup> January / 9<sup>th</sup> February), at the end of the Divine Liturgy, **Mark Wiles** of Bordon made his vows as a catechumen and was given the new name Joseph, after our **Venerable Father Joseph of Optina**, feast day 9<sup>th</sup> / 22<sup>nd</sup> March. Help and support him in the struggles ahead through your prayers.

### ***VISITORS***

ON Tuesday, 11<sup>th</sup> February we were visited by the **Armigerous Archpriest Peter Baulk** of the **Cathedral Parish of the Nativity of the Mother of God in Gunnersbury** (RO CAMP), who kindly gave us two sets of priest's vestments, one in purple and one in blue, which were made in the Greek style, and so not used by him as he now serves in a Russian parish. He met some of our parishioners who were finishing the parish breakfast after a weekday Liturgy when he arrived and spent some time talking to the members of the brotherhood and sharing memories - until 2006, he had served here and at the Convent as one of our clergy.

### ***TRUSTEE MEETING***

ON Monday, 17<sup>th</sup> February, a meeting of the **trustees of the former Convent at Brondesbury Park, London**, was held in the Brotherhood house, attended by their accountant and financial advisors.

