



Orthodox Mission of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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<http://EntranceMission.org>

Everywhere Present, Filling All Things March 28, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

He Who was once far from us is now near to us. (St. Augustine. Sermon on the Ascension of our Lord)

Quite some time ago I remember reading a sermon by St. Augustine on our Lord's ascension, and his words have stuck with me all these years. In his meditation on the bodily ascension of our Lord, our Lord's physical departure as a man, the great saint observed something quite extraordinary. He said that He Who was once far from us is now near to us. When I read the sermon, I was quite surprised at his words. How is it, I wondered, that when speaking of the so-called "departure" of Jesus the saint could say that He was now "near" to us. How is it that He Who had lived and preached and taught and healed among people physically as a man could be said to have been "far" from anyone?

The great saint of course was speaking spiritually. As a man, Christ was limited by His physical humanity; He was able to be in only one place at one time; He was "circumscribed." But once He had ascended to the Father and sent from the Father the All-Holy Spirit, now, the saint observed, He could be ever near to us, "uncircumscribed," everywhere present through the Grace of the All-Holy Spirit, the outpouring of which we celebrate on the great feast of Pentecost, fifty days from Pascha.

These words of the saint are in my mind as we prepare for the Second Sunday of Great Lent, the Sunday

devoted to the remembrance of another great saint of the Church, Saint Gregory Palamas. Saint Gregory Palamas lived a good 900 years or so after Saint Augustine. The two saints were very different. Whereas St. Augustine was a rhetorician, a man of great learning and intellectual bearing, Saint Gregory Palamas was a simple monk; he lived in the Great Lavra on Athos, which at that time was the largest monastery there. He taught the ancient spiritual disciplines of our Holy Orthodox Faith, the praying of the Jesus Prayer and how one could move forward in the gradual journey that every person may take toward an ever-fuller participation in the Grace of the Holy Spirit. Some of the monks under his guidance reported that they actually experienced and discerned the Uncreated Light Himself.

During his years on Athos St. Gregory was challenged by two notable Orthodox laymen, one a scholar from southern Italy named Barlaam and the other a monk named Akindynos. They questioned the ability of any person to actually participate in and to actually perceive the Uncreated Light Himself. Their understanding of Christianity was the cold and narrow view of the academic, limited in scope by the precise philosophical definitions of their western, humanistic perspectives. God for them was primarily the judge, who hurled rules and regulations and precise limits of how He could be understood, to whom He could be given and by whom He could be controlled. Theirs was the dry apprehension of the mind without heart, without soul, without any possibility of knowing God Himself. They knew quite a bit “about” Him, the way a scholar might know about Him from books or rules, but they did not actually know Him. St. Gregory instructed his monks in the discipline of the Prayer of the Heart, the Jesus Prayer and the way in which one could grow to know the Self-Giving of the God of love.

St. Gregory Palamas was the defender of the essence of the Orthodox Faith, our faith, that professes the self-giving of God through the Grace of the Holy Spirit. Not only is it possible to experience Him, but it is His desire that we do experience Him. He is indeed “everywhere present and fills all things.” He waits for us to silence the willful passions within us so that we might gradually grow to apprehend Him Who is ever near to us. One of my teachers in a course I took at St. Vladimir’s Seminary years ago called St. Gregory Palamas the great saint of God’s “immanence.” The One Who dwells in heaven also dwells with us on earth. He is with us, for us and in us. He is there to comfort us in our suffering, to heal us in our sickness, to receive our souls when we die. St. Gregory Palamas looked above the empty and cold understanding of the intellect into the very eye of the heart. It is there, the great saint taught, that we will know God in whatever and every manner possible that is appropriate for us to know Him. God is not only transcendent, above and beyond; but He is also immanent. He is not only past and future, but He is also present, here and now, with us, in us and for us.

“He Who was once far from us is near us!” Different though they may have been, the two great saints, Augustine and Gregory Palamas, proclaim the same message. The Transcendent God is also immanent; He Who dwells in heaven, dwells at the same time with us on earth. He is everywhere present and fills all things! This is the message of the Second Sunday in Great Lent.

Fr. Elias

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