



Orthodox Church of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

306 W. Main Street Emmitsburg,
MD 21727

<http://EntranceMission.org>

717-817-0084

The V. Rev. Elias Yelovich,
Rector

The Rev. Anthony Duvall,
Assistant

Saints and Sinners: Commemoration of St. Mary Magdalene August 4, 2024

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

What makes a saint a saint? This is a question I ask repeatedly.

In our Epistle Lesson from Romans chapter 12 it is clear that St. Paul uses the word “Saint” in a more general sense that we use it in the modern Orthodox Church. In his closing exhortations, he says “Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; ... rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints ... Bless those who persecute you; bless, and do not curse.”

For St. Paul, the saints are clearly those who are joined with us in the Church - those who seek to follow Christ - those who are fellow disciples of the Lord with us. It is in this sense that some theologians spoke of the Church as a “Corpus Mixtum,” a union or bunch of those who gather like sheep around the Shepherd – not the local “pastor” or “rector” or “bishop,” but the Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ. He spoke of this mix of people consisting of “saints and sinners,” by

which he meant not that there were some who were “saints” versus some others who were “sinners” - simultaneously “saints and sinners.” Sinners who are connected to the Great Shepherd Jesus Christ through repentance and forgiveness. Sinners redeemed through the Grace of God, Whose Good Will it is always to save.

I find that this is a somewhat difficult message to preach, because we have come to think of saints as people who are in some sense better than us, perfect in a way that we are not. And this view of saints, those recognized officially by the Church and “glorified” as saints by the Church, sometimes blinds us to the truth of what the Holy Apostle actually taught. We miss the radicality of the dogma of the Incarnation. Deus incarnatus est. God took upon Himself the carnal nature of our sin and made it His own, to join with it and purify it. His presence is what makes us holy; Oneness with Him is what makes us saints, even though we are simultaneously subject, each and every one of us, to the ravages and ramifications of original sin, what Fr. John Romanides calls “the ancestral sin.”

This view of sainthood – that we are simultaneously made holy by Christ even as we persist in our struggle against sin – is extraordinarily helpful to me as I negotiate the turmoil of life in the Church with all of its personalities and political eddies. If I thought otherwise, then I tell you quite clearly, I would simply hang up my epitrachelion and move on to building models and volunteering to help others in my spare time. The mess that we are embroiled in presently, however, is how the Church has always been, precisely because we are saints – sanctified by Grace – even as we struggle against sin. This struggle will continue throughout all of time, until the Lord returns in glory. To face this struggle in the hope of eternal purification is what we must persist in – to see the ultimate triumph of God’s will. Knowing that the All-Merciful One will persist in winning over even the most recalcitrant of sinners until that day when He will truly be all-in-all – and all will come to the acceptance of that existence in His Kingdom that is salvation.

So then, recognizing that all of us are sinners – priests, monastics, bishops, archbishops, metropolitans, patriarchs, clergy and people alike – we can and must be and do as St. Paul exhorts: Let us cling to good; let us show kind affection to with another with brotherly, sisterly, love. Let us rejoice in hope and continue in repentance, seeking always to overcome that which holds us back in the submission to His Will. For the Lord is our Shepherd, and none other!

To Jesus Christ be all honor and glory forever!

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