



23rd Sunday After Pentecost

Martyrs and Confessors Gurian, Samonas, and Abibus

15 / 28 November

Resurrection Tropar, Tone 6: The angelic powers were at Thy tomb; / the guards became as dead men. / Mary stood by Thy grave, / seeking Thy most pure Body. / Thou didst capture hell, not being tempted by it. / Thou didst come to the Virgin, granting life. / O Lord who didst rise from the Dead, / Glory to Thee!

Troparion tone 5: Wise Gurias and Samonas are praised today with Deacon Abibus; / they fill the faithful with joy and their contests are the boast of Edessa. They trampled down error by their words, / and by their deeds became martyrs and wonderworkers. / They pray for us to the Lover of mankind.

Resurrection Kondak, Tone 6: When Christ God the Giver of Life, / raised all of the dead from the valleys of misery with His Mighty Hand, / He bestowed resurrection on the human race. / He is the Saviour of all, the Resurrection, the Life, and the God of All.

Kontakion tone 2: You protect those in temptation with grace from on high, / O holy Martyrs. / You saved a girl from bitter death / and are the glory of Edessa and the joy of all the world.

Matins Gospel I

EPISTLE: Ephesians 2: 4-10

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, Even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), And raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, That in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

EVEN WHEN WE WERE DEAD IN TRESPASSES ...GOD MADE US ALIVE TOGETHER WITH CHRIST ...FOR BY GRACE YOU HAVE BEEN SAVED

Again Christ is introduced, and it is a matter well worthy of our belief, because if the firstfruits live, so do we also. He has quickened both Him and us. Do you see that all this is said of Christ incarnate? ...Those who were dead. those who were children of wrath, those He has quickened. Do you behold 'the hope of His calling?' ...Do you behold the glory of His inheritance? ...As yet not one is actually raised, excepting that inasmuch as the Head has risen, we also are raised ...Truly there is need of the Spirit and of revelation, in order to understand the depth of these mysteries. And then so you may have no distrust about the matter, observe what he adds further ...Was faith then, you will say, enough to save us? No, but God, he says, has required this, lest He should save us, barren and without work at all. His expression is that faith saves, but it is because God so wills it that faith saves ...'We are His workmanship.' He here alludes to the regeneration which is in reality a second creation. We have been brought from non-existence into being. As to what we were before, that is, the old man, we are dead.

St. John Chrysostom. Homily IV on Ephesians II. B#57, pp. 66- 68.

for the Great Martyrs: Eph . 6:10-17

THE GOSPEL: St Luke 10: 25-37

And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" So he answered and said, "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,' and 'your neighbour as yourself.'" And He said to him, "You have answered rightly; do this and you will live." But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" Then Jesus answered and said: "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, who stripped him of his clothing, wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a certain priest came down that road. And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite, when he arrived at the place, came and looked, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said to him, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you.' So which of these three do you think was neighbour to him who fell among the thieves?" And he said, "He who showed mercy on him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

THE PARABLE OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

The parable of the Good Samaritan is a classic tale that teaches us how we may each put the Great Commandments to love God and to love our neighbor into practice. However, as with almost everything in the Gospel, this parable is rich with layers of meaning, revealing to us the fullness of the God/man Jesus Christ. In this parable, not only do we see a lesson about how we should act towards others but also we see how God has acted towards us. This parable expresses the whole plan of our salvation from beginning to end.

Blessed Theophylact, in his commentary upon the Gospel, states that "it was our human nature that was going down from Jerusalem, that is, was descending from tranquility and peace, for Jerusalem means 'vision of peace'. Where was man descending? To Jericho, a place sunk down low and suffocating with heat, that is to a life of passions. See that He did not say, 'went down', but, 'was going down,' For fallen human nature is always inclined downwards, not just once of old, but continuously going down towards passionate life. And man 'fell among thieves,' that is, among demons...who strip the man, depriving him of his raiment of virtue, and then inflict the wounds of sin. They strip us of every good thought and of God's protection and when we are thus naked, they lay on the stripes of sin. They leave human nature 'half dead.'" Here we see the whole problem, the reason that we require God to save us for we are "half dead" – we are an immortal soul joined to a mortal body. We are "stuck" as it were, unable to ascend to the Kingdom of God, and yet not quite lost completely. How then can we be saved, how then can this situation be resolved?

This question is the whole reason we are here; the whole point of our faith is that it provides a means of healing, a way back to the Kingdom of God. Men do, in fact, seek spiritual healing in many ways, but it is Jesus Christ, in the person of the Samaritan, who comes to us and is able to help us. The priest and the Levite who came by and saw the injured man represent the law and the prophets who desired to make human nature righteous, but were unable to do so. They were defeated by the severity of the wounds of sin and they were compelled to "pass by". The law was given to man by God not as a means to heal sin, but rather as a safety measure to prevent man from falling into further injury from sin. God knew that He would Himself come to heal men, but as the time had not yet come, He gave the law to His people to help them avoid further injury from sin – but it did not heal them, it only stabilized the situation so that things might not deteriorate further.

Finally though, the Samaritan comes to the fallen man – that is Jesus Christ comes to heal our soul. Note that it is said that the Samaritan did not come upon this man by chance, but as the parable says, he "journeyed and came to him". Jesus Christ came into this world to find us and to bring us healing. Out of His great love for us, He "came to us and had compassion upon us". It is only Jesus Christ who has the power to treat the wounds of sin and to begin to heal them. He first binds our wounds with oil and wine. In binding our wounds, He restrained the power of sin no longer permitting it to operate in us freely. In binding our wounds, He "poured on oil and wine". Oil, when applied to a wound serves to soothe it and wine is an astringent which destroys the infection which might otherwise set in. We can understand the oil as the grace of God, which He pours out upon our soul. It soothes the irritation of sin by the promise of healing and blessings. Not only this, but it is also by the power and action of the grace of God in us that the healing is effected and we begin to be transformed into the likeness of Christ. The wine is the forgiveness of sin which comes through repentance. It cleanses the soul from the corruption which sin introduces. The wine, when poured on a wound is at first sharp, stinging and unpleasant. So with repentance which at first stings the soul and is unpleasant as we humble ourselves, confessing our sins. But this stinging is only temporary for once the wound is cleansed by forgiveness, it subsides and the healing can continue unimpeded by the infection of corruption.

We can also see in the oil and wine the images of the sacraments. The wounds of sin are washed first by baptism and then the oil of chrism is applied, sealing the soul with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Then we receive in the sacrament of Holy Communion, the most holy Body and most precious Blood of Christ. In these sacraments we see the binding of the wound by baptism and pouring on the oil and wine by the application of Chrism and the reception of the Eucharist. We receive these gifts of the sacraments from the font of the Church which leads us to the next part of the parable.

Jesus Christ does not stop with this simple "first aid", bandaging the wound and pouring on oil and wine. He knows that the wounds of sin are deep and require ongoing care. Thus the parable tells us that the Samaritan picked up the wounded man and placed him on his own beast of burden and took him to an inn where he cared for him further. Then, even though it was necessary that he himself move on, he gave the wounded man into the care of the innkeeper providing all that was necessary for his care and promising to return again to complete the care of the wounded man. The "beast of burden" is the body of the Lord. In receiving us, He places us on His own "beast of burden, that is, His own Body. We are made members of the Body of Christ. And then He brings us to an inn where He cares for us and gives us into the care of others while He is away. This inn is the Church and the innkeeper represents those who are given the responsibility in the Church for the care of the souls therein – that is the bishops and priests and deacons.

When He comes to us and begins to heal us and treat our wounds, our Lord does not leave us alone but brings us into the Church that we might not be left alone. The Church in its essence is not a religious organization, but rather it is a spiritual hospital whose purpose is the care and healing of the souls wounded by sin. For this, Jesus Christ has supplied the Church with all that is necessary to the task. He has given to the Church the sacraments by which His transforming grace is poured out upon us. He has also given to the Church the Scripture, the written Word of God by which she is continually guided in her task. In the Church there is also the Holy Tradition which is the means of treatment and therapy by which the wounds of sin

continue to heal, further injury is prevented and by which we become strong in the faith so that we might not again fall under the power of the "robbers": sin and the demons.

Having placed us in the hospital of the Church, Jesus has not left us alone, but has placed us in the company of our fellow strugglers, of those other souls wounded by sins who are seeking, as are we, to be healed and to return to the Kingdom of God. Nor has He abandoned us, but has ascended into heaven to prepare a place for us and has promised that He will return to us and will take us with Himself into His heavenly kingdom.

In this parable of the Good Samaritan, we can see how it is that we must work out in our own lives the love of God and neighbour. But we also see the love of God for us expressed in His incarnation and in bringing us to salvation. We see that He cleanses and binds the wounds of sin that leave us "half dead" and He gives us His grace and forgiveness to begin the healing of our wounds. He then adopts us into His own Body and places us into the Church where we receive all that is necessary for our recovery and spiritual health. He has promised, as well, to return to receive us into His heavenly Kingdom that we might live with Him throughout eternity.

Archpriest David Moser
<https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/propoved/info>

for the Martyrs: Luke 12:8-12

Saints of the week

15 / 28 November - Beginning of Nativity Fast - Repose of St. Herman, wonderworker of Alaska; The Holy Martyrs Gurias, Samonas and Abibus - Gurias and Samonas were eminent citizens of Edessa. At the time of a persecution of Christians, they hid outside the city and lived in fasting and prayer, giving courage to the faithful who came to them for counsel. They were seized and taken before the judge, who threatened them with death if they refused to observe the imperial decree on the worship of idols. Christ's holy martyrs replied: 'If we observe the imperial decree, we shall be lost even if you do not kill us.' They were thrown into prison after harsh torture, and were there confined from August 1st to November 10th, enduring hunger, darkness and great hardship. They were then brought out again and tortured afresh, and, as they remained steadfast in the Christian faith, were condemned to death and beheaded with the sword in the year 322, under the wicked Emperor Licinius (who ruled the eastern half of the Empire until 324). Later Abibus, a deacon in Edessa, was tortured for Christ his Lord and, in the flames, gave his spirit into God's hands. His mother took his unharmed body from the fire and buried it together with those of Gurias and Samonas. When the persecution had ended, Christians built a church in honour of these three martyrs, and placed their wonderworking relics in one coffin. Of the manifold miracles of these wonderful saints of God, one is specially remembered: A widow in Edessa had a young daughter, who was to marry a Goth serving in the Greek army. As the mother was concerned at the thought of sending her daughter to a distant land, the Goth swore over the grave of the martyrs that he would do no ill to the girl, but take her as his legal wife. He was, though, in fact, already married. When he took the girl back to his own land, he treated her, not as his wife, but as a slave, until his lawful wife died. He then agreed with his kinsman that he should bury his living slave along with his dead wife. The slave implored the holy martyrs with tears to save her, and they appeared to her in the grave, took hold of her and, in an instant, carried her from the land of the Goths to Edessa, to their church. On the following day, when the church was opened, the girl was found by the tomb of the saints, and the story of her miraculous deliverance was heard. The Holy Martyrs Elpidius, Marcellus and Eustochius; The Feast of the Icon of the Mother of God of Kupyatich;

St. Maughold, apostle to the Isle of Man (d.488) - an Irish prince and reputedly a captain of robbers who was converted by Patrick. Upon his conversion, he became a new man by putting on the spirit of Christ. One version of the legend says that Patrick told him to put to sea in a coracle without oars as a penance for his evil deeds. Another says that he set sail in order to avoid the temptations of the world. In both stories, he retired to the Isle of Man (Eubonia) off the coast of Lancashire, England. Earlier Patrick had sent his nephew, Saint Germanus, as bishop to plant the Church on the island. Germanus was succeeded by Saints Romulus and Conindrus during whose time Maughold arrived on the island and began to live an austere, penitential life in the mountainous area now named after him Saint Maughold. After their deaths, Maughold was unanimously chosen as bishop by the Monks. In one of the 18 parish churchyards on the island can be found Saint Maughold's well. The very clear water of the well is received in a large stone coffin. Those seeking cures of various ailments, particularly poisoning, are seated in the saint's chair just above the well and given a glass of well-water to drink. Maughold's shrine was here until the relics were scattered during the Reformation. Maughold, commemorated in both the British and Irish calendars, is described in the Martyrology of Oengus as "a rod of gold, a vast ingot, the great bishop MacCaille." Many topological features on the Isle of Man, which he divided into 25 parishes, bear Maughold's name.

16 / 29 November - Nativity Fast - The Holy Apostle Matthew the Evangelist - the son of Alphaeus was at first a tax-collector, and it was as such that the Lord saw him in Capernaum and said to him: 'Follow Me!' Leaving everything, he followed Him (Matt. 9:9). After that, Matthew prepared a feast in his house, and there provided an opportunity for the Lord to voice some great truths about His coming to earth. After receiving the Holy Spirit, Matthew preached the Gospel among the Parthians and Medes and in Ethiopia, the land of the negroes. In Ethiopia, he consecrated as bishop one Plato, a follower of his, and himself withdrew to prayerful solitude on a mountain, where the Lord appeared to him. Matthew baptised the wife and son of the prince of that land, at which the prince was greatly enraged and sent a guard to bring Matthew before him for trial. The soldiers went off, but returned to the prince, saying that they had heard Matthew's voice, but had been unable to set eyes

on him. The prince then sent a second guard. When this guard drew near to the Apostle, he shone with a heavenly radiance so brilliant that the soldiers were unable to look at him, but threw down their weapons in terror and returned home. The prince then went himself. When he approached Matthew, such radiance shone forth from the saint that the prince was blinded on the instant. But the Apostle had a kind heart: he prayed to God and the prince's sight was restored—unfortunately, only on the physical plane, his spiritual eyes remaining closed. He seized St Matthew and put him to harsh torture, twice lighting a fire on his chest, but the power of God kept him alive and unharmed. Then the Apostle prayed to God, and gave his spirit into His hands. The prince commanded that the martyr's body be put into a leaden coffin and cast into the sea. The saint appeared to Bishop Plato and told him where to find his body in its coffin, and the bishop went and brought them back. Seeing this new marvel, the prince was baptised and received the name Matthew. He then set aside all earthly vanity and became a priest, serving the Church in a manner pleasing to God. When Plato died, the Apostle Matthew appeared to this Matthew and counselled him to accept the episcopate. So he became a bishop, and was a good shepherd for many years, until God took him to His immortal Kingdom. St Matthew the Apostle wrote his Gospel in Aramaic, and it was very soon translated into Greek. It has come down to us in Greek, the Aramaic original being lost. Of this Evangelist, it is said that he never ate meat, but fed only on vegetables and fruit; Our Holy Father Sergius of Malopinega.

17 / 30 November — Nativity Fast — St Gregory the Wonder-worker, Bishop of Neocaesarea - Here is a man of God and a mighty wonderworker, who was called a second Moses! Born of wealthy and eminent pagan parents, Gregory at first studied Hellenic and Egyptian philosophy, but, seeing its barrenness and insufficiency, he turned to Christian teachers, particularly Origen of Alexandria, with whom he studied for several years and by whom he was baptised. Pure in soul and body, he desired to consecrate himself utterly to Christ, to which end he withdrew to the desert, where, in painful asceticism, he spent many years. His fame spread abroad everywhere, and Phaedimus, the bishop of Amasea, wanted to make him Bishop of Caesarea. The discerning Gregory was warned of Phaedimus's intention, and hid in the wilderness from those sent to find him, so that they failed in their quest. Finally, Phaedimus consecrated him by devious means, and Gregory had to accept the work of a shepherd. The most holy Mother of God appeared to him, together with St John the Theologian, and, at her command, St John gave him the Creed that is known by Gregory's name. (The Nicene Creed, that Gregory was instrumental in establishing at the Second Ecumenical Council in 381). Who can enumerate the miracles of this second Moses? He commanded evil spirits, commanded mountains and waters, healed every sort of pain and ill, became invisible to his persecutors and had insight into both distant events and men's thoughts. He finished his earthly course in the year 270, in great old age. When he arrived in Caesarea as bishop, the whole town was composed of pagans, with just seventeen Christians. When he departed this life, the whole town was Christian, with just seventeen pagans. He therefore received a wreath of glory from his Lord in the heavenly Kingdom. Our Holy Father Nikon of Radonezh' Our Holy Father Gennadius of Vatopedi;

St. Hilda, abs & eldress, who convened the Council of Whitby and adopted the orthodox Pascha.- Daughter of Hereric. Sister of Saint Hereswitha. Grand-niece of King Saint Edwin. Baptized in 627 at age thirteen by Saint Paulinus of York. Lived as a lay woman until age 33 when she became a Benedictine nun at the monastery of Chelles in France. Abbess at Hartepool, Northumberland, England. Abbess of the double monastery of Whitby, Streaneshalch. Abbess to Saint Wilfrid of York, Saint John of Beverley, and three other bishops. Patroness and supporter of learning and culture, including patronage of the poet Caedmon. Hilda and her houses followed the Celtic liturgy and rule, but many houses had adopted the continental Benedictine rule, and the Roman liturgy. Hilda convened a conference in 664 to help settle one a single rule. When the conference settled on the Roman and Benedictine, they were adopted throughout England, and Hilda insured the observance of her houses. Born 614 at Northumbria, England Died 680 of natural causes Representation - holding Whitby abbey in her hands with a crown on her head or at her feet; turning serpents into stone; stopping wild birds from stealing a corn crop; being carried to heaven by the angels

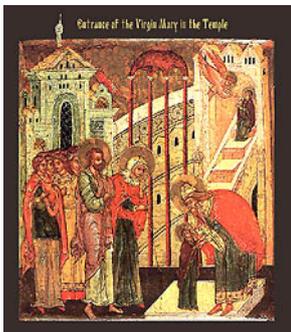
18 November / 1 December — Nativity Fast - The Holy Martyr Platon — From the town of Ancyra in Galatia, he was born and brought up a Christian. Even in his youth, he showed great perfection in every virtue. Platon did not conceal his faith in Christ the Lord, but preached it openly, denouncing idolaters for their bowing down to dead creatures in place of the living Creator. For this, he was brought before the governor, Agrippinus, for trial, and was harshly tortured by him. When the governor began to urge him to escape death and save his life by worshipping idols, Platon replied: 'There are two deaths: the temporal and the eternal; and there are two lives: the one transitory and the other without end.' Then Agrippinus put him to harsher torture. Among other tortures, he commanded that red-hot cannon balls be placed on his naked body, and that his flesh be cut into strips. 'Torture me more harshly', cried the martyr to the torturers, 'that your inhumanity and my endurance may be the more clearly seen. 'When the torturer spoke to the martyr about the philosopher Platon, saying that he was a pagan philosopher, he replied: 'I am not like Platon, nor he like me, except in our names. I learn and teach the wisdom that is of Christ, while he teaches the wisdom that is folly before God.' After that, Platon was thrown into prison, where he spent eighteen days without bread or water. When the warders marvelled that Platon could live without food for so long, he said to them: 'You are satiated by food, but I by holy prayer; you rejoice in wine, but I in Christ the true Vine.' He was finally beheaded with the sword in about 266, and received a wreath of eternal glory. The Holy Martyrs Romanus and Barulas; St. Mawes, bishop in Cornwall & Brittany (5th c.).

19 November / 2 December — Nativity Fast - The Holy Prophet Obadiah — Obadiah lived at the court of King Ahab, but, when the king turned away from true worship and bowed down to idols, Obadiah did not follow the king's example, but continued to serve the one, true God. When the wicked Queen Jezebel, because of her feud with Elias, hunted down all the prophets of God, Obadiah took a hundred of them and hid them in two caves, feeding them till the persecution was over (I Kings 18:4). A contemporary of the great Prophet Elias, Obadiah revered him greatly and hearkened to him in all things, being a follower and pupil of his. He lived nine hundred years before Christ, and entered peacefully into rest. The Holy Martyr Barlaam; Our Holy Fathers Barlaam and Joasaph the Heir; The Holy Martyr Heliodorus;

St. Egbert, archbishop of York (766) - He was son of Eata and brother of Eadbert, King of Northumbria. Having received deacon's Orders at Rome he returned to Northumbria and was appointed to the See of York in 732. He received the pallium in 735, thus becoming second Archbishop of York, the title having been lost to that church since the flight of Saint Paulinus to Kent. He was thus placed in a position to carry out many needed reforms in which he proved himself a strict disciplinarian, but was at the same time remarkable for sweetness and gentleness. One of his greatest works was the foundation of the famous School of York and its celebrated library. Alcuin was among his pupils. Eadbert resigned his throne to enter the monastery, and the two men spent their last years in retirement and prayer. Egbert's best known work is a collection of canonical regulations.

20 November / 3 December — Forefeast of the Entry into the Temple of the Most Holy Theotokos — Nativity Fast — Our Holy Father Gregory of Decapolis — He was born in Isaurian Decapolis of eminent and devout parents, Sergius and Maria. When he had finished his schooling, his parents desired him to marry, but he fled to the desert and became a monk. He lived in various places: in Byzantium and Rome, and on Mount Olympus. Wherever he found himself, he made men marvel by his asceticism and miracles. It happened at times that his face was lit up with heavenly light, and that angels of God appeared to him; he looked upon the beauty of the angels and heard their blessed singing. He lived a long and godly life, and died peacefully in Constantinople in the ninth century, his soul entering into the joy of his Lord. St Proclus, Patriarch of Constantinople; The Holy Martyrs Eustace, Thespesius and Anatolius; St Isaac, Archbishop of Armenia; The Three Holy Persian Maidens;

At Bury St. Edmund in Suffolk, St. Edmund, king of E. Anglia, martyr (869) - On Christmas Day 855 a young man aged fourteen was acclaimed King of Norfolk by the ruling men and clergy of that county. The following year the leaders of Suffolk also made him their king. For fifteen years Edmund ruled over the East Angles with what all acknowledged as Christian dignity and justice. He himself seems to have modelled his piety on that of King David in the Old Testament, becoming especially proficient at reciting the psalms in public worship. From the year 866 his kingdom was increasingly threatened by Danish invasions. For four years the East Angles managed to keep a shaky, often broken peace with them. Then the invaders burned Thetford. King Edmund's army attacked them there but could not defeat the marauders. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle records that the Danes 'killed the king and overcame all the land', adding that 'they destroyed all the churches that they came to, and at the same time reaching Peterborough, killed the abbot and monks and burned and broke everything they found there'. He thus remains the only English sovereign until the time of King Charles I to die for religious beliefs as well as the defence of his throne. For centuries the holy relics of King Edmund remained incorrupt, and innumerable miracles were wrought through his intercession. The skull of St. Edmund is at present in the basilica of St. Sernin in Toulouse, while his holy bones are in the private chapel of the Duke of Norfolk in Arundel Castle.



21 November / 4 December — The Entry into the Temple of the Most Holy Theotokos — Nativity Fast — When the most holy Virgin Mary had reached the age of three, her parents, holy Joachim and Anna, took her from Nazareth to Jerusalem, to give her to the service of God in fulfilment of their promise. It was three days' journey to Jerusalem, but, going as they were on God's work, they did not find the journey difficult. Many of Joachim and Anna's kinsmen gathered to take part in this celebration, in which the invisible angels of God also took part. Maidens went ahead with lighted candles in their hands, followed by the most holy Virgin, led on either side by her father and mother. The Virgin was clad in royal and beautiful garments, like those of the 'king's daughter', the Bride of God (Ps. 44:9,10). Behind them walked many of their kinsfolk and friends, all bearing lighted candles. There were fifteen steps leading to the Temple. Her parents stood the Virgin on the first step, and she ran quickly to the top on her own, where the High Priest,

Zacharias, the father of St John the Forerunner, met her and, taking her by the hand, led her not only into the Temple but into the Holy of Holies, the holiest place of all, into which none could enter except the High Priest, and that once a year. St Theophylact of Ochrid says that Zacharias was 'out of himself, and moved by God' when he led the Virgin into the chief place in the Temple, beyond the second curtain—otherwise there could be no explanation of his action. Her parents then offered sacrifices to God, according to the Law, received the priest's blessing and returned home, leaving the most holy Virgin in the Temple. She dwelt in the Temple for nine whole years. While her parents were alive, they visited her often. When they departed this life, the holy Virgin was left an orphan, and longed to remain in the Temple for the rest of her days, without entering into marriage. This being contrary both to the Law and Israelite custom, she was confided at the age of twelve to St Joseph, a kinsman of hers in Nazareth, so that she might, under the protection of betrothal, live in virginity and thus fulfil both her desire and the demands of the Law, for it was unknown in Israel at that time for a girl to vow perpetual virginity. The holy Virgin Mary was the first to do this, and was later followed by thousand upon thousand of virgin men and women in the Church of Christ.

Troparion — Tone 4: Today is the prelude of the good will of God, / of the preaching of the salvation of mankind. / The Virgin appears in the temple of God, / in anticipation proclaiming Christ to all. / Let us rejoice / and sing to her: / "Rejoice, O Fulfillment of the Creator's dispensation."

Kontakion — Tone 4: The most pure Temple of the Savior; / the precious Chamber and Virgin; / the sacred Treasure of the glory of God, / is presented today to the house of the Lord. / She brings with her the grace of the Spirit, / therefore, the angels of God praise her: / "Truly this woman is the abode of heaven."

St. Columbanus, abbot and founder of Luxeuil Abbey, France (615) - Born 543 at West Leinster, Ireland, handsome and educated, Columbanus was torn between a desire for God and easy access to the pleasures of the world. Acting on advice of a holy anchoress, he decided to withdraw from the world; his family opposed the choice, his mother going so far as to block the door. Monk at Lough Erne. He studied Scripture extensively, and wrote a commentary on the Psalms. Monk at Bangor under abbot Saint Comgall. In middle age, Columbanus felt a call to missionary life. With twelve companions (Saint Attala, Columbanus the Younger, Cummain, Domgal, Eogain, Eunan, Saint Gall, Gurgano, Libran, Lua, Sigisbert and Waldoleno) he travelled to Scotland, England, and then to France in 585. The area, though nominally Christian, had fallen far from the faith, but were ready for missionaries, and they had some success. They were warmly greeted at the court of Gontram, and king of Burgundy invited the band to stay. They chose the half-ruined Roman fortress of Annegray in the Vosges Mountains for their new home with Columbanus as their abbot. The simple lives and obvious holiness of the group drew disciples to join them, and the sick to be healed by their prayers. Columbanus, to find solitude for prayer, often lived for long periods in a cave seven miles from the monastery, using a messenger to stay in touch with his brothers. When the number of new monks overcrowded the old fortress, King Gontram gave them the old castle of Luxeuil to found a new house in 590. Soon after, a third house was founded at Fontaines. Columbanus served as master of them all, and wrote a Rule for them; it incorporated many Celtic practices, was approved by the Council of Macon in 627, but was superseded by the Benedictine. Problems arose early in the 7th century. Many Frankish bishops objected to a foreign missionary with so much influence, to the Celtic practices he brought, especially those related to Easter, and his independence from them. In 602 he was summoned to appear before them for judgment; instead of appearing, he sent a letter advising them to hold more synods, and to concern themselves with more important things than which rite he used to celebrate Easter. The dispute over Easter continued to years, with Columbanus appealing to multiple popes for help, but was only settled with Columbanus abandoned the Celtic calendar when he moved to Italy and adopted Eastern Orthodox Pascha. In addition to his problems with the bishops, Columbanus spoke out against vice and corruption in the royal household and court, which was in the midst of a series of complex power grabs. Brunehaut stirred up the bishops and nobility against the abbot; Thierry ordered him to conform to the local ways, and shut up. Columbanus refused, and was briefly imprisoned at Besançon, but he escaped and returned to Luxeuil. Thierry and Brunehaut sent an armed force to force him and his foreign monks back to Ireland. As soon as his ship set sail, a storm drove them back to shore; the captain took it as a sign, and set the monks free. They made their way to King Clothaire at Soissons, Neustria and then the court of King Theodebert of Austrasia in 611. He travelled to Metz, then Mainz, Suevi, Alamanni, and finally Lake Zurich. Their evangelization work there was unsuccessful, and the group passed on to Arbon, then Bregenz, and then Lake Constance. Saint Gall, who knew the local language best, took the lead in this region; many were converted to the faith, and the group founded a new monastery as their home and base. However, a year later political upheaval caused Columbanus to cross the Alps into Italy, arriving in Milan in 612. The Christian royal family treated him well, and he preached and wrote against Arianism and Nestorianism. In gratitude, the Lombard king gave him a track of land call Bobbio between Milan and Genoa. There he rebuilt a half-ruined church of Saint Peter, and around it he founded an abbey that was to be the source for evangelization throughout northern Italy for centuries to come. Columbanus always enjoyed being in the forests and caves, and as he walked through the woods birds and squirrels would ride on his shoulders. Toward the end of his life came word that his old enemies were dead, and his brothers wanted him to come back north, but he declined. Knowing that his time was almost done, he retired to a cave for solitude, and died as he had predicted. His influence continued for centuries as those he converted handed on the faith, the brothers he taught evangelised untold numbers more, and his brother monks founded over one hundred monasteries to protect learning and spread the faith. Miracles ascribed to Columbanus include: to obtain food for a sick brother monk, he cured the wife of the donor; once when he was surrounded by wolves, he simply walked through them; at one point he needed a cave for his solitary prayers; a bear lived there; when Columbanus asked, the bear left; when he needed water in order to live in the cave, a spring appeared nearby; when the Luxeuil monastery granary ran empty, he prayed over it and it refilled; he multiplied bread and beer for his community; he cured several sick monks, who then got straight out of bed to reap the monastery's harvest; gave sight to a blind man at Orleans; he destroyed a vat of beer being prepared for a pagan festival by breathing on it; when the monastery needed help in the fields, he tamed a bear, and yoked it to a plough

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God most often gives victory in battle to the peacemakers. One example of this is the great Emperor Justinian, and another example is the holy King Stefan of Deè< face="AGaramond">ani. Following the death of his father King Milutin, Stefan removed the bandage from his eyes and was joyfully proclaimed as king both by the nobles and by the people. However, Constantine-son of Simonida and Stefan's younger brother on his father's side-raised up an army against Stefan. Stefan then wrote him in the following manner: ``You have heard what has happened to me (that is, how I received my sight) by God's providence, that works in all for the good. Shown mercy by God, I have inherited the throne of my parents, to rule over the people in the fear of God and with justice, according to the example of my forefathers. Abandon your undertaking, and come, let us meet with one another; assume the second place in the kingdom as the second son, and do not rise up with foreigners against your fatherland. Our spacious land is sufficient for both you and me. I am not Cain, the slayer of his brother, but a friend of Joseph, the lover of his brethren. In the words of the latter, I say to you: *You intended evil against me but God intended it for good* (Genesis 50:20)." Thus wrote the holy king, but Constantine did not take heed and was defeated in battle by Stefan. Defeated also was Vladislav, Dragutin's son, another pretender to the Serbian throne. However, Michael Shishman, the Bulgarian king, fared worst of all. Stefan wrote to him: ``Reflect on the meaning of Christian love, calm your wrath, let there be love between us as there was between our parents. Cease to shed Christian blood. Turn your weapons against the enemies of the name of Christ and not on Christians. Remind yourself of how hard it will be to answer for innocent blood. Know this also, that he who takes what belongs to others loses what is his." Michael scoffed at this letter from the holy king and was utterly defeated at Velbuzd in 1330. ``God is with the righteous, not with the mighty."

Homily: The Nativity Fast

Now we have entered the Nativity fast, and we thank God that once again we are preparing to participate in the mystery of the coming to earth of our Saviour. In the words of St. Theophanus the Recluse, during this lent we must partake of the Blood and Body of Christ, in order to comprehend with our entire being that the Word has become flesh, and that the Lord has taken on our flesh and blood, becoming one of us.

Now, while the Church is reminding us of the necessity for fasting and prayer, it would be well to note that although the Nativity fast is not so strict in terms of external demands, it still requires a reasonable attitude towards it. First of all, we must keep this fast of course, but as Saint Isaac the Syrian says, there is a proper measure of fasting. We must understand that all church regulations should accord with the measure of each specific individual, depending on his bodily strength, age, health and other characteristics.

St. Isaac says that inordinate fasting is more harmful than too little fasting. This refers primarily to those devotees of fasting who wish to quickly ascend to a very high degree, exhibiting outward abstinence that is, however, not counter-balanced by their inner spiritual state. Why is inordinate fasting more harmful than too little fasting? Because, says the holy one, from a state of inadequate fasting a man can still proceed to a correctly-established spiritual life, while the corruption of spirit that arises from immoderate fasting can lead to spiritual disorder which is much harder to rectify.

Lent, being a spiritual manifestation, always bares our perception of both good and evil, and so each one of us must remember that during lent there naturally arise special temptations, and we can either draw nearer to God or become alienated from Him as a result of the increase in the temptations we suffer. Saint Sincleticia says that external fasting which does not correspond to the measure of our spiritual state is more harmful than beneficial, because it primarily incites us to vanity and a feeling of superiority over others. That is to say, external fasting alone does not bring us closer to God and other people, but, on the contrary, alienates us from them. And all the other passions – irritation, anger, and everything else that is characteristic of us, can flare up very intensely during lent.

Thus, the main thing of which the Church reminds us during lent is that when we partake of bodily abstinence, our body, which separates us from the invisible world, becomes thinner and we become more sensitive to the spiritual world. And if our heart is not purified, then, naturally, our contacts with this spiritual world are primarily connected with the evil forces. This gives rise to all the temptations and passions which only proceed to increase during lent.

Let us ponder this. From year to year we are used to fasting too externally, too formally, often focusing only on keeping to a certain dietary regimen, without adding prayer and without delving deeper into a realization of our path to Christ, a realization of the mystery which is being revealed to us during this time. Christ truly approaches each one of us; therefore, let us realize that the worst thing that can happen to us is for us to be spiritually lukewarm, to be observing only a formal and external fast. Let us try to deepen our fast from the very beginning (and not only at the end), drawing nearer to Christ not only through the reading of the Holy Scriptures, not only through the reading of prayers and a more frequent attendance of church services (although all of it is essential and necessary), but specifically through a communion with the most important thing that there is in Christ – His love, His unity with the suffering and fate of each individual, so that the mystery of Christ's incarnation would become a living experience for us during this lent. Amen.

Protopriest Alexander Shargunov

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