

NOTES FROM A REFLECTION

We thank Reader Vincent Rossi for the following notes, used in a meditation he gave on the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

METROPOLITAN KALLISTOS (Ware), commenting on the Sunday of the Prodigal Son in the forward to the *Lenten Triodion*, wrote that the Parable of the Prodigal Son is “an exact icon of the stages of repentance.” Looking at the parable as found in Luke 15: 11-32 with the help of a homily by Clement of Alexandria and St. Gregory Palamas’ homily on the parable, it is possible to discern ten primary stages of repentance:

- 1) *Separation*: the younger son said to his Father, give me the portion of the goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.
- 2) *Exile*: and not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country.
- 3) *Dissipation*: and there wasted his substance with riotous living.
- 4) *Starvation*: and when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.
- 5) *Enslavement*: And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with husks that the swine did eat; and no man gave unto him.
- 6) *Awakening*: And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my Father have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger.
- 7) *Resolution*: I will arise and go to my father.
- 8) *Compunction*: I will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.
- 9) *Return*: And he arose and came to his Father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.
- 10) *Feast*: The father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it, and let us eat and be merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

The meaning of this wonderful parable of the Prodigal Son is inexhaustible, and one may approach everything in it from many perspectives and levels. Leaving aside all that might be said, and that the Fathers do say about the immeasurable mercy and incomprehensible love of God, and focusing only on the ascetic aspects of repentance from St. Gregory’s homily, we summarize its meaning as follows.

All sin begins by separating us from God. Our inheritance is the perfectly illumined nous, the perfectly harmonious functioning of body, soul and spirit in the Divine image, and the right understanding and use of creation, which God made and gave to us as gift.

As soon as we fall into self-centeredness, rather than God-centeredness, we are exiled from God by our own actions, and we find ourselves living in a “far country”, the world apart from God, the world distorted in fallenness, travail and passion.

Being in exile, with a darkened nous, we gravitate to further darkness, and ignoring the signposts of the Spirit that are everywhere and our own inner voice, our conscience (*syneidesis*, Greek), which is the last vestige of God-given inner noetic knowledge, we dissipate our inheritance, our birthright as sons and images of God, in sinful thoughts, words and deeds.

The more we do this, the less we feel satisfied and fulfilled, the more spiritually starved we become, and our spirit suffers under an inescapable spiritual famine, because nothing but God can satisfy the sick soul. The more we seek our own self-centered well-being, the more painful and depressing life becomes. We are drawn inexorably into slavery to the passions and to the demons, the “citizens” of that far country.

Then through God’s immeasurable mercy, and through the grace of the Divine image within, which has not been totally darkened or damaged, we have a moment of awakening. In the words of the parable, we come to ourselves. We wake up to our sin-

INFORMATION

Protection of the Holy Virgin & St. Seraphim of Sarov Church
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Our Parish Secretary may be reached at the Church office on Tuesday-Saturday, 9 AM to Noon, at 584-9491.

Fr. Lawrence Margitich may be reached at the Parish office phone, or at lmargitich@sbcglobal.net. He is available Tuesday-Saturday, from noon onwards each day.

PARISH CONTACTS

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ful state, which is in fact a great thing, because being aware of our sin is at the same time being aware of God, the first sign of recognition of the holy, saving truth. Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound (Rm. 5:20).

Realizing how far we have fallen from our true nature, from the image of God in which we are made, we resolve to return to our father's house, not expecting to be recognized as sons due to our unworthiness, but as hired servants, because what is least in our heavenly father's house is infinitely greater than a life dissipated in sin.

Resolve is meaningless without acting upon it, and so we muster up the strength of will to take the first step of our return to our father's house. As soon as we turn toward God, He immediately turns toward us and sees us from afar off and comes running to embrace us. Or rather, He is always turned toward us in divine love and mercy and compassion. We start to make our confession of unworthiness and before we can finish, our Father is already preparing the celebration of our return. He asks his servants to bring forth the best robe, which St. Gregory says is the robe of baptism, our wedding garment without which we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. The ring placed on our finger is the seal of the Holy Spirit, according to Clement, the ring of *theoria* [vision of and communion in God]. According to St. Gregory the ring is the symbol of the active life, the marriage of contemplation and action that restores the knowledge of God in our hearts; and upon our feet the shoes of the preparation of the gospel of peace. The fatted calf is Christ himself, the "Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8). Alienation has turned to intimacy: the feast of joy in heaven for the return of the son who was lost and is found. The most important thing to realize about the stages of repentance is that awakening can occur at any time along sin's downward path. It is not necessary to fall

through all the stages of descent into sin before "coming to oneself." But the return path to God requires all the stages: awakening, resolve, compunction, return and feast. And so we approach the Sunday of the Last Judgment and the beginning of Lent, trusting in the mercy and love of the Father to lead us by repentance to that deep awakening in which we know our true self in Christ and know that same Christ in our brother and sister and even in the least of these, the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the sick and imprisoned. Thus through repentance we may await with hope the blessed words, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

JUST RECEIVED from our seminarian Deacon Ian Shipley: "By the Grace of God I will be ordained to the Holy Priesthood on February 2nd (Feast of the *Meeting of the Lord*) at St. Tikhon's Monastery in PA. Of course I would love it if you all could attend, but I understand if you cannot. Please keep me in your prayers as I prepare for this fearful day."

FROM THE BOOKSTORE

Author Veronica Hughes intrigued and delighted us on Wednesday, January 25th, when she spoke about writing her book, *Pearl of Great Price*, and read selections from it. It is her personal story of coming to Orthodoxy along a convoluted and at times devious path. She signed books for all those who purchased them that evening, and we were happy to have her also sign the few copies still on the shelves. Please stop by after the Sunday Agape meal to secure your own inscribed copy and enjoy the exciting and memorable account of her journey.

NEW AND NEWLY RERELEASED BOOK REVIEWS

• For Children:

The Woman and the Wheat: by Jane Meyer, second in a set with *The Man and the Vine*. “The book highlights that time in church when something temporal becomes something eternal” – when the Communion Bread becomes the Body of Christ. It has deep personal meaning, as the author’s father was a baker who came from a long line of bakers. The book was written using words that appeal to children and read like music. “I wrote this book for the kids who are standing in church singing the liturgy, and watching, and wondering and feeling all that is happening.”

Saint George and the Dragon: by Jim Forest, Illustrated by Vladislav Andreyev. A Christian convert born late in the third century, George was one among many martyrs of the early Church. What made him a saint among saints was the fearless manner in which he proclaimed his faith during a period of fierce persecution when many other Christians were hoping not to be noticed. The dragon story is a journalistic invention, yet what better way is there to symbolize the evil that George actually confronted and defeated than to portray it in the form combat with a fire-breathing dragon?

• For Teen Girls:

Letters To Saint Lydia: By Melinda Johnson. This book grabbed me and would not let me go. It’s told in a bright and accessible style--in the format of letters written by a young woman to a Saint she doesn’t even know is responding. My eyes were filled with tears a hundred times while I read. And there were just as many huge smiles. I teach high school and I can testify that the book will ring true for young people today. Johnson does not avoid the moral controversies and outright dangers confronting young people in the modern world. The religious characters in the book are real people (living or dead) who face the same struggles as everyone else, just with a different perspective on it.

The Edge of Mysterion: Fantasy (in the tradition of C.S. Lewis) by Fr. Richard Rene, priest at St. Aidan’s Orthodox Church in Cranbrook, BC. Running away from a violent father and a broken home, teenaged Isabella finds herself in Mysterion, a hidden world peopled by Cyclops and giant turtles, dragons and mermaids, and winged Angeli. Bella encounters a world that challenges everything she believes and offers her a chance at a new and better life – if only she can trust enough to grasp it.

• For Parents:

Our Church and Our Children by Sophie Koulomzin: a classic by a distinguished Orthodox Christian religious educator and a foundational read for Christian parents and educators. Koulomzin, who taught at St Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary (1954–1973), writes as a laywoman, teacher, mother, and grandmother about the task of Christian education. The contents of the book comprise a deep understanding of children, of educational and developmental theory, a lived knowledge of the Orthodox faith tradition, and a keen sense of Orthodox church life in America. For Koulomzin, recognizing that children are full members of the Church was of utmost importance. Among the key topics addressed are: the task of Christian education, developmental stages of children, Christian education in the family, the challenges and opportunities of the church school, and a vision and goals for the Christian teacher. An excellent book for either group or personal study.

• **For Couples:**

Mastering the Art of Marriage: by Fr. Constantine Nasr. Marriage is no fairy tale—it takes unselfish love, total commitment, a realistic attitude, and a lot of hard work. Subtitle: *Staying Together When the World Pulls You Apart*. In a conversational style, with exercises and examples from movies and life, the V. Rev. Nasr, a 38-year veteran of both marriage and marital counseling, shows you how to master the art of marriage and create a lastingly joyful home and family.

• **Of General Interest:**

Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy: by Fr. Andrew Stephen Damick, Pastor St. Paul Orthodox Church, Emmaus PA. Originally a series on Ancient Faith Radio, the book is even better than the podcasts. Fr. Andrew gives a clear explanation of the differences between Eastern Orthodoxy and other religions without resorting to insults or hyperbole. [Reader's comment: Wikipedia defines heterodoxy as idea, thought, dogma, principle or lifestyle that is not heresy but is in conflict with the Orthodox Faith.

Spread the Word – Evangelism in Orthodoxy: by Antiochian mission priest Fr. Michael Keiser. Subtitled “Reclaiming the Apostolic Tradition of Evangelism,” it explains how Orthodox evangelism differs from the Protestant approach, and traces the Church's unbroken evangelistic tradition back to the time of the Apostles. By the author of *A Beginner's Guide to Spirituality* and *A Beginner's Guide to Prayer*. Publisher's review: “With his characteristic straight forward and humorous style, Fr. Michael covers the history of Orthodox evangelism, the rationale and the methods for continuing this tradition in our contemporary Western post-Christian society.”

The Rest of the Bible: by Theron Mathis; *A Guide to the Old Testament of the Early Church*. A beautiful widow risks her life to defend her people while men cower in fear. A young man takes a journey with an archangel and faces down a demon in order to marry a woman seven times widowed. A reprobate king repents and miraculously turns back toward God. A Jewish exile plays a game of riddles in a Persian king's court. Young men and widows become martyrs in the face of idolatry. Wisdom is detailed and exalted. Christ is revealed. Writings dubbed “Apocrypha” and cut from the Bible by the Reformers, these books of the Greek Old Testament were once a vital part of the Church's life and are still treasured by Orthodox Christians today. *The Rest of the Bible* provides a brief and intriguing introduction to each of these valuable texts, which St. Athanasius termed “the Readables.” [Review from Amazon]

• **On Death and Burial:**

A Christian Ending, A Handbook for burial in the Ancient Christian Tradition, by J. Mark and Elizabeth J. Barna. From the foreword: “How should Christian people prepare for death, their own and that of loved ones? No question can be more important than this, since death is the final reality of our earthly life. Yet particularly in the United States, we tend to avoid the question as much as we can. Written in a genial, conversational style, this book offers the Christian reader a solid foundation in both the theology and the psychology of death: its place within God's creative and saving work, and the personal impact it makes on those facing death and those who grieve for them. It also clarifies a great many misconceptions held by most people concerning professional funeral practices, making clear that a truly “Christian ending” to our life can mean beauty and utter simplicity both in the rituals that surround it and in the burial itself. Many readers will be surprised to learn that it is not at all necessary, legally or practically, to use the services of a funeral home. There is indeed “another way,” one more in keeping with the Gospel imperative to honor the physical body as a temple of the Holy Spirit...”

All that happens within the Divine Liturgy are not ideas, but they are a reality, an experience. Once we offer everything to God, He, humbly and philanthropically, sends us the Grace of His All-Holy Spirit and transforms the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of His Son, really and truly, which He in turn offers back to us to receive it and to be sanctified by it, to become sharers of His Body, to savor the Grace of the Resurrection, to begin to live from now eternal life, the enjoyment of heavenly things. — *Hieromonk Tikhon, Abbot of Stavronikita monastery, Mt Athos*

EVENTS & ANNOUNCEMENTS

- **THE ANNUAL MEETING FOR 2012** will convene on Sunday, February 5, following the Liturgy. All parish members are asked to attend the meeting. What constitutes Parish Membership? What are the requirements for eligibility to vote at this meeting? Very simply, four things: A member of the parish is one who 1) is a baptized Orthodox Christian, 2) is at least 18 years of age, 3) regularly confesses and communes in this parish, 4) financially supports the parish (you are encouraged to give a proportional amount from what God has blessed you, in accordance with the Biblical standard). If you have questions about any of these requirements, please see any Parish Council Member, or speak with Father Lawrence.
- **YOUTH ACTIVITY PLANNING MEETING RESCHEDULED:** Parents of our high school-age children are invited to attend a meeting on Sunday, February 12, at 12:45, in the Parish hall. Topic: Creating Orthodox soul-strengthening, faith-building and friendship-bonding activities, camp-outs, and retreats for our parish teens. We won't be discussing theology, theory, challenges or problems that confront our youth (that's for the retreats, etc.). Fr. Lawrence will simply lead a planning session for the above-named activities for the year ahead, using our resources, those that the Diocese makes available to us, and those of our sister parishes.
- **A NIGHT ON THE TOWN:** St. Michael's Orthodox School and St. Seraphim Church will host a dinner/dance here in the new parish hall on the Fast Free Friday, February 10, at 6:30 PM as a benefit for St. Michael Orthodox School. Tickets are \$50, for dinner, drinks and dancing. Call Lara Anderson for reservations and tickets at 707-291-6856.
- **AN ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE ON ISLAM:** Deacon Jeremiah is giving a series of lectures on topics relating to Islam and Orthodoxy (life and career of the Islamic Prophet Mohammed; the Quran, Sharia Law, Caliphates; Islamic and Christian Spirituality; the spread of Islam and Christianity under Islamic oppression; contemporary issues. Classes are on Tuesday evening, 7 PM, at 1352 Oak View Circle, apartment #307, hosted by Debi Shrimplin. Please call 536-9112 for more info and directions.
- **LIVING SYMBOL:** Exploring the inner meaning of the Divine Liturgy. San Francisco, CA. Feb 17-18. Lectures by Archimandrite Meletios (Webber), Archimandrite Irenei (Steenberg) and Archpriest Josiah Trenham. Hosted by the Sts. Cyril and Athanasius Orthodox Institute. register online at www.sforthodoxinstitute.org. Talks will be given at the Old Cathedral, 864 Fulton Street, SF.
- **UPCOMING LECTURE** at Nativity of Christ Greek Orthodox Church by Father Deacon John Chryssavgis. Fr. John is a deacon of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America and currently serves as theological advisor to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I on ecological issues. He completed his doctoral studies in Patristics at the University of Oxford (1983). His research has specialized in the ascetic thought and practice of early Christianity, especially from the desert tradition of Egypt (4th century) through the regions of Palestine (5th-6th centuries) and Sinai (7th century). 9:30 AM Registration; 10:00 AM, 1st Session Begins; 12:00 PM Lunch; 1:00 PM, 2nd Session Begins; Nativity of Christ Greek Orthodox Christian Church 1110 Highland Drive, Novato, California. \$15.00 Registration (Students-\$10.00) includes Continental Breakfast and Lunch.
- **CATECHISM, SATURDAY AFTERNOON, 3:30 PM.** Join with the Catechumens in their study of the teachings of the Orthodox Church as they prepare for Baptism. The class meets either in the Protection or St. Seraphim Church from 3:30 until 4:45 PM. For a list of topics, see the Monthly calendar.

Father Basilios (Nassar) ~ Memory Eternal!

Please pray for the repose of the soul of the Hieromonk Basilios (Nassar), 30, of the Archdiocese of Hama, Syria, who was killed during the continuing civil unrest in that country on January 25th. Evidently Father Basilios was in the Archbishopric when he received a phone call that one of his parishioners had been shot but was still alive. He immediately left the chancery and went to his ailing parishioner. Having arrived there the pious priest himself was shot twice and killed. May the Lord God give rest to the soul of the Hieromonk Basilios! May the Lord God forgive his murderers and quell the violent passions of the Muslims before it is too late for them. A video tribute to Father Basilios may be viewed at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=DgUtssSin80

PROTECTION OF THE HOLY VIRGIN MARY ORTHODOX CHURCH

FEBRUARY 2012

| Sunday | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday | Saturday |
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| | | | 1 • 6:15 PM, Vigil for Meeting of the Lord | 2 - Meeting of the Lord • 9 AM, Festal Divine Liturgy and blessing of candles | 3 | 4 • 3:30 PM, Catechism, <i>On Baptism pt. 2</i> • 5 PM, Great Vespers & Confessions |
| 5 - Publican & Pharisee • 9-10 AM, Confessions • 10 AM, Liturgy • 11:45, Church School • 12:30 PM, ANNUAL MEETING (please bring a bag lunch) | 6 | 7 Fr. Lawrence at Mission Retreat in Portland • 7 PM, Rohnert Park Study Group | 8 - No Fasting • 6 PM, Vespers | 9 • 6 PM, Akathist | 10 - No Fasting • 6:30 PM, Benefit Dinner for St. Michael's School | 11 • 11 AM, <i>Baptism</i> • 3:30 PM, Catechism, <i>On How to Read the Scriptures</i> • 5 PM, Great Vespers & Confessions |
| 12 - Prodigal Son • 9-10 AM, Confessions • 10 AM, Liturgy • 11:45, Church School • Noon: Agape Meal • 12:45 PM, <i>Youth Planning Meeting in Parish Hall</i> • 12:45 PM, <i>Choir Rehearsal</i> | 13 | 14 • 7 PM, Rohnert Park Study Group | 15 • 6 PM, Vespers | 16 • 6 PM, Akathist | 17 | 18 • 3:30 PM, Catechism, <i>Christian Ethics</i> • 5 PM, Great Vespers & Confessions |
| 19 - Last Judgement/Meatfare • 9-10 AM, Confessions • 10 AM, Liturgy • 11:45, Church School • Noon: BLINI | 20 <i>On this day we begin to fast from all meat products until Pascha</i> | 21 • 7 PM, Rohnert Park Study Group | 22 • 6 PM, Vespers | 23 • 6 PM, Vespers • 7 PM, Parish Council Meeting | 24 • 7:30 AM, Matins for the Feast of St. John the Baptism (<i>Finding of Precious Head</i>) | 25 • 3:30 PM, Catechism, <i>Holy Tradition</i> • 5 PM, Great Vespers & Confessions |
| 26 - Forgiveness Sun./Cheesefare • 9-10 AM, Confessions • 10 AM, Liturgy • 11:45, Church School • Noon: Agape Meal • 1:15 PM, <i>Vespers of Forgiveness for Great Lent</i> | 27 - Clean Monday • 7:30 AM, Matins • Noon, 6 th Hour • 7 PM, Canon of St. Andrew of Crete | 28 • 7:30 AM, Matins • Noon, 6 th Hour • 7 PM, Canon of St. Andrew of Crete | 29 • 7:30 AM, Canon of St. Andrew of Crete • Noon, 6 th Hour • 6:15 PM, Liturgy of Presanctified and Meal | March 1 • 7:30 AM, Matins • Noon, 6 th Hour • 7 PM, Canon of St. Andrew of Crete | 2 • 7:30 AM, Matins • Noon, 6 th Hour • 6:15 PM, Liturgy of the Presanctified | 3 • 3:30 PM, Catechism, <i>Overview of Great Lent</i> • 5 PM, Vigil |