

Fr. Lincoln con't

joy of eternally being in the presence of our Lord (Matt. 25:21,23).

As we continue to bear this cross, may we persevere in prayer, learn self-denial through fasting, and do good works of mercy to those in need around us. Prayer makes us united in God, even when physically separated.

One final thought. Perhaps we should not “think it strange” that this pandemic is hitting us on the fiftieth anniversary of the OCA’s autocephaly, a year of celebrations. This year we are reflecting on the past fifty years as the local Orthodox Church in America, celebrating the wonderful missionary work that God has done through our humble Church, repenting for our sins, and seeking to serve Him ever more faithfully. On this fiftieth anniversary year of our autocephaly, especially in the midst of a pandemic, we have an opportunity to be renewed in our mission of bringing the healing presence of Jesus Christ to a broken and suffering world. “Rejoice in the Lord... The Lord will be your light, your protection, your way, your strength, your crown of gladness and eternal help.”

May we, for the exceedingly great joy set before us, endure this present cross with patience, that we may be found worthy through His grace to be co-enthroned with our Risen Lord Jesus Christ at the right hand of God the Father (Rev. 3:21).

The Annunciation

By Fr. Lawrence Farley

St. Ignatius of Antioch, martyred in Rome in about the year 107, wrote that along with the death of the Lord, the virginity of Mary and her giving birth were mysteries that were hidden from the ruler of this age, and were accomplished in the silence of God (*To the Ephesians*, 19.1). That is, their full significance were not immediately perceived by the world. This was certainly true, for when news of Mary’s pregnancy became known in her small town home in Nazareth, no one there suspected that the Child she was carrying was about to change the world forever. Most young mothers can expect to be showered with congratulations and good wishes when they share the news of their pregnancy. But not Mary. At that time she was only betrothed to her fiancé Joseph, and the wedding itself was still

some months away. It was clear enough that Joseph was not the father of her baby, and the wagging tongues of Nazareth would assume the obvious and the worst.

It is easy for us to forget this. Elizabeth her cousin greeted her with joy and pronounced her blessed among women, but Elizabeth was something special. She was the mother of the one chosen to be the Forerunner, and when Mary entered her home to visit with her during her advanced pregnancy, Elizabeth’s baby leaped up inside her, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:41). The old biddies in Nazareth, it is safe to say, were *not* so filled with the Holy Spirit, and they did *not* pronounce Mary to be blessed among women. As far as they were concerned, the young adolescent (the normal age for betrothal then being about thirteen) was an immoral woman.

That meant that when Gabriel came to Mary in Nazareth and brought the good news that she had been chosen to be the mother of the Messiah, the news was not all good. In the long term, all generations of those who served the Messiah would call her blessed (Luke 1:48), but in the short-term, all her neighbours would call her something else, and small town Nazareth very quickly became a very unfriendly place. How else could one explain why Mary was willing to accompany Joseph for a long journey to Bethlehem in Judea when she was nine months pregnant? Better to brave the hardships of a journey like that than to stay at home among the slanderous tongues of Nazareth.

We traditionally think of Mary as a meek woman, adorned with the long robes of humility. And indeed she was. But her meekness might lead us to miss the fact of her indomitable courage as well, thinking meekness and courage were somehow mutually exclusive. (The example of Moses proves that they weren’t; see Numbers 12:3.)

Despite her tender years, Mary was smart enough to realize the full consequences of Gabriel’s announcement, and the damage to be done immediately to her reputation when she was found to be pregnant before she was married. Yet she assented anyway, bowing her head and saying, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word”. This took tremendous courage. If her Son would later set His face to go to Jerusalem knowing what awaited Him **Con’t Pg 10**

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there (Luke 9:51), Mary similarly must have set her face to go into the markets of Nazareth each day, knowing what awaited her there. Mary was just a young girl when she decided to face down the cold stares of Nazareth. Her utterance, "Let it be to me according to your word" was not simply a word of submission. It was also a word of towering strength and courage. Let us follow her, and let the Mother of God teach us to be brave. These days, we have need of such bravery.

Some Thoughts on the Crisis and the Call of the Corona Virus: A Reflection by His Grace Bishop Alexis of Bethesda

The Bishops of the Holy Orthodox Church love their flocks and ever strive to lead them to well-watered and rich pastures. They care for them, body and soul. In so doing, they are following their Master Christ who not only "cast out unclean spirits," but also healed "all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people." (Matthew 10:1). In the Gospels, we see that Christ sometimes treated the soul first and the body second; at other times, the body first and the soul second. In the presence of the highly contagious and potentially lethal corona virus, the Bishops' concern is for the bodily welfare of their people lest even a single lamb be needlessly lost. This is not from a lack of faith or dearth of compassion, but from unwavering faith and an abundance of compassion. Compassion is expressed in giving each sinner the time necessary to repent, for in "hell there is no repentance" (Saint John of Damascus). Faith is expressed in the certainty that our Lord can always be in our midst, that He can always be by our side, for the Psalmist proclaims, "If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there" (Psalm 139:8). And if I am shut up in my home away from Church, "Thou art there," even as the Lord was there for and with the Apostle Peter when he was locked up in prison, so He is there for and with us.

During times of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear, we naturally turn to God for refuge, peace, and courage. This is our birthright as baptized Orthodox Christians. Indeed, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore, we will not fear though the earth should change" (Psalm 46:1-2). With the corona virus, the earth has changed, but we do not fear. The faithful are isolated in their homes,

physically separated from loved ones, and even unable to gather together as the Church for the celebration of the mysteries, but we do not fear, for God remains our refuge, our peace, and source of courage. Many are understandably discouraged and downcast about the decision to ban eucharistic gatherings in Church for the sake of the health of our neighbor whom we love. Yet, God remains our refuge, our peace, and our source of courage. Within this trial, this threat to so much that we hold so very dear, there is a call that is given and a promise that beckons. But to hear that call and see the fulfilment of that promise, we need to approach our Savior as His faithful children have always approached Him, not with self-righteous indignation or self-pitying despondency, but with humble, patient hope.

The call is to prayer of the heart. The promise is the purifying and illumining grace of the Holy Spirit. In the emphasis on more frequent communion over the past forty years, we might be tempted to neglect the necessary ongoing moment-to-moment inner communion with Christ by prayer, that talking with Him and walking with Him that characterized most of the lives of the Apostles before and after the institution of the Mystical Supper. Many of our greatest saints were deprived of Holy Communion for periods of time that for us would be unbearable to contemplate, but that for them were periods of continued growth from glory to glory, because they were never without Holy Communion with Christ through prayer. Prayer is not easy; it requires concentration, dedication, and love, but through the gates of prayer, we can touch Christ, Christ can touch us, and we can be healed. It is imperative for us all to learn to serve Liturgy at the Altar of the heart and the time is now at hand.

During this crisis of the corona virus, we are given the opportunity to become men and women of deep prayer. We are given the occasion to "enter into our closet, and when we have shut the door, pray to our Father which is in secret" (Matthew 6:6), offering Him our repentance, our gratitude, and our love. We can come to understand that "prayer is a safe fortress, a sheltered harbor, a protector of the virtues, a destroyer of passions. It brings vigor to the soul, purifies the mind, gives rest to those who suffer, consoles those who mourn. Prayer is converse with God, contemplation of the ***Con't Pg 11***

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invisible, the angelic mode of life, a stimulus towards the divine, the assurance of things longed for, 'making real the things for which we hope'" (Theodore, the Great Ascetic, Century 1:61). As Saint Sophrony of Essex puts it, "prayer is infinite creation, far superior to any form of art or science. Through prayer we enter into communion with Him that was before all worlds...Prayer is delight for the Spirit." (On Prayer, 9).

The Elder Aimilianos whose love for the Divine Liturgy was incomparable once said, "It is pointless to go to Church, unnecessary to attend Liturgy, and useless to commune, when I am not constantly praying" (The Church at Prayer, 14). A spiritual life of private prayer is not a monastic prerogative, but the common inheritance of all the faithful. The saintly elder further notes, "The harm that befalls us if we do not know how to pray is incalculable. Incalculable? It is the only harm from which we suffer. There is no catastrophe that can compare to it. If all the stars and all the planets were to collide with one another, and the universe to shatter into smithereens, the damage would be far less than that which befalls us if we don't know how to pray" (The Church at Prayer, 10). The threat of the virus perhaps can open our eyes to the threat of not knowing how to pray to God in our heart. The threat of the virus may turn into a blessing that can enliven our spiritual life.

The temptation before us is to deafen our ears to this call to active, arduous prayer to approach God and instead to prefer more passive, easier ways for God to approach us. Now is not the time to try to devise any means to avoid this prayer in private, but it is the time to heed the call to prayer in our heart to the God of our heart. There is a rich, inner world beckoning to us, a world where God is all in God. Let's take the gift of this time to enter into that world. And if we do so, when we come together for the Divine Liturgy with a yearning magnified by distance apart, that Liturgy will be more radiant and more angelic than anything we have known before. Through a deep life of inner prayer, we will indeed learn how to set aside all earthly cares, that we may receive the King of all.



Hieromartyr Mark, Bishop of Arethusa, who suffered under Julian the Apostate

Commemorated on [March 29](#)

Hieromartyr Mark, Bishop of Arethusa, suffered for his faith in Christ under the emperor Julian the Apostate (361-363). By order of the emperor Constantine (May 21), Saint Mark had once destroyed a pagan temple and built a Christian church.

When Julian came to the throne, he persecuted Christians and tried to restore paganism. Some citizens of Arethusa renounced Christianity and became pagans. Then Saint Mark's enemies decided to take revenge on him. The old bishop hid himself from the persecutors at first, but then gave himself up when he learned that the pagans had tortured many people in their search for him.

The holy Elder was led through the city and given over to torture. They tore out his hair, slashed his body, dragged him along the street, dumped him in a swamp, tied him up, and cut him with knives.

The pagans demanded that the holy bishop pay them a large sum of money to rebuild the pagan temple, and he refused to do so. The persecutors invented several new torments: they squeezed the Elder in a foot-press, and they cut off his ears with linen cords. Finally, they smeared the holy martyr's body with honey and grease, then hung him up in a basket in the hot mid-day sun to be eaten by bees, wasps, and hornets. Saint Mark did not seem to notice the pain, and this irritated the tormentor all the more.

The pagans kept lowering the price he had to pay for their temple, but Saint Mark refused to give them a single coin. Admiring him for his courage and endurance, the pagans stopped asking him for money and set him free. Many of them returned to Christ after hearing his talks.

Saint Gregory the Theologian (January 25) describes the sufferings of Saint Mark in his First Oration against Julian. Theodoritus of Cyrrhus also mentions him in his *Church History* (Book 3, Ch. 6)

Hebrews 6:13-20 (Epistle)

For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, “Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you.” And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute. Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us.

This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

THE LADDER OF DIVINE ASCENT

In the Ladder of Divine Ascent, Saint John Climacus lists out 30 steps or stages of the spiritual development of Orthodox monastics. And though written for monastics, and depicted in the icon with monastics, the Ladder is an essential guide for all Orthodox Christians. The icon is based upon the text of the Ladder with each rung of the angled ladder representing one of the 30 hidden years of Our Savior’s life here on earth. Each rung represents a stage of a person’s spiritual development. In the bottom right hand corner of the icon, Saint John stands outside of a monastery and gestures towards the ladder while holding a scroll that reads “Ascend, ascend, Brethren, ascend with eagerness and resolve in your hearts”.

Monks appear on various rungs of the ladder – some securely on rungs heading upward, others just hanging on in fear of being pulled off by the many winged demons. Angels are also depicted, usually in the upper corner, encouraging the monks and reaching forward to help them on their way up the ladder. The Angels are painted as bright and strong, the demons as weak and dark. At the very top, Our Savior meets the monks with outstretched hands and some icons depict a crown of glory being placed on their heads.

WHAT WE LEARN FROM ST. JOHN OF THE LADDER:

“To lag in the fight at the very outset of the struggle and thereby to furnish proof of our coming defeat is a very hateful and dangerous thing. A firm beginning will certainly be useful for us when we later grow slack. A soul that is strong at first but then relaxes is spurred on by the memory of its former zeal. And in this way new wings are often obtained” (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Chapter 11).

“When the soul betrays itself and loses the blessed and longed for fervor, let it carefully investigate the reason for losing this. And let it arm itself with all its longing and zeal against whatever has caused this. For the former fervor can return only through the same door through which it was lost” (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Chapter 12).

The modern world tries to pretend that sin is a myth and that personal accountability for one’s actions before a just God is merely a quaint superstition. As Orthodox Christians, we are called to a different standard than that of the world. This has been true of Christians in all ages and is especially important in our times. We are called to be the “light of the world” and the “salt of the earth.” This means that we must not only be vigilant in how we live, but we must be honest with ourselves and respond immediately to God’s call to repentance when we fall short of the mark. When we approach God in a spirit of humility and repentance, Confession can bring us face-to-face with ourselves. We can learn more from our weaknesses than we ever will from our strengths, because acknowledgment of weakness is the shortest path to humility. As Abba Sarmatias said: “I prefer a sinful man, who recognizes his fault and humbles himself, to a self-complacent man of virtue.” The most absurd notion that many people cling to in these times is the idea that no matter how selfish, vain, egotistical, and immoral they may be, they really are quite “good”. This is a destructive delusion.

Troparion — Tone 1

Dweller of the desert and angel in the body, / you were shown to be a wonder-worker, our God-bearing Father John. / You received heavenly gifts through fasting, vigil, and prayer: / healing the sick and the souls of those drawn to you by faith. / Glory to Him who gave you strength! / Glory to Him who granted you a crown! / Glory to Him who through you grants healing to all!