

THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

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Session 8: Eschatology and Spirituality

Living in this world; the Second Coming; Holiness, Saints and Mariology

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I. The Eighth Day

"The number eight was, for ancient Christianity, the symbol of the Resurrection, for it was on the day after the Sabbath, and so the eighth day, that Christ rose from the tomb. Furthermore, the seven days of the week are the image of the time of this world, and the eighth day of life everlasting. Sunday is the liturgical commemoration of the eighth day, at the same time a memorial of the Resurrection and a prophecy of the world to come ..."

(J. Danielou, *The Bible and the Liturgy*)

The number eight has symbolical significance in both Jewish and Christian spiritual tradition. It signifies more than completion and fullness; it signifies the Kingdom of God and the life of the world to come since seven is the number of earthly time. The sabbath, the seventh day, is the blessed day of rest in this world, the final day of the week. The "first day of the week," the day "after Sabbath"; stressed in all of the gospels as the day of Christ's Resurrection (Mk 16.1, Mt 28.1, Lk 24.1, Jn 20.1, 19), is therefore also "the eighth day," the day beyond the confines of this world, the day which stands for the life of the world to come, the day of the eternal rest of the Kingdom of God (see Heb 4).

100 AD BARNABAS: We keep the eighth day [Sunday] with joyfulness, the day also on which Jesus rose again from the dead. Moreover God says to the Jews, 'Your new moons and Sabbaths I cannot endure.' You see how he says, 'The present Sabbaths are not acceptable to me, but the Sabbath which I have made in which, when I have rested [heaven: Heb 4] from all things, I will make the beginning of the eighth day which is the beginning of another world.' Wherefore we Christians keep the eighth day for joy, on which also Jesus arose from the dead and when he appeared ascended into heaven. (The Epistle of Barnabas 15:6-9, The Epistle of Barnabas, 100 AD, Ante-Nicene Fathers , vol. 1, pg. 147)

250AD CYPRIAN: The eight day, that is, the first day after the Sabbath, and the Lord's Day." (Epistle 58, Sec 4)

400AD ST. AUGUSTINE: ... an eighth and eternal day, consecrated by the Resurrection of Christ ... There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise. (*City of God*, Book 22, Chapter 30)

II. What Christians Do in the In-between Time

Everything is realized and completed in Christ, but not yet in those who belong to him. As St Paul writes to the Christians in Ephesus, "we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (4:15). Where Christ is, the body, the Church, must follow. The Church lives in and by the power of the risen Christ, and at the same time it moves toward the future, toward the full realization of him and his resurrection.¹ Then shall salvation be consummated—the new creation will be completed at the time of his parousia.

St Paul's comparison and contrast of Adam and Christ indicates that Christ is the Lord for every man and not only for those who are "in Christ."² It is thus the role of the Church in the world to work for the salvation of all, "to unite all things in him" (Eph 1:10), "for in him all things were created" (Col 1:16). This link between the resurrection and the world mission of the Church is quite inescapable. The risen Christ goes before his disciples to Galilee, where they will see him. He sends them to make disciples of all nations. Beginning in Jerusalem, they are to be witnesses to his resurrection, and as the Father has sent him, even so he sends them forth (Mk 16:15; Mt 28:18-20; Lk 24:46-49; Jn 20:21).

On the first day of the week, on the first morning after the seventh day (the Sabbath), the women discovered the tomb empty and Christ appeared to them. This is the day of resurrection, the first day of the new creation. To mark its transcendent character, revealed in the events that happened on this "chosen and holy day," the early Christians started calling it the "eighth day." So crucial was this day that they had to name it with a name that goes beyond the accepted notion of a seven-day week, that points to the completion of time already in this age. The "eighth day," the first day of the first new week, gives new meaning to all other days of the week, of the year and of history.

The risen Christ challenges the world from beyond as well as from within history. He ascended to the Father, yet he "abides with his disciples forever."³ He has promised to be with them "always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28:20).⁴ His is the transcending presence which brings together the past and the future. The Church "remembers" his resurrection, which occurred in the past, and makes it present in its life and in the life of its members. But, paradoxically, the Church

¹ The relationship between the resurrection and the parousia is fully discussed in F. X. Durrwell, *The Resurrection: A Biblical Study*. Durrwell writes that the Church "is moving toward an event which historically happened before she existed, the event of Easter" (279). A movement toward the parousia is a movement toward Christ's resurrection (282).

² See John G. Gibbs, *Creation and Redemption: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971) 135f.

³ Kontakion of the Feast of the Ascension.

⁴ We have a vision of the risen and ascended Son of Man in the book of Revelation, standing in the midst of seven lampstands, which are the local churches of the world. The churches are distinct from each other, yet they are united in the Son of Man, who is present among them. G. E. Caird points out that it is of great importance for our understanding of the doctrine of Christ in Revelation that the book begins with this first statement about the heavenly Christ among his churches. "He is no absentee, who has withdrawn from earth at his Ascension, to return only at his Parousia . . . The first characteristic of Christ revealed to John in his vision is that he is present among the earthly congregations of his people." G. E. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 24f.

also "remembers" the future, the Christ of the parousia. In the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, after the words of institution of the eucharist, the priest says: "Remembering this saving commandment and all those things which have come to pass for us: the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the Ascension into heaven, the Sitting at the right hand, and the second and glorious Coming . . ." The resurrection of Christ, in the life and mind of the Church, is not merely of the past, and neither is the second coming only of the future.⁵

On Pentecost we have the final fulfillment of the mission of Jesus Christ and the first beginning of the messianic age of the Kingdom of God mystically present in this world in the Church of the Messiah. For this reason, the fiftieth day stands as the beginning of the era which is beyond the limitations of this world, fifty being that number which stands for eternal and heavenly fulfillment in Jewish and Christian mystical piety: seven times seven, plus one.

Pentecost is called an apocalyptic day, which means the day of final revelation. It is also called an eschatological day, which means the day of the final and perfect end (in Greek eschaton means the end). For when the Messiah comes and the Lord's Day is at hand, the "last days" are inaugurated in which "God declares: . . . I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh."; This is the ancient prophecy to which the Apostle Peter refers in the first sermon of the Christian Church which was preached on the first Sunday of Pentecost (Acts 2:17; Joel 2: 28–32).

III. The End Time

Revelation chapters 16 and 20 portray God's universal judgement on "the Day of the LORD," at the "end of the world," as expressed in Isaiah 24.21-22:

On that day the LORD will punish the host of heaven, in heaven, and the kings of the earth, on the earth. They will be gathered together as prisoners in a pit; they will be shut up in a prison, and after many days they will be punished.

I. Revelation Chapter 16: The Egyptian Plagues Are Visited upon the Faithless.

- A. The seven bowls are poured out in the manner of libations on the altar, but they are turned around. They are now plagues sent by God against his own people for their faithlessness. Moses warned the people in Deuteronomy 28.58-60: "If you are not careful to do all the words of this Law..., then the LORD...will bring upon you again all the diseases of Egypt, which you were afraid of; and they shall cleave to you."

⁵ John D. Zizioulas speaks about the Church's "memory of the future" in connection with the liturgy, and stresses that history can no longer be understood simply as past. See his "Apostolic Continuity and Orthodox Theology: Towards a Synthesis of Two Perspectives," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 19:2 (1975) 83. See also the interesting comments on this aspect of the Orthodox liturgy by C. H. Dodd, in his *Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961). "All through" the liturgy, Dodd notes, "the remembrance of the coming of Christ in history, and the hope of His eternal Kingdom, are inextricably bound together with the sense of His presence with His Church. The worshippers are placed within that moment at which the Kingdom of God came, and experience sacramentally its coming, both as a fact secure within the historical order and as the eternal reality whose full meaning can never be known to men on earth" (164, n1).

- B. Verse 15 gives the thrust of the chapter: "Behold, I come as a thief; blessed is he who maintains vigil and keeps his garments...." Here, as throughout the book, the author preaches repentance, perseverance and patient endurance for his persecuted flock.

- B. Verse 16: God assembles the evil spirits and the kings of the whole earth at Armageddon (Hebrew for or "Mount of [final] Rendezvous," i.e. as in the place of the "Last Stand," specifically, Jerusalem/Mt. of Olives, though often interpreted as "Mount of Megiddo").
 - 1. Megiddo, in northern Palestine, was scene for the defeat of the Canaanite kings in Judges 5.19, and it was site of the tragic death of King Josiah in 2 Chronicles 35.22-25.
 - 2. Megiddo was located at a strategic mountain pass and was the site of many wars for control of the route between Mesopotamia and Egypt for trade and military dominance. The Megiddo pass became a symbol of disaster and was a natural setting for the expected final battle (just as in our time we speak of where we expect World War III to start).
 - 3. Jews expect the Messiah to come into Jerusalem from the Mt. of Olives.
 - 4. As Jesus Ascended from the Mt. of Olives, He is expected to return there "in glory, to judge the living and the dead."

- C. Verse 17: Now that all parties are assembled for the battle, the seventh (i.e., final) bowl is poured out, and the loud voice proclaims that the end has come.

- D. Verse 21: Even this final assault does not cause the wicked to repent and acknowledge God's sovereignty, but they continue in their blasphemy.

Chapter 20: Satan and His Agents Are Imprisoned, and the Saints Rule with Christ for 1000 years.

- E. This chapter is related to chapter 16 and follows from it, but not in a manner of chronological succession. Scenes in the Apocalypse from a series of kaleidoscopic images expressing God's ultimate victory for his people and encouraging the faithful to persevere for the promised reward.

- F. Verses 2-3: Satan has been defeated and bound already, but will be loosed at the end of 1000 years, an indeterminately long period of time.
 - 1. A millennial period or messianic era was a popular notion in first century Judaism.
 - 2. The book of 2 Enoch considers a day to be 1000 years; thus the seventh day is a day of rest, the messianic age of 1000 years; the eighth day is the "time where there is no computation and no end, neither weeks, nor days, nor hours."
 - 3. The "millennium" is between the end of creation and the coming of the eternal age "in glory."
 - 4. The Church and the saints live now in both the seventh and eighth days.

5. Some early Christians, usually members of deviant sects, believed in a literal millennial period.
 6. The Third Ecumenical Council in Ephesus (in 431 A.D.) spoke of chiliasm, the belief in the earthly reign of Christ incarnate which would usher in the final coming of the Kingdom, as a deviation and a fable.
 7. Even after this, Joachim of Flora in the 12th century taught that the millennium would begin in 1260. Chiliastic teachings are also to be found among the followers of John Hus, the Anabaptists, the Mormons, the Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses and among Pentecostal groups.
- G. Verse 5: The "first resurrection" is that in which only the saints participate, reigning with Christ for 1000 years, while the rest of the people are dead. This is initiation in the life in Christ through Baptism (death and resurrection in Christ). The saints then become "a royal priesthood and a holy nation."
- H. Verse 7: Satan will be released from prison for the final battle, the battle previously described in chapter 16, vv. 16ff.
- I. Verse 8: Gog and Magog epitomize Satan's earthly allies in the Old Testament and other Jewish literature (cf. Ezekiel 38.1-3, 8, 11, 14).
- J. Verse 10: Satan is ultimately destroyed, in the battle at Armageddon, and is thrown into the lake of fire.
- K. Verse 12: Judgement is according to one's works. The "books" are those in which are recorded one's good and evil deeds; the "book" is the book of life in which the names of the righteous are inscribed.
- L. Verse 13: All who died, even the evil, will rise to stand for God's judgement.
- M. Verse 14: The second death is not the physical death but condemnation to eternal punishment at the final judgement. "Death and Hades" itself will be cast into the lake of fire, signaling the end of the mortal era of the seventh day.

IV. Judgement

Sin

Where westerners think of sin as particular offenses, Orthodox conceive of sin as the state of being anything less than equal to God in perfection, but we are trying to work at growing into His image and likeness. Thus, we are all sinners, and Orthodox acknowledge this all the time. In the Lord's Prayer, the prayer that sets the pattern for all prayers, we ask for forgiveness. In the most used Psalm of all, Psalm 50/51, along with David we ask for God's mercy and declare that "in sins did my mother bear me." In the Jesus Prayer, which can be repeated unceasingly, we acknowledge, "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner." Were only those who are sinless--by this definition of sin--to be admitted to Communion, no one would ever be in

Communion. As the article states, we need to be fed on the Body and Blood of Jesus to have the nourishment and strength necessary to work on growing toward perfection, unto "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

There are, however, limits, as St. Anastasios of Antioch wrote in this article: "Then let us partake of the Holy Mysteries, believing that the reception of the divine Mysteries is unto remission of sins and purification. But if we also commit grave sins which are evil, carnal and impure, and we have rancor towards our brother, until we worthily repent of these sins, let us not boldly approach the divine Mysteries."

Theosis

Theosis ("deification," "divinization") is the process of a worshiper becoming free of *hamartía* ("missing the mark"), being united with God, beginning in this life and later consummated in bodily resurrection. For Orthodox Christians, *Théōsis* (see 2 Peter 1:4) is salvation. *Théōsis* assumes that humans from the beginning are made to share in the Life or Nature of the all-Holy Trinity.

The statement by St. Athanasius of Alexandria, "The Son of God became man, that we might become god", [the second g is always lowercase since man can never become a God] indicates the concept beautifully. 2 Peter 1:4 says that we have become " . . . partakers of divine nature." Athanasius amplifies the meaning of this verse when he says ***theosis* is "becoming by grace what God is by nature"** (*De Incarnatione*, I).

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature. (2 Pe 1:3-4)

For a child (how the Old Testament is our *paidagogos*), one begins with fear of punishment, then God draws those who are older with a future reward, then we finally get to selfless desire to do for others out of love.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. (John 13:34)

And now I beg you, lady, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning, that we love one another. (2 John 1:5)

Faith *and* Works – the right thing *and* for the right reason

Matthew 25

And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Mat 25:46)

1Co 13:1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

1Co 13:2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

1Co 13:3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Judgment by His mere presence

Psa 68:1 Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered; let those who hate him flee before him!

Psa 68:2 As smoke is driven away, so drive them away; as wax melts before fire, let the wicked perish before God!

Psa 68:3 But let the righteous be joyful; let them exult before God; let them be jubilant with joy!

God is Light/Fire

Heb 12:29 for our God is a consuming fire.

Isa 48:10 Behold, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.

Psa 12:6 The promises of the LORD are promises that are pure, silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times.

1Co 3:12 Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw--

1Co 3:13 each man's work will become manifest; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.

Moses saw God in the Burning Bush but was told that, because of his sins, he could not see God and live

Exo 33:20 But," he said, "you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live."

Exo 33:21 And the LORD said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock;

Exo 33:22 and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by;

Exo 33:23 then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

Luk 5:8 But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

V. Holiness, Morality and Ethics

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness. (Rom 6:3-13)

"You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." Mt. 5:48

"Be holy, for I am holy..." Lev. 11:44 & 45

"But as He who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct." 1 Pet. 1:15

See the Sermon on the Mount for many commandments for ethical living. Mt. 5-7

"As you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it unto me." Mt. 25:40

Natural Law: "All who have sinned without the law will perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law unto themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus." Rom. 2:12-16

From *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles or Didache*

1:1 There are two paths, one of life and one of death, and the difference is great between the two paths.

1:2 Now the path of life is this -- first, thou shalt love the God who made thee, thy neighbour as thyself, and all things that thou wouldest not should be done unto thee, do not thou unto another.

1:3 And the doctrine of these maxims is as follows. Bless them that curse you, and pray for your enemies. Fast on behalf of those that persecute you; for what thank is there if ye love them that love you? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? But do ye love them that hate you, and ye will not have an enemy.

1:4 Abstain from fleshly and worldly lusts. If any one give thee a blow on thy right cheek, turn unto him the other also, and thou shalt be perfect; if any one compel thee to go a mile, go with him two; if a man take away thy cloak, give him thy coat also; if a man take from thee what is thine, ask not for it again, for neither art thou able to do so.

2:1 But the second commandment of the teaching is this.

2:2 Thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not commit adultery; thou shalt not corrupt youth; thou shalt not commit fornication; thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not use soothsaying; thou shalt not practise sorcery; thou shalt not kill a child by abortion, neither shalt thou slay it when born; thou shalt not covet the goods of thy neighbour;

2:3 thou shalt not commit perjury; thou shalt not bear false witness; thou shalt not speak evil; thou shalt not bear malice;

2:4 thou shalt not be double-minded or double-tongued, for to be double tongued is the snare of death.

2:5 Thy speech shall not be false or empty, but concerned with action.

2:6 Thou shalt not be covetous, or rapacious, or hypocritical, or malicious, or proud; thou shalt not take up an evil design against thy neighbour;

2:7 thou shalt not hate any man, but some thou shalt confute, concerning some thou shalt pray, and some thou shalt love beyond thine own soul.

3:1 My child, fly from everything that is evil, and from everything that is like to it.

3:2 Be not wrathful, for wrath leadeth unto slaughter; be not jealous, or contentious, or quarrelsome, for from all these things slaughter ensues.

3:3 My child, be not lustful, for lust leadeth unto fornication; be not a filthy talker; be not a lifter up of the eye, for from all these things come adulteries.

3:4 My child, be not an observer of omens, since it leadeth to idolatry, nor a user of spells, nor an astrologer, nor a travelling purifier, nor wish to see these things, for from all these things idolatry ariseth.

3:5 My child, be not a liar, for lying leadeth unto theft; be not covetous or conceited, for from all these things thefts arise.

3:6 My child, be not a murmurer, since it leadeth unto blasphemy; be not self-willed or evil-minded, for from all these things blasphemies are produced;

3:7 but be thou meek, for the meek shall inherit the earth;

3:8 be thou longsuffering, and compassionate, and harmless, and peaceable, and good, and fearing alway the words that thou hast heard.

3:9 Thou shalt not exalt thyself, neither shalt thou put boldness into thy soul. Thy soul shall not be joined unto the lofty, but thou shalt walk with the just and humble.

3:10 Accept the things that happen to thee as good, knowing that without God nothing happens.

"The mystery of the Holy Trinity points to the relational character of the good. We are created in the image and likeness of a Trinity of Persons. Thus, ultimate truth is a community of divine persons. The ethic, then, of the Gospel which is based on that goodness,...will see the very nature of goodness which is personal, and as a consequence, relational and communal." Toward Transfigured Life Fr. Stanley Harakas, p. 27.

"In the Christian Church, and particularly in the tradition of the Orthodox East, the problem of human morality has always been identified with the existential truth of man. Morality is not an objective measure for evaluating character and behavior, but the dynamic response of personal freedom to the existential truth and authenticity of man." From The Freedom of Morality by Christos Yannaras, p. 15.

"The concept of ethics, then, which stems from the interpretation of sin as failure and 'missing the mark' does not depend on the conventional social idea of 'good' and 'evil, of merit or transgression; it involves the dilemma between life and death, between existential truth and authenticity on the one side, and existential deprivation and corruption on the other." From The Freedom of Morality by Christos Yannaras, pp. 36-37

VI. Saints

When one enters a traditional Orthodox church building, he finds himself surrounded on all sides by icons of Christ and the saints. Every bit of wall and ceiling may be covered. They manifest the truth that: "*Therefore, **since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses**, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us*" (Hebrews 12.1).

There are in the Church a number of saints who were theologians and spiritual teachers who defended and explained the doctrines of the Christian Faith. These saints are called the holy

fathers of the Church and their teachings are called the patristic teachings (*patristic* is from the Greek word for *father*). ... The doctrine of the Church comes alive in the lives of the true believers, the saints. The saints are those who literally share the holiness of God. "Be holy, for I your God am holy" (Lev 11.44; 1 Pet 1.16). The lives of the saints bear witness to the authenticity and truth of the Christian gospel, the sure gift of God's holiness to men.

From Thomas Hopko, *The Orthodox Faith*

VII. Mariology

The issue of Mary involves saints in general - holy people, of whom Mary is the first. She totally, voluntarily submitted to God's will. She did not have to say, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to thy will" (Luke 1.38). Being like us in every way, human and no more, she was totally obedient and holy. She was thus not a passive conduit but an active participant in God's plan of salvation.

This really a very simple and natural thing for us to pray to/for the departed and to ask for their prayers as well. It stems from our firm belief in the Resurrection. One who is baptized has died with Christ risen with Him to begin eternal life (cf. Romans 6). Thus, we never speak of a Christian as having died but as having 'fallen asleep' or 'departed this life.' One who is a member of the Body of Christ is, by definition, alive. It is an unthinkable denial of the Faith to consider that Christ or any member of his Body is dead!

Given the full implications of the Resurrection, therefore, it is no different to pray for the departed or to ask them to pray for us than it is for you and me to pray for one another. I'm sure you pray for your family and others, and they even seek your prayers on their behalf, yet you never look at that as someone coming in between you and the Father as an intermediary. We can address the Father Himself in prayer (cf. John 16.26-27), and we can at the same time seek the prayers and intercessions of one another.

In seeking prayer support from others, furthermore, to whom would you turn?: to the notorious sinner or to those who are manifestly righteous and devout? Clearly the latter. It is precisely for this reason that we seek the prayers of Mary and the other saints: they persevered in the Faith to the end of their lives. Their witness and example are clear. They are human beings exactly like us in every way, and their sanctity is evident. We have confidence in their prayers, coupled with our own: "Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects" (James 5.16). Again, I hasten to add, and God is not limited by our limitations of time and space, but His Kingdom (i.e. the Church, the Body of Christ) already encompasses the fullness of all those who are saved, from the beginning to the end of time. While there is a physical separation between us and those who have gone before us, we are not cut off from one another, and we are all one together in the Mystery of the Body of Christ.

The Church has ALWAYS maintained that Mary was ever-virgin. Besides the unbroken tradition of the Church from the time of the Apostles, there are indications from Scripture that Mary had no other children. First of all, we must realize the Church is not composed of ignorant people, and, while we say that Mary was ever-Virgin, we do give people such as James, Bishop of Jerusalem, the epithet

"Brother of the Lord." We recognize that the New Testament speaks of the brothers and sisters of Jesus. We also recognize that in the language and culture of the time the term "brother" and the "term" sister did NOT exclusively denote siblings but was used more generally for relatives, especially for cousins. In our language, for example, "James the Brother of the Lord" would be called "James the Cousin of the Lord." To demonstrate this, cf. Mat. 13.55 with Mark 15.40 with John 19.25. You see that James and Joses were sons of Mary - NOT Mary the Mother of Jesus but Mary the wife Cleopas. Furthermore, Mary the wife of Cleopas is called "his [Jesus'] mother's sister." Clearly they are sisters in the sense of being relatives rather than siblings, for no set of parents would ever give two children the same name! Furthermore, if Mary, Jesus' mother, had other children, why would Jesus, from the Cross, ask John to take care of her (cf. John 19.26)? Indeed we know that from that time, John took care of Mary, and she lived with him in Ephesus until her departure from this life.

Also, looking at Mary as the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah, she is known as the living Temple and the living Ark, in that the Son of God dwelt bodily in her virginal womb. References to the Old Testament Temple find their typological counterpart and fulfillment in the person Mary. Cf., for example, Ezekiel 44.1-3 (read from the beginning of ch. 43 to get the context): only the Lord entered the Temple and the door was shut; no one else could ever enter. Mary is, in a sense, the "Bride of God." It is, therefore, unthinkable that Mary could forsake her Bridegroom and bear children with mere men after that! It is no small matter to know that you have carried and given birth to your God and Creator, that her womb contained Him Whom the heavens themselves cannot circumscribe. Again, it is utterly unthinkable to think that, after that, any other child could occupy that space. That would violate the biblical understanding of holiness. Something is holy because it has been claimed by God and dedicated to his exclusive service. The Temple and the altar and vessels therein are holy because they are consecrated - set apart - for God's use alone. They are not to be 'profaned' by any common use now that they have been claimed by and for God. So it is with Mary, as the Ark and Temple of the Living God.

Fr. Nabil Hanna

1) Mary as a *Type* of the Church

- a) Jacob's Ladder, uniting heaven and earth, the "House of God," the "Gate of Heaven," Gen. 28.10-17
- b) The living Temple of God, filled with divine glory: Ezek. 43.27-44.4
- c) The House that Wisdom built, Prov. 9.1-11
- d) The Bush that burns yet is not consumed, Gen. 3
- e) The Ark
- f) The faithful and obedient, 2 Cor. 6.11, Isa. 52.11
- g) The new Eve: Mother of all living; mother of John the Disciple who was faithful at the cross

- 2) Ever-virginity
 - a) Mt.1.25: "but he knew her not until [Gk., *heos*] she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus."
 - b) English "until" renders the Greek, *heos, achri, mechri*
 - c) Cf. Mt. 5.18; Lk. 20.43||Ps. 110.1; Mt. 28.20
 - d) Brothers and Sisters of Jesus
- 3) Other Titles
 - a) Most Holy
 - b) Immaculate
 - c) Most Blessed
 - d) Glorious
 - e) Lady
 - f) Theotokos
- 4) Veneration
 - a) Magnificat, Lk. 1.47-50ff.
 - b) Blessed is the one who hears the Word of God and keeps it, Lk. 11.27-28 (Conceived through her ear!)
 - c) Psalm 45.10-17
 - d) Archeological evidence of 1st century shrines in Nazareth and Ephesus
 - e) Icon painted by the Evangelist Luke
 - f) Apparitions
 - g) Healings/miracles
- 5) "Most holy Theotokos, save us." Cf. Rom. 11.14, 1 Cor. 9.22, Jude 23
- 6) Why not any other virgin?
- 7) References

Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary through the Centuries: Her place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1996).

The following hymn to the Mother of God was found by archaeologists in Egypt on papyrus documents that date from the first century, and it continues to be used to this day:

Beneath thy compassion we take refuge, O Theotokos. Despise not our supplications in our necessity, but deliver us from harm, O only pure, only blessed one.

Facing Up to Mary

By Fr. Peter E. Gillquist



Is it safe to say that no woman in history is more misunderstood by modern Christendom than the Virgin Mary? And is it also probable that in a discussion concerning Mary between two Christians, if their differences remain unresolved, most likely it will be due to differing interpretations of the biblical data? If I have heard him say it once, I have heard Billy Graham say it at least a half-dozen times over the years: We evangelical Christians do not give Mary her proper due. There is no doubt in my mind that he is correct. But his statement raises a crucial question about Mary. What is her proper due? Before we look to the Scriptures for some answers, let us acknowledge right up front a problem which makes our task much more difficult than it should be. The highly charged emotional atmosphere which surrounds this subject serves to blunt our objectivity in facing up to Mary. Therefore, those of us who were brought up to question or reject honor paid to Mary in Christian worship or art often have our minds made up in advance. That is why we have allowed our preconceptions to color our understanding even of the scriptural passages concerning her. We have not let the facts speak for themselves. As we attempt to face up to Mary honestly and openly, let us turn first to the Bible, the source book of all true Christian doctrine. We will consider what the New Testament teaches about her, and then

we will turn to the Old Testament. To understand how the biblical record has been applied through the years by Christians, we will look specifically at Church history to understand both how she has been properly honored, and how excessive beliefs concerning her have crept into the picture. Lastly, we will look at how we must face up to her in light of the fullness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

VIII. THE NEW TESTAMENT RECORD

What is it, then, that the New Testament clearly teaches concerning the Virgin Mary? The Gospel of Saint Luke, the book of the beloved physician, gives us at least four crucial answers.

IX. 1. Mary is the greatest woman who ever lived.

Whereas our Lord Jesus Christ tells us there is no greater man to walk the earth than John the Baptist, both the Archangel Gabriel and the saintly Elizabeth confess to Mary, “Blessed are you among women” (Luke 1:28 and 42). She is the most blessed of women for several reasons, the greatest of which is that she conceived, carried, gave birth to, and nurtured the very Savior of our souls. The One who today occupies the heavenly throne of David, seated regally at the right hand of God the Father, entered the human race and became our Savior through her womb. She was sovereignly chosen by the Father to bear His only begotten Son. In that role, Mary is the first person in all history to receive and accept Christ as her Savior. You and I are called to enthrone the Lord in our hearts and lives—to follow her example in doing so. Early in Christian history she is called “the first of the redeemed.” I remember entering a church some years ago and seeing a painting or icon of Mary with open arms front and center on the wall (the apse) just behind the altar. My first impulse was to wonder why Christ alone was not featured at that particular place in the church, though He was shown in a large circle that was superimposed over Mary’s heart. When I asked why she was so prominently featured, the Christian scholar with me explained, “This is one of the greatest evangelistic icons in the entire Church. What you see is Christ living as Lord in Mary’s life, and her outstretched arms are an invitation to you and me to let Him live in our lives as He has in hers.” The power of that icon stays in my mind to this day. For she has set the pace for all of us to personally give our lives over fully to Jesus Christ. Mary is also blessed because she found favor in the sight of God. Gabriel’s words of encouragement to her were, “Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28). Then he comforted her by saying, “Do not be afraid, Mary, *for you have found favor with God*” (Luke 1:30, italics mine). What does one do to become one of God’s favorites, to be favored by Him? Remember Cornelius in Acts 10? He was the first Gentile to convert to Christ, “a devout man and one who . . . gave alms generously to the people, and prayed to God always” (Acts 10:2). Two verses later he is told in a vision, “Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God.” The Lord took notice of his deeds of devotion and brought him salvation. In a similar way, Mary’s purity found favor with God, and she was chosen to bear His Son. You say, “Wait a minute! Are you suggesting human merit earns salvation?” Not at all! As commendable as it is for us to live in purity, a devout life never merits salvation. Else why would Mary be called first of the *redeemed*, or why would Cornelius be *baptized* into Christ by Saint Peter? Prayer and devotion, however, do gain God’s attention. When we seek Him with all our hearts, we do find Him! Do you want to be favored of God? Then give Him everything you have, give Him your very life. This is precisely what Mary did, and why she is to be considered the greatest woman who ever lived.

X. 2. Mary is our model for Christian service.

While God certainly knew Mary desired to please Him, He did not take her service for granted. The angel explained how she would bear Christ. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest [God the Father] will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). Now Mary had a decision to make. Was she willing? Hear her answer, for it is the doorway to the life of spiritual service for all of us. “Behold the maidservant of the Lord!” she said. “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Even if we are totally sincere about wanting to follow God, He will never conscript us apart from our consent! This is why He is called “the God of all grace” (1 Peter 5:10). We are to choose freely to obey Him and do His will. Some thirty years later, by the way, Mary again had opportunity to exalt her Lord. She was with Jesus at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. The servants who were in charge of the celebration discovered they were out of wine. Mary had no doubt as to who could solve their problem. Referring to her Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, she advised them, “Whatever He says to you, do it” (John 2:5).

XI. 3. Mary is the Mother of God.

Now things get a bit more touchy for some of us. Here is one of those emotional trouble spots I mentioned earlier. Whether we like to face it or not, the Bible teaches Mary is the mother of God. First let’s look at the text, then we will discuss why this title is so important to our lives as Christians in the Church. After Christ had been conceived in her womb, Mary paid a visit to the home of relatives Zacharias and Elizabeth, soon to be parents of John the Baptist. When Mary greeted her cousin, Elizabeth called her blessed and said, “Why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Luke 1:43). Elizabeth knew that her Lord, the Messiah of Israel, was in the womb of Mary. The title “Mother of God” took on great importance in the fifth century, when a heretic named Nestorius—a man who held high office in the Church—claimed that the one in Mary’s womb was certainly man, but that He was not God. Orthodox Christians, with one accord, said, “Wrong!” To see Jesus Christ as something less than God in the flesh is sub-Christian. For unless the one in Mary’s womb was and is God, we are dead in our sins. To safeguard the full deity of Christ, the Church has always insisted that Mary be rightly called—as Elizabeth called her—the Mother of God. This title, of course, does not mean mother of the Holy Trinity, for the Holy Trinity has no mother. Neither does it mean she originated the Person who is God the Son. It refers instead to Mary being the Mother of the Son of God, who assumed full humanity in her womb. Just as we insist on the Virgin Birth of Christ, we also insist that for the nine months Mary carried Him in His humanity He was at every moment fully God as well. Thus we say boldly and with great insistence that Mary is the Mother of God, *Theotokos*, God-bearer. To say anything less is to side with those who deny His deity. When a man buys a large plot of land and turns cattle out to graze on it, he fences in his acreage. He does so to protect his cattle, to keep them from wandering off, and to discourage rustlers. Similarly, the Church sets doctrinal fences around its foundational truths. And nothing is more basic and important to us than the deity of Christ. Because Christ is God, we set a firm and non-negotiable fence around His divinity by our unmovable confession that Mary is Mother of God.

XII.4. We are to honor Mary and call her blessed.

Now comes the toughest test of all. Not only is Mary the most blessed of women, our model for obedience, and the Mother of God, we are called to honor her and to bless her. How do we

know? The Bible tells us so. During her three-month stay at Elizabeth's house, Mary offered one of the most beautiful prayers of praise to the Lord in all the Scriptures. It begins, "My soul magnifies the Lord," and thus it has become known as "The Magnificat." In that prayer, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Mary prophesied, "henceforth all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48). Essentially, all generations in Church history have done so; only the last few centuries have faltered. Our generation of American Christians is filled with those who refuse to bless her, and we must change our ways. For some Christian bodies have come to stand dogmatically against Christ and the New Testament by refusing to bless her. From the beginning of recorded Christian worship, Orthodox Christians have taken special care to venerate or honor Mary in the Liturgy. There is an ancient hymn which begins, "It is truly right to bless you, O Theotokos (Mother of God)." She is also called in this hymn "ever-blessed and most pure." The biblical injunction to honor Mary is followed and taken seriously. We do not, of course, worship Mary, for worship is reserved for the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But she is most certainly to be honored and venerated. And because Christ is our elder brother, the firstborn of many brethren, we honor the Virgin Mary as our Mother, our Lady, as well. Just as Eve was mother of the old Adamic race, so Mary is the true Mother of the new race, the Body of Christ, the Church. Perhaps in part because we refuse to honor Mary, our generation seems to struggle with honoring anyone. For example, next time a presidential news conference comes on T.V., watch closely how most of the press corps behave! Far from merely trying to get the story, many are out for intimidation and willful dishonor. While God's word tells us to honor the king (1 Peter 2:17) and to give preference to each other (Romans 12:10), our generation seems to delight in challenging and humiliating other people, especially those in authority. Not only are we who are Bible-believing Christians urged to give honor to whom honor is due (Romans 13:7), we are called by God in no uncertain terms to bless the Mother of our God. We cannot get around that point in Scripture.

XIII. THE OLD TESTAMENT AND MARY

We know that the Old Testament is more than just an inspired account of the history of mankind, or of Israel in particular. In its pages—indeed central to its message—is also the prophetic record concerning our Lord Jesus Christ. He is typified throughout. Moses is a type of Christ, in that he leads the people out of bondage into the land of promise. David typifies Christ as King of Israel. Adam was a type of Christ as head of the human race. Often overlooked, however, is the fact that the Virgin Mary is also seen in the prophetic pages of the Old Testament. Most Christians are aware that the Prophet Isaiah predicts Mary's virgin conception of Christ when he writes: "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). But there are numerous other passages which speak of Mary as well.

XIV. EVER-VIRGIN

From the very early years of the Church, Mary was called not only Virgin, but Ever-Virgin. She was seen as never having had a sexual union with Joseph, before or after the birth of Christ. Ezekiel 44:1-2 is a passage often referred to by the early Fathers in this regard. It states: "Then He brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary which faces toward the east, but it was shut. And the LORD said to me, 'This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter by it, because the LORD God of Israel has entered by it; therefore it shall be shut.' "In

traditional interpretation of this passage, Mary is the temple and Christ is the Prince of Peace. The gate mentioned is seen as a picture of Christ's passage through the door of Mary's womb. You might not find that interpretation in some of today's commentaries, but it was held by the great majority of early Church Fathers, as well as many of the Reformation leaders. At this point, however, a very valid question can be raised. If she remained a virgin, why does the Gospel of Matthew tell us that Joseph knew not his wife until Christ was born (Matthew 1:25)? From a scriptural standpoint, the presence of the phrase, "*until* she had brought forth her firstborn Son" does not automatically mean that Joseph must have known her afterward. This is because in both Greek and Hebrew the words *until* and *to* can have several different meanings. We find it in 2 Samuel 6:23: "Michal the daughter of Saul had no children to [until] the day of her death." It is used again in Matthew 28:20 where the risen Christ says "Lo, I am with you always, even to [until] the end of the age." And in Deuteronomy 34:6 we read that Moses was buried "in a valley in the land of Moab . . . but no one knows his grave to [until] this day." Obviously the use of the word in these passages does not imply that Michal had a child *after* her death, that Christ *will depart* at the end of the age, or that Moses' burial place was discovered *the day* Deuteronomy 34:6 was written. By the same token, the word *until* in Matthew 1:25 does not mean that Joseph and Mary began a sexual union after Christ was born. Such a teaching is found nowhere in Scripture and is contrary to the consistent voice of the entire early Church. But doesn't the Bible also mention other brothers and sisters of Christ? Who are they and where did they come from? For one thing, they are never directly called the sons and daughters of Mary and Joseph. In several passages the Bible speaks of the children or relatives as "brothers." Abraham and Lot are called brothers, although Lot was actually Abraham's nephew. And Jacob and Laban are called brothers, even though Jacob was the son of Rebecca, Laban's sister. Scripture is therefore silent concerning the nature of this relationship between Christ and these brothers and sisters. Early Fathers differed slightly in their understanding of what the terms meant. Some, such as Saint Ambrose, believed that they were children of a former marriage between Joseph and a wife who died prior to Matthew chapter 1. Others taught that they were cousins. But on one point, almost everyone is in agreement: Mary and Joseph had no sexual union whatsoever, before or after the birth of Christ. I must say in all candor that had my betrothed been the woman chosen by the Father to bear His eternal Son in the flesh, my view of her would have been utterly transformed and my honor for her infinitely heightened. Imagine being betrothed to the Mother of God. It was so with Joseph. His betrothed was ever-virgin.

XV.ROYALTY

If we as the Church are called to be "not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but . . . holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:27), does it not follow that she who is the progenitor of the Lord of that Church should be of that same holy character? Not only has Mary by the mercy and power of God conquered both sin and death, the Psalmist sees a glimpse of her in heaven through prophetic eyes. For in Psalm 45, Christ is King and Mary is at His side as Queen and rightly so. If God can make us "kings and priests" (Revelation 1:6) for all eternity, certainly He has the prerogative to crown her with higher honor in heaven's royal procession. Little did John and James realize, the day they argued about which of them might occupy the seat of honor at Christ's right hand in the Kingdom, that God the Father had already reserved that space for the marvelous woman He chose to bear His Son for our salvation. The honor is appropriate for the most blessed of all women, the one who is our very icon of holiness. Who else could be more rightly rewarded? Thus the Psalmist is well within the mark when he writes of Christ, "At Your

right hand stands the queen” (Psalm 45:9)!

XVI. OTHER TRADITIONS

There are two other beliefs concerning Mary that must be briefly mentioned and addressed. The first is her bodily assumption into heaven, the other her immaculate conception. It was widely reported in the early Church that shortly after her death, Mary’s body was assumed into heaven. In later centuries, the Roman Church ratified this belief as dogma, while the Eastern Church withheld such an official imprimatur. Most Christians agree that such a miracle is within the realm of firm biblical precedent, Enoch and Elijah being two examples. Further, there is no known record of any gravesite or relics of the Holy Virgin. The assumption of the Virgin is safely seen as an historic Christian tradition, though not recorded in the Scriptures. The Immaculate Conception of Mary is a doctrine unique to the modern Roman Church. In an effort to distance Mary (and protect Christ) from the stain of sin, the Immaculate Conception holds Mary was conceived and born without sin. The Orthodox Church firmly rejects this doctrine on the basis of both Scripture and tradition. Whatever other excesses may have cropped up in history, the Roman Church has never believed or officially taught that Mary was in any way coequal with the Trinity or was to be worshiped with the Trinity. Such allegations are sometimes set forth by critics of the Roman Church, but without basis in fact.

XVII. THE VESPERS PRAYER

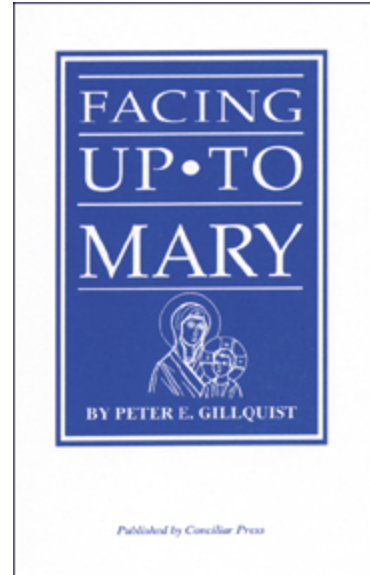
Near the end of Vespers in the Orthodox Church, the officiant says, “O holy Mother of God, save us.” What does this mean? The Orthodox Church has taught from the very beginning that Mary is the supreme example, or prototype, of what happens to a person who fully places trust and faith in God. Everything we aspire to become in Christ, she already is. We are all to “receive” Christ (John 1:12). And as we noted previously, Mary was the first human being who did receive Christ. Out of the millions of “decisions” made for Christ, Mary’s was the first. Therefore, whatever promises the Holy Scriptures hold for us, Mary already possesses. If the sacred Scriptures declare that we are all kings (Revelation 1:6), is it so strange that the Church refers to Mary as Queen? If the Holy Bible promised that you and I shall judge angels (1 Corinthians 6:3), is it so odd that the Church should sing that Mary is “more honorable than the cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the seraphim”? If we who are called “holy brethren” (Hebrews 3:1) are commanded to be holy as God is holy (1 Peter 1:15, 16) and are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1), is it so unthinkable that she whose holy body was the recipient of God Incarnate should be called “most holy” by the Church? If Saint Paul instructs us to “[pray] always . . . for all the saints” (Ephesians 6:18), is it so outrageous to confess with the Church that Holy Mary (along with all the saints who have passed from death to life and continually stand in the presence of Christ) intercedes before her Son on behalf of all men? Mary volitionally relinquished her will to the will of God, thus cooperating fully with the purpose of God. So the original question, “Can Mary save us?” leads to another question: “Can we save others?” Again, the Holy Scriptures speak with resounding clarity. Here are some examples: “Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you” (1 Timothy 4:16). “Let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins” (James 5:20). “And on some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire” (Jude 22, 23). Fire saves (1 Corinthians 3:15), prayer saves (James 5:15), angels

save (Isaiah 63:9), baptism saves (1 Peter 3:21), preaching saves (1 Corinthians 1:21), the Apostle Paul saved (Romans 11:14). New life in Christ, or salvation, is both personal union with Him and an incorporation into the wholeness of the Body, the Church.

Salvation is a Church affair, a Church concern, because we are all affected by it. In another biblical image, salvation is seen as a family matter—God’s family (“the whole family in heaven and earth”—Ephesians 3:15). Everybody gets into the act, so to speak.

Therefore, under Christ we each have a part to play in the corporateness of His saving act. We do not save alone; Mary does not save alone. Jesus Christ is our wellspring of salvation. And He said, “Without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). But, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you” (John 15:7). Mary has a unique role in our salvation because she provided the physical body of Christ and thereby became the “mother” of all those who

would be saved. That is why Jesus, while on the Cross, said to His mother, “Woman, behold your son!” and then said to Saint John, “Behold your mother!” (John 19:26, 27).



XVIII. TAKING ACTION

Many Christians have been grossly misinformed in the last 150 years concerning the historical Church’s view of Mary. Therefore, I would suggest that you keep this booklet and use it to help others when the question arises. And remember also that there are things that are unique to the Virgin Mary. She was the only one who gave her flesh to the Son of God, and she is uniquely to be blessed throughout all generations (Luke 1:48). What we do about Mary is connected directly to what we do about Church. The community of Christ’s followers is called to act together.

Taking action with regard to Mary is not simply personal or private; it has to do with responding as The Church. And where in Christendom has the fullness of truth concerning Mary been preserved? Even most Protestants—both liberal and conservative—know she is slighted in their circles. The answer for Protestants who take the biblical and historical evidence seriously lies neither within the Protestant Churches nor in the Roman Church, with its questionable late dogmatic additions concerning Mary. I urge you to visit and get to know the historic Orthodox Church which has maintained the biblical fidelity concerning Mary and Christian Faith in general. Within the boundaries of Orthodoxy, the faith and practice of the Church safeguard true commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ together with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. It is there that the truths of the Bible are taught in their entirety, where the worship of God is experienced in Spirit and in truth, and where Mary and the great cloud of witnesses for Christ throughout the ages are honored and revered. The hour is at hand for all of us who love Christ and take seriously the Holy Scriptures to set our hearts and minds to giving Holy Mary her proper due in the proper Church. We do so because God has done great things for and through her (Luke 1:49). As Christians we do not live by feelings, we live by faith. Let us once for all rise above those things the devil has sown in our hearts to neutralize us against this precious woman who gave birth to our Savior. Bless her in the midst of God’s people. Follow her example in exalting Christ. Confess her as the Mother of God. Come home to the Church that has kept intact our Holy Faith. And may we help turn our generation back to giving Mary the honor and blessing which God has commanded.

Venerating Icons – It’s So Much Other Than You Think

November 18, 2019 · [Fr. Stephen Freeman](#)



In 1991, I sat in a room at Duke University with Geoffrey Wainwright, Stanely Hauerwas, and Susan O’Keefe. The purpose was the defense of my thesis, “The Icon as Theology.” I was an Episcopal priest, who was turning his doctoral work in Systematic Theology into an M.A. and heading back to parish life (a long story, that). The defense was friendly, thorough, with few surprises. The one major surprise, of course, came from Hauerwas. His question caught me off-guard in that it left behind academic questions and became intensely personal (that’s typical Hauerwas – there are no hiding places). His question was straight-forward:

“Do you believe the veneration of icons to be necessary for salvation?”

The loaded part of the question was quite intentional on his part. Anglican priests take an oath at their ordination that “I believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to contain all things necessary to salvation.” It had been drilled into me at a certain point in my life and my answer should have been a knee-jerk repetition of my vow. Instead, I was mute. What he had done was to bring me to see

something my soul had pushed into the background. What was interesting and academic was suddenly revealed to be a matter of existential authenticity. What did I believe?

After a time of quiet, I stammered out my answer:

“I know that my oath of ordination says that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments contain all things necessary to salvation. However, I believe that the veneration of icons is necessary to its fullness.”

It was the first time the thought had occurred to me. In truth, it would be some years before I fully understood what I had just said. My response was more a matter of instinct than understanding. I *knew* it was true. I was not entirely sure how. The upshot of that day came the next morning. I woke up with a clarity of soul. I knelt by my bed and prayed, “Oh God, make me Orthodox.” I meant two things by that: first, I wanted to become Orthodox; second, God was going to have to *make* me. That second point was simply my awareness of my own cowardice and the duplicity of my soul. It was not an act of bravery or noble conversion. It was an acquiescence in the face of what I now saw to be true. At least half of me wished it weren’t so. The rest of me was willing to be dragged into the Kingdom of God. It took seven years for that prayer to be fulfilled. There were heel marks on the entire length of the path.

Here are some mature reflections on the act of veneration:

No spiritual activity permeates Orthodoxy as much as veneration. For the non-Orthodox, veneration is often mistaken for worship. We kiss icons; sing hymns to saints; cry out “Most Holy Theotokos, save us!” And all of this scandalizes the non-Orthodox who think we have fallen into some backwater of paganized Christianity. It is not unusual to hear Orthodox who more or less apologize for this activity and seek to minimize it. “We are only trying to give honor to the saints, etc.” What is lacking, all too often, is a vigorous explanation for the work of veneration and its central place in the Christian life.

The normal mode of “seeing” in our daily world can be called “objective.” We see things as objects, *and nothing more*. Indeed, we see most people as objects unless

we have reason to do otherwise. Sometimes we see people as objects in order not to see them as otherwise. But this objective viewing is an extremely limited and limiting way of seeing anything. Veneration brings us to a different form of seeing.

It is carefully noted in the accounts of Christ's resurrection that he is unrecognized at first, and on more than one occasion. Mary Magdalen mistakes Him for the gardener. The disciples on the road to Emmaus talk with Him while they are walking but do not recognize Him until the moment at which He disappears. The disciples who are fishing do not recognize Him until after they have a miraculous catch of fish.

The silliest explanations of these failures to recognize are the ones that try to attribute it to grief. The stories clearly have something else in mind. This "something else" is particularly revealed in Christ's encounter with Mary Magdalen. She thinks He is the gardener and wants to know to where the body of Jesus has been moved. But suddenly this "gardener" calls her by name, "Mary." And she recognizes Him.

What has taken place is the change from an *objective* seeing to a *personal* seeing. It is only in the realm of personhood that we experience communion. We do not and cannot commune with "mere" objects. The Resurrection, among many things, represents the triumph of the personal over the objective. The Resurrected Christ cannot be seen in an objective manner, or, at least, He cannot be seen for who He is in such a manner. It would be more accurate, or helpful, to say that He is discerned, or perceived, rather than merely seen. Both "discerned" and "perceived" imply something more from the observer than simple seeing. (In truth, "seeing" should be more than "mere seeing." In Greek, the verb, "to know," is derived from a root meaning "to see.")

Veneration is far more than the acts of bowing, kissing, crossing oneself, offering incense or lighting candles. Those things become *veneration* when they are offered towards the *person* who is made present in an icon. An icon that becomes an object ceases to be a true icon and becomes mere art, or worse, the object of a fetish. The Fathers taught that an "icon makes present that which it represents." The veneration of an icon is an encounter with a *person*.

It is worth noting that in one of the better treatments of the theology of icons – saints are generally painted “face-to-face” rather than in profile. Judas and demons are frequently seen depicted in profile, on the other hand. There are exceptions to this rule, some by the hands of very competent iconographers. Nonetheless, the general observation remains important. We encounter persons, as *person, face-to-face*. The impersonal, objective treatment of another person is an act of shaming and inherently hides our own face from them.

At some point, the Church’s use of iconography became distorted and became the Church’s use of *art*. Art is interesting and serves the end of beauty (when done well). But this development in the Church (primarily in the West, and occasionally in the East as well, as certain styles were copied) represents a turning away from the icon as encounter and the objectification of human beings and nature. It is among the many serious steps that created the notion of a secularized world.

Jesus, as an artistic subject, is equally accessible to all. His use in art renders Him as object. Indeed, Jesus is frequently used to “make a statement.” But this is the anti-icon, the betrayal of the personal as made known to us in the Resurrection. Christ becomes historicized, just one object among many to be dissected and discussed.

Of course, Christians are free. We may decorate our lives with art as we choose so long as we don’t confuse art with iconography, nor religious sentiment with spiritual encounter. But our engagement with art can easily overtake our experience of icons. Our culture knows how to “see” art, but icons remain opaque. Only the true act of veneration reveals what is made present in an icon.

I can recall my first experience with an icon. I had bought a print from St. Vladimir’s and mounted it. I would have it in front of me during my prayer time. I would look and think, and look harder. I think I expected to “see” something or for there to be a trail of thoughts inspired by my looking. But it was simply empty. I was a young college-age Anglican at the time and had no idea how to find my way into the world of an icon.

Some decades later, I became Orthodox, having written a Master's thesis on the theology of icons and come to understand them. The summer following my conversion, I visited St. Vladimir's Seminary for my first time. I was surprised when I walked into the chapel to see that the icon of the Virgin on the iconostasis was the original of the small print I had begun my journey with. And then I could see her. All of the journey seemed intensely personal, without accident or caprice. She had brought me home!

This is something that veneration begins to reveal to us. We do not think about the saints or imagine them. In their icons and our veneration, we come to *know* them. We see them face-to-face and even learn to recognize them and their work and prayers in our daily lives. The world is not accident and caprice. It is deeply intentional and personal, and conspiring towards our salvation.

The "objects" in our lives are nothing of the sort. It is only the dark and callous objectivity of the modern heart that has so disenchanting reality. We imagine ourselves the only sentient beings marooned on a small, blue planet in space. We wonder if there is "life" out there, as if there were anything else anywhere.

The world is icon and sacrament. But it cannot be known until we see it face-to-face. And you will not see anything face-to-face unless and until you venerate it. Veneration is a word that describes the proper attitude to the whole of creation. Listen to these sweet words from St. John of Damascus (7th century):

I honor all matter, and venerate it. Through it, filled, as it were, with a divine power and grace, my salvation has come to me. Was the three-times happy and blessed wood of the Cross not matter? Was the sacred and holy mountain of Calvary not matter? What of the life-giving rock, the Holy Tomb, the source of our resurrection — was it not matter? Is the holy book of the Gospels not matter? Is the blessed table which gives us the Bread of Life not matter? Are the gold and silver, out of which crosses and altar-plate and chalices are made not matter? And before all these things, is not the body and blood of our Lord matter? Either stop venerating all these things, or submit to the tradition of the Church in the venerating of images, honoring God and his friends, and following in this the grace of the Holy Spirit. Do not despise matter, for it is not despicable. Nothing that God has made is. Only that which does not come from God is despicable — our own

invention, the spontaneous decision to disregard the law of human nature, i.e., sin.

<https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/glory2godforallthings/2019/11/18/venerating-icons-its-so-much-other-than-you-think/>



XIX. About [Fr. Stephen Freeman](#)

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