



**Orthodox Mission of the
Entrance of the Theotokos
into the Temple**

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The Splendor of God's Temple
October 9, 2022

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." (1 Peter 1: 15-16)

St Peter quotes a central passage from Leviticus chapter 19 as he begins his first epistle. It is a theme we see often in the Holy Epistles of SS. Peter, James, John and above all, St. Paul. "Be holy, as I am holy."

The Hebrew word for "holy" is "*qadash*" and it means to be sanctified, set apart for God, separate. It is a popular theme in the New Testament Epistles, because through the Life and Example of our Lord Jesus, a new perspective on our lives together as children and disciples of the One True God has been revealed and proclaimed. Whereas there was once a special and spectacular building, a Temple in Jerusalem, the center of all "holiness" and "sacred activity," now, it is you and me - we ourselves, who become Temples, centers of all "holiness" and "sacred activity." St. Paul's writings are filled with this teaching! He continually reminds those to whom he wrote, particularly to those in Corinth, that *they* are now to be Temples of God,

vessels of the All-Holy Spirit. Just as Jesus originally called the 12 to leave their normal, everyday lives, and go “fishing” for men, so we too, through our Oneness in Christ, first established in Holy Baptism, are to be set apart. *We ourselves* are to be Holy, Sanctified, vessels of God’s presence and activity.

This represents a huge change in perspective, doesn’t it, both from what had been normal religious life in first-century Judaism of the time of Christ, and, if the truth must be said, from the common understanding of our own religious life in 21st Century Orthodox Christianity. We shower so much attention on church architecture, vestments, elaborate decoration, particularly in the altar, which is the focus of our attention when we come together to pray. This is right and proper. But not at the expense of the central teaching of the Holy Apostles, who followed the teaching of our Lord Himself. Not the church, the building, the structure, the decorations or even the altar is to be the focus of God’s presence, but it is we ourselves who are to bear the Grace, the Self-Giving of God, in our own flesh.

This is the key to understanding the radical call of Christ to discipleship. How do we catch men into the net of Christ? We catch them by living as Christ called us to live, by focusing first and foremost on God, His will, His commandments, His call to follow Him. We catch them by living differently than others: it is God, not our possessions, or our politicians, or our achievements that must propel us in our lives, but our obedience as St. Paul said in today’s lesson, our obedience to His commandments and His call to love neighbor as ourselves. The church itself is not the building. It is the assembly of sheep who gather around the Shepherd, Jesus Christ.

Once, years ago, one of my bishops in the Antiochian Archdiocese came to visit the congregation, and during his visit he chastised the people for not building their church. It was about the third year of our lives as a congregation, and the people, by and large, had been generous in their offerings and were preparing to do just that. However, it was not fast enough for him, for the focus of his attention was the possibility of new building. He said loudly to those who could hear him: “It’s time to build your church!” Immediately, a member of the congregation spoke up boldly; he told the bishop, “Sayidna, we *are* building it! Every time we come together in the Name of the Holy Trinity to hear the Word of God and to receive His Sacraments!”

Indeed it is so! *WE* - not a building, splendid though it might be – *WE* are the Church. The splendor which God calls each and every one of us to manifest is the splendor of charity, service, self-giving and obedience to God’s revealed will. This is how we fish and catch men into the net of Christ!

Fr. Elias

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