

SEPTEMBER 2017 The Year of Grace of the Lord

Each year, at the beginning of September, the Churches of the Byzantine Rite lead their congregations into a cycle of prayers and commemorations that constitutes the 'liturgical year' or the 'church year.' What does this liturgical year mean, exactly?

One could think of the liturgical year as if it were a picture of the services and feast days during a cycle of 365 days, from September to September: in short, the liturgical year could be reduced to a practical diagram, to a calendar. The liturgical year is, in fact, expressed as a calendar, but simply to identify it with a calendar would be totally inadequate. One could also say that the purpose of the liturgical year was to bring to the minds of believers the teachings of the Gospel and the main events of Christian history in a certain order. That is true, but this educational, pedagogical, function does not exhaust the significance of the liturgical year. Perhaps we could say that its aim is to orient our prayer in a particular direction and also to provide it with an official channel which is objective, and even, in a certain way, artistic. This, too, is true, but the liturgy is more than a way of prayer, and it is more than a magnificent lyric poem. The liturgy is a body of sacred 'signs' which, in the thought and desire of the Church, have a present effect. Each liturgical feast renews and in some sense actualizes the event of which it is the symbol; it takes this event out of the past and makes it immediate; it offers us the appropriate grace, it becomes an 'effectual sign,' and we experience this efficacy to the extent that we bring to it a corresponding inclination of our soul. But still, this does not say everything. The liturgical year is, for us, a special means of union with Christ. No doubt every Eucharist unites us intimately with Christ, for in it he is 'both he who offers and who is offered,' in the same way that every prayer, being the prayer of the members of the mystical body, shares in the prayer of him who is the head of the body and the only one whose prayer is perfect. But, in the liturgical year, we are called to relive the whole life of Christ: from Christmas to Easter, from Easter to Pentecost, we are exhorted to unite ourselves to Christ in his birth and in his growth, to Christ suffering, to Christ dying, to Christ in triumph and to Christ inspiring his Church. The liturgical year forms Christ in us, from his birth to the full stature of the perfect man. According to a medieval Latin saying, the liturgical year is Christ himself, *annus est Christus*.

It is not only the commemoration of the events in the life of the Lord Jesus that forms Christ in us. In addition to the cycle of feasts that bear directly on our Lord, the liturgical year includes the cycle of feasts of the saints. These two cycles, however, should not be thought of as two strands that run parallel to, or separate from, each other, for the saints are the glorified members of the body of Christ. Their sanctity is but an aspect, a shining ray of the holiness of Christ himself. To celebrate the feast of a saint is to celebrate a special grace that flows from our Lord which is specially evidenced by the saint, it is to enter (for our profit) into the relationship of prayer which unites that saint to Christ. It is still more. In the same way that the feasts of our Lord in a mysterious way renew the events of his life, so the feasts of the saints make their lives, their merits and their deaths mysteriously actual, inasmuch as they participate in the life, the merits and the death of the Lord Jesus. Thus commemorations of the martyrs somehow renew the grace of their violent deaths, so that, as these were a participation in the passion of Christ, it is this passion which is relived in remembering the martyrs. The liturgical year has but one and the same object, Jesus Christ; whether we contemplate him directly, or whether we contemplate him

SEPTEMBER 2017

St. Paul the Apostle Orthodox Church • Las Vegas, Nevada

			<p>GREETERS</p> <p>SEP 3: STAFFORD/MURPHY SEP 10: DEMKO/MOROZOVA SEP 17: CAMPBELL/GERALT SEP 24: OSBURN/HAYDEN</p>		<p>CHURCH NEW YEAR</p>	<p>1</p> <p>2</p> <p>GREAT VESPERS, 5:00 PM CONFESSIONS</p>
<p>3</p> <p>DIVINE LITURGY, 9:00 AM HOURS: W. DEMKO EPISTLE: JARLSON POST-COMM: H. DEMKO</p>	<p>4</p> <p>LABOR DAY</p>	<p>5</p>	<p>6</p>	<p>7</p> <p>ERITREAN SERVICE, 8:00 AM COFFEE CHAT, 10:00 AM</p> <p>VESPERS/LITIYA, 6:30 PM</p>	<p>8</p> <p>DIVINE LITURGY 8:00 AM NATIVITY OF THE THEOTOKOS</p>	<p>9</p> <p>RUSSIAN CONFESSIONS, 9 AM SLAVONIC LITURGY, 10 AM</p> <p>GREAT VESPERS, 5:00 PM CONFESSIONS CHOIR REHEARSAL</p>
<p>10</p> <p>DIVINE LITURGY, 9:00 AM HOURS: E. TESFAY EPISTLE: ABRAHAM POST-COMM: HALLIDAY</p> <p>CHURCH SCHOOL ORIENTATION/PICNIC</p>	<p>11</p>	<p>12</p>	<p>13</p> <p>VESPERS/LITIYA, 6:30 PM</p>	<p>14</p> <p>DIVINE LITURGY 8:00 AM EXALTATION OF THE CROSS (STRICT FAST DAY) ERITREAN SERVICE, 9:30 AM</p>	<p>15</p>	<p>16</p> <p>FEEDING THE HOMELESS 10:30 AM</p> <p>GREAT VESPERS, 5:00 PM CONFESSIONS</p>
<p>17</p> <p>DIVINE LITURGY, 9:00 AM HOURS: BROOKS EPISTLE: HALLIDAY POST-COMM: BITSKO CHURCH SCHOOL</p>	<p>18</p>	<p>19</p> <p>PARISH COUNCIL, 6:00 PM</p>	<p>20</p>	<p>21</p> <p>ERITREAN SERVICE, 8:00 AM NO COFFEE CHAT</p>	<p>22</p> <p>FALL SESSION OF THE METROPOLITAN COUNCIL, NEW YORK — FATHER JOHN OUT OF TOWN, SEPTEMBER 18-27</p>	<p>23</p> <p>GREAT VESPERS, 5:00 PM CONFESSIONS</p>
<p>24</p> <p>DIVINE LITURGY, 9:00 AM HOURS: H. DEMKO EPISTLE: W. DEMKO POST-COMM: ABRAHAM CHURCH SCHOOL</p>	<p>25</p> <p>FATHER JOHN OUT OF TOWN, SEPTEMBER 18-27</p>	<p>26</p>	<p>27</p> <p>DAILY VESPERS, 6:30 PM ADULT FAITH FORUM</p>	<p>28</p> <p>ERITREAN SERVICE, 8:00 AM COFFEE CHAT, 10:00 AM</p>	<p>29</p>	<p>30</p> <p>VESPERS/LITIYA, 5:00 PM CONFESSIONS</p>

St. Paul the Apostle Orthodox Church

PO Box 12635
5400 Annie Oakley Drive
Las Vegas, Nevada 89112-0635
702.898.4800
www.lasvegasorthodox.com

RECTOR

Archpriest John J. Dresko
1747 Crystal Downs Ave
Las Vegas, NV 89123
860.833.4921 (Mobile)
fatherjohn@lasvegasorthodox.com

Father Stephen Osburn, Jr.
(702) 521-6988

CHOIR DIRECTORS

Matushka Elizabeth Dresko
Grace Brooks

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Catherine Wilkalis, Secretary

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Kevin McAuley

Eritrean & Ethiopian Outreach
Tekeste Nuguru

Russian Outreach
Natalia Minkoff

Church School/Youth
Amy McAuley

Fellowship Committee
Charity Committee

through the members of his body.

Great graces and great spiritual opportunities are offered us during the course of the liturgical year. It provides a frame and support for Christian piety; it gives it a style which is sober and objective; it maintains a bond of unity among believers. And, above all, it communicates an inspiration, it transmits a life. One should, however, beware of excessive 'liturgicalism' which would seek to enclose prayer in ritual frames. The liturgical way is not the only way. Saints and mystics have sometimes reduced outward forms to a minimum; solitaries have done without them altogether. Liturgical life is not an end in itself; it is but a means – amongst other means – of reaching the kingdom of God which 'is within us.' Our taking part in the liturgical year is empty and illusory if the outward cycle is not matched by an inner cycle, and if the events of Christ's life that each feast represents do not find themselves mysteriously renewed in our soul. The liturgical year acquires its true meaning to the extent that it becomes an adoration in spirit and in truth.

– a Monk of the Eastern Church
The Year of Grace of the Lord

As we enter into the New Year of Grace, let us all make an effort to live that journey of salvation. Pray, fast, attend the services, read the Scriptures. Meditate on the greatness of God in giving us the ability to enter directly into the Mystery of His coming.

Father John

FEASTDAYS

During September, we celebrate the following feastsdays:

NATIVITY OF THE THEOTOKOS

SEPTEMBER 8

VESPERS/LITIYA, 6:30 PM (THUR)

DIVINE LITURGY, 8:00 AM (FRI)

EXALTATION OF THE CROSS

SEPTEMBER 14

VESPERS/LITIYA, 6:30 PM (WED)

DIVINE LITURGY, 8:00 AM (THUR)

STRICT FAST DAY

PROTECTION OF THE THEOTOKOS

OCTOBER 1

VESPERS/LITIYA, 5:00 PM (SAT)

DIVINE LITURGY, 9:00 AM (SUN)

AT A GLANCE...

September 1: CHURCH NEW YEAR

September 8: NATIVITY OF THE THEOTOKOS

September 9: Russian Confessions, 9:00 AM; Slavonic Liturgy, 10:00 AM
Choir Rehearsal following Vespers

September 10: CHURCH SCHOOL ORIENTATION AND PICNIC

September 14: EXALTATION OF THE CROSS (STRICT FAST)

September 16: FEEDING THE HOMELESS, 10:30 AM

September 18-22: Fall Session of the Metropolitan Council, New York
Father John out of town September 18-27

September 19: Parish Council Meeting, 6:00 PM

September 27: Daily Vespers, 6:30 PM, Adult Faith Forum resumes

October 1: PROTECTION OF THE THEOTOKOS

Send email addresses and corrections to:
fatherjohn@lasvegasorthodox.com

HELP NEEDED

Our beloved Parish Council Vice President, Ginny (Veronica) Hood, has been diagnosed with Stage 2 Squamous Cell Cancer. Due to unforeseen issues, she needs help paying for her surgery (a minimum of \$100,000).

We have been taking special collections at the end of the Divine Liturgy to benefit the Hood family. We ask you to consider a donation by check, card, or online, earmarking it for the Hood Collection.

We have also set up a YouCaring Page:

<https://www.youcaring.com/viginiaginnyhood-899443>

In whatever way you care to make a donation, please make a donation and be generous, along with lifting Ginny and her family into the very presence of God in prayer.

CHURCH NEW YEAR

The Church New Year begins on September 1. Every year on this date (six years now!), Father John distributes a schedule for the *daily* reading of the Orthodox Study Bible. Over the course of one year, the schedule will have you read the OSB (both OT and NT) completely, including the Psalms and Proverbs twice each. It only takes about 15 minutes each day.

Father John's annual challenge – join him!

METROPOLITAN COUNCIL

The Fall Session of the Metropolitan Council of the OCA will meet in New York, September 18-22. Father John and Matushka Liz will be out of town September 18-27. Following the meeting, Father will spend a few days visiting his family before returning.

Father Stephen will be covering all services and pastoral needs during Father John's absence. Please contact him if necessary.

SLAVONIC SERVICES

Father Alexander will be here on the customary second Saturday of the month (September 9). Russian language confessions begin at 9:00 AM. Slavonic Liturgy is scheduled for 10:00 AM.

CHOIR REHEARSAL

The choir will be rehearsing following Vespers on Saturday, September 9. All choir members are asked to make every effort to be present.

CHURCH SCHOOL

The end of summer means the beginning of our 2017-2018 Church School year. We will have prayers and the blessing of the students and teachers at Liturgy on September 10. Following the liturgy, we will have our traditional orientation and class assignments followed by a parish picnic. Regular classes begin on September 17 following liturgy as usual.

We will provide hot dogs and hamburgers, and there is a sign-up list available for pot luck salads, desserts, etc. in the hall.

STRICT FAST

We will celebrate the Exaltation of the Cross on September 13/14. A reminder that this day, in keeping with the remembrance of the Cross, is a **strict fast day**.

FEEDING THE HOMELESS

Our next Feeding the Homeless project will be held on Saturday, September 16. We meet at 10:30 AM then construct the lunches and bag all of the items, which we then distribute downtown and are usually done by 1:00 PM. Please join us! If you can donate any of the items needed for the lunches (or funds to provide such), it would be appreciated. See Cathy Wilkalis for more information.

ADULT CLASS

Our Adult Faith Forum will resume on Wednesdays beginning on September 27. Before beginning a new topic, we will complete our discussion on *The Parables of Christ*. As usual, we begin with Daily Vespers at 6:30 PM, and then have discussion 7:00-8:00 PM.

IOCC

We need a new parish liaison to International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC). If you are interested in helping us out in this position, please see Father John.

GREEK FESTIVAL

Our sister parish of St. John the Baptist is holding their 45th Annual Greek Festival September 15-17. Please consider supporting our brothers and sisters in Christ, while enjoying some great Greek food and entertainment.

ICONOGRAPHY

The next phase of our iconography project will be to complete the east walls of the church (to the left and right of the sanctuary). Renderings are available in the church hall and you are urged to take a look. This is a **MAJOR** project which will require substantial funding. The two renderings posted in the hall will cost \$36,000 each, a total of \$72,000. **We are once again accepting donations to the Icon Fund. Please consider making an offering above and beyond your normal support of the parish!**

CHARITY

Our normal collections of food for Friends of the Desert continue. Needs: jelly, jam, peanut butter, canned fruit, canned tuna/chicken. Thank you!

ORTHODOX VENDORS

A list of businesses that our parish uses or are owned and operated by

Orthodox Christians (some parishioners). We provide this information for you to consider if you need services.

CB Air Conditioning
Cedomir Blagojevic
(702) 493-0295

Edward Yee
Doctor of Ophthalmology
2980 S. Jones Blvd., Suite A
(702) 362-3937

Kyklos Café (Greek food)
Galleria Mall
Sophocles Frangakis
(702) 450-1515

Makeup and Hair Artist
Natalia Kasimtseva (Baker)
(I travel to client location)
Text or call: (702) 336-8300
View portfolio at:
www.facebook.com/NataliaKasBeauty

Taffer Computers
Website Design, Marketing,
& Computer Repair
Fr. Stephen Osburn
(702) 521-6988

PRAYER FOR OUR PARISH

We ask everyone to remember our parish in daily prayer:
Lord, God and Savior of all, we thank You for the blessing of St. Paul parish in our lives. May Your word become alive in each and every one of us who strive to follow You. Please bless and multiply all the gifts – time, talent and treasure – which are given in thanks to benefit our mission and glorify Your name. Bless and multiply the givers and help us all to make present Your Kingdom. For You are the Giver of all that is good, O Christ our God, and to You we give glory, together with Your Father who is without beginning and Your all-holy, good and life-giving Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

SACRAMENTS/SPECIAL SERVICES

Please follow these guidelines.

- Baptisms. A personal meeting scheduled with Fr. John will be necessary to schedule any baptism requested.
- Matrimony. A date and time for weddings must be requested at least six months (preferably twelve) in advance. There will be premarital sessions for both bride and groom to attend.
- Memorials (Panikhida). Requests for a memorial must be made at least one week in advance. If possible, the service should be served on Saturday. Other requests will be met as pastorally possible.

PARISH COUNCIL SYNOPSIS AUGUST 20, 2017 MEETING

Rector's Report: Fr. John and Matushka Liz returned from their trip to baptize and meet their new granddaughter. He expressed thanks to Fr. Stephen for handling things in his absence. He stated it was a difficult time to leave and miss Transfiguration and Dormition, but the dates of the events they attended were set then.

Meetings: Fr. John will be gone for the day on August 22nd to attend the Diocesan Finance Committee meeting. From September 18-23, he will be in New York for the Metropolitan Council meetings, then spend a few days with his family. He will tele-com for the September Parish Council on September 19 meeting while Fr. Stephen oversees it.

Associate Priest's Report: Fr Stephen reported on his busy summer. His daughter Zoe Fotini was baptized on June 10th before he left for Project Mexico. He also reported that he served his first wedding on June 11th. In September, he will be going on vacation with his family.

Vice President's Report: Nothing new to report. Fr. John expressed his joy that Ginny is doing better and wishes her well in her treatment and recovery. She is thankful for all the love and support from the parish and hopes to qualify for a program that will help cover the costs of the treatment of her illness. Fr. John emphasized that the entire parish is with her and we will continue our efforts to help her financially.

Treasurer's Report: Karen Short distributed our financials before the meeting:

Capital Fund: \$63,313.00
Rainy Day: \$54,786.00
Icon Fund: \$4,600.00

Income for June was
\$22,895.44, with expenses of
\$22,891.32 for a surplus of \$4.12.

Income for July was
\$23,737.87, with expenses of
\$219,195.32 for a surplus of
\$4,542.55.

2017 YTD FINANCIALS (7/31)

2017 Inc	\$ 188,203.14
2017 Exp	\$ 168,302.68
Inc over Exp	\$ 19,900.46

Karen reported that the bonds were paid off and that excess money was placed in the Capital Fund and that fund reimbursed the parish for the doors and sound panels. Discussion then took place about the changes to the budget now that the Church Bonds are paid off and the parish is without that commitment. Next year's budget will show big differences but this year's budget will not be adjusted. We have lost a number of active, generous families in the past few months – that will more than offset the relief of no bond payments. New challenges for stewardship will be addressed in the coming months.

COMMITTEES

Buildings and Grounds:

HVAC: Office HVAC broken and cannot be fixed. It cannot be replaced until the weather cools off. Motion: Greg Brooks moved, Virginia Hood seconded, that up to \$7000 be allotted to replace the office HVAC when possible. Passed unanimously.

Doors: Kevin needs to schedule the door painting and order the other door. He stated it would be done before next meeting.

Courtyard: Fr. John recommended the courtyard project be done now. Karen recommended a plan that included phases. Kevin added that he would have a concept drawing done by next meeting. We hope to present a plan by the annual meeting in December.

Carpeting: Sean Campbell has arranged for the manufacturer to make the carpets and have them donated. All of the area rugs in the church will be replaced. (This will not include the wall to wall carpet.) Dates to be determined.

Charity: next feeding the homeless event is scheduled for 9/16. Fr. John read Cathy's report in her absence: "the next homeless feeding day will be Saturday, Sept 16 at 10:30 a.m. There was a carryover balance of \$62.39 from the last homeless feeding. A church check for \$250 was added on 5/28 for a total of \$312.39. Since then there have been two donations totaling \$203.58 for a new balance of \$515.97. With this amount, we are able to purchase extra socks, soap, washcloths and other items as needed for hygiene kits."

IOCC: Still need coordinator.

Church School/Youth: September 10 is the start of the new church school year. There will be the annual picnic after Liturgy, followed by an orienta-

tion and classes assigned. Due to calendar conflicts, the adult class will begin on September 27.

Project Mexico (Fr. Stephen): reported that the trip presented some difficulties. There was some mismanagement on the part of the coordinators at the site and ranch and made the trip very stressful. However, he did state the kids had a good time and would like to go back. Frs. John and Stephen will be meeting soon to discuss a return trip or the next summer youth trip.

Youth Program (Fr. Stephen): reported that quite a few kids and youth have approached him asking when the next activity was going to be. He asked the parish council and Fr. John if he could reorganize the youth program to address this issue with plans to have them involved in activities that range from work to fun. Fr. John gave his blessing for this endeavor and Fr. Stephen stated he would have a plan of action prior to next month's meeting.

Eritrean/Ethiopian: reported that there have been some serious concerns. Fr. John and Archbishop Benjamin discussed the issue privately and through pastoral discretion, Fr. John notified the Eritreans they have until no later than their Christmas (January 6) to find a new place. They are also forbidden to use the sanctuary at all and must only use the hall for a brief coffee hour after their Thursday service. No wedding or funeral receptions will be allowed in the hall. Further discussion took place.

Fellowship: reported that the committee met and discussed events for the coming year. Oktoberfest will be on October 28 and it will go back to self directed with no catering. It will be an outreach event where parishioners are encouraged to bring a friend. Tickets will go on sale at the end of August.

Tickets will again be \$15 for adults, \$5 for children, and the option to buy a ticket for a friend at \$10 per ticket.

Outreach/website: no report.

Russian: August service was cancelled last minute due to Fr. Alexander's wife having surgery.

Stewardship: This year's Stewardship Month must have a new and different approach based on the realities of the current state of our parish (with losses, etc.).

OLD BUSINESS

Greeters Training: Father John will conduct greeters' training on Sunday August 27. There will be a training sheet and new greeters will work with veteran greeters at first. Karen suggested marking up a Divine Liturgy book to help them know when to let people in and out, etc.

Sunshine Group: reported that Cathy put together a "survival kit" for her while she was in the hospital and that this would be a great outreach. She will work with Cathy to setup a kit for those who go into the hospital and will update more on this next meeting.

NEW BUSINESS

None.

Next Council Meeting:
Tuesday, September 19, 6:00 PM

PARISH DIPTYCHS

This list of parish departed is to remind us all of those whom we love and miss and to spur us to remember them in our daily prayers.

MONTH OF SEPTEMBER

Oscar Thomas Abdoulah
September 3, 2001

John Vukmanovich
September 9, 2006

Milana Popovich
September 10, 1998

Darinka Janjic
September 12, 1994

Lucian Stefanescu
September 14, 1999

Theodore Shimsky
September 15, 2002

Dawit Kahassai
September 16, 2001

Yekaalo Gebremeskel
September 16, 2010

Tatiana Paul
September 17, 2003

Ruslan Zhgenti
September 17, 2010

Christina Manteris
September 25, 1992

Valentina Petrovna Demchenko
September 25, 2001

Norman Daniel Kuka
September 26, 2001

FATHER STEPHEN'S CORNER SIN IS SIN, NO MATTER HOW YOU FLUFF IT

On Transfiguration Sunday, I preached a sermon explaining why the Church can never support transgenderism and homosexual marriages because our identity is in Christ and not in what we want it to be. Most of my sermons receive feedback, but this one in particular was the most. It was primarily good, some bad, which is refreshing because in this day and age, it seems like most Christians, even Orthodox are growing more and more away from the teachings of the Christ and embracing their own beliefs and

wills - or that of the culture who seeks to only disunite, not unite with God.

Now, I don't want to address those who had dissent, because that isn't the purpose of this reflection. I will say this, the large issue brought to me wasn't that I was wrong, rather that the Church needs to be more compassionate to individuals who struggle with these particular passions. My response to that is simple: We are the Church and as the Church, compassion comes from people not the entity. Meaning, if you want to show the Church is caring of those in need, literally go and be someone who cares for those in need. Don't expect others to do it for you. Make the Parable of the Last Judgment not merely a theological reflection on how to live, but embrace Christ's words "as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me" into your core being. Make it who you are as someone who is trying to live the Christian life.

But, I digress and if I need to address this further at another time, I will. However, the big question I was asked or comment I received, had to do with those asking me to expand more on the Church's understand of sin in relations to these identities. I have to first off make it clear that sin is sin, no matter how you fluff it up. Every sin separates us from God, even those that are more visible than others. Every person in the history of mankind since the Fall, with the exception of one - Jesus Christ - is a sinner. It is important to remember that the Church doesn't condemn any sin based on the presumed sinlessness of its members, but on the sinfulness or separation from God that the sin creates. If we all had to wait until being perfectly righteous to call a sin a sin, then nothing would ever be called a sin.

To understand this a little better, I'm going to provide a type of thought experiment. We have two people in a car. The driver has been pulled over for speeding. After he gets his ticket, the passenger says to him, "speeding is wrong", and the driver responds with, "But you have gotten 3 tickets in the last year, you have no right to judge me for my actions." Was the passenger right to call out the crime (sin) of the driver? Or is this an invalid claim based on the fact that the driver was the one who committed the crime? The problem is not in pointing out the sin, because in a way, it should be pointed out, especially in a context where society treats so many sins as justifiable (and even celebrate it in some cases). Rather, the issue presented here is that we turn a blind eye to sin. We ought not to excuse sin, much less excuse sin because one is a sinner. Instead, we should point out both sins and call all, including ourselves, to repentance. We don't hate sinners, but we hate sin and that is often looked down upon in today's world. People assume that calling a sin "sinful" is the same as hating an individual. In fact, for those who hate sin, it is for real Christians what loving the sinner means.

So what does this exactly mean? It means that we have to change our focus on how we view our own sins. We are called to change the way we see the world and in a much broader way, turn our attention completely to God. Our initiative should be to seek to do good and not to avoid bad because it means not being punished, but to avoid bad because it detaches us from one another. In the end of the day, the only thing we are all called to seek after is God Himself. I often say that if given a choice, where God says, I will have the Vikings win the Super Bowl every year the rest of your life, or

you can serve at the altar for one day. I will pick the altar every single time. Not simply because sports are in many ways just a foolish hobby; rather, the joy of serving God means more than anything this world can provide. At the end of the day, we will still worry about the consequence of our sins, but the fear of being completely separated from Him is what hurts us most. I am more afraid of my life being with God, than anything that can give me joy in my life here and now.

This is where we really understand how to encounter others. True

compassion to others who struggle is to have a humble approach to show them by picking the altar over the world. Loving others isn't showing them their sin but it is recognizing and calling out the sin as sin. We don't become righteous by expressing the sinfulness of others, we become righteous by saying, as we used to say when I was doing hospital ministry, "that stinks, but how can I help?"

We treat those who sin as those who are in need and we show them we are there for them in their struggle, to help them carry their crosses but at

the same time remembering that it is still a cross. The world is going to tell us every day that we don't need to carry our crosses and that sin is just a figment of our imaginations. Our response to the world is, "No, you are wrong. This Cross is real and I will not abandon you. Come with me. I'll help you carry your Cross and together we can all experience God's love." If there is ever a time we need to help others turn from their sins, this is the time. We are in the midst of it but we are not free unless we turn to God and battle sin together.

SERMON ON THE NATIVITY OF THE THEOTOKOS

† *Father Alexander Schmemmann*



The Church's veneration of Mary has always been rooted in her obedience to God, her willing choice to accept a humanly impossible calling. The Orthodox Church has always emphasized Mary's connection to humanity and delighted in her as the best, purest, most sublime fruition of human history and of man's quest for God, for ultimate meaning, for ultimate content of human life.

If in Western Christianity veneration of Mary was centered upon her perpetual virginity, the heart of Orthodox Christian East's devotion, contemplation, and joyful delight has always been her Motherhood, her flesh and blood connection to Jesus Christ. The East rejoices that the human role in the divine plan is pivotal. The Son of God comes to earth, appears in order to redeem the world, He becomes human to incorporate man into His divine vocation, but humanity takes part in this. If it is understood that Christ's "co-nature" with us is as a human being and not some phantom or bodiless apparition, that He is one of us and forever united to us through His humanity, then devotion to Mary also becomes understandable, for she is the one who gave Him His human nature, His flesh and blood. She is the one through whom Christ can always call Himself "The Son of Man."

Son of God, Son of Man...God descending and becoming man so that man could become divine, could become partaker of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), or as the teachers of Church expressed it, "deified." Precisely here, in this extraordinary revelation of man's authentic nature and calling, is the source that gratitude and tenderness which cherishes Mary as our link to Christ and, in Him, to God. And nowhere is this reflected more clearly than in the Nativity of the Mother of God.

Nothing about this event is mentioned anywhere in the Holy Scriptures. But why should there be? Is there anything remarkable, anything especially unique about the normal birth of a child, a birth like any other? The Church began to commemorate the event with a special feast...because, on the contrary, the very fact that it is routine discloses something fresh and radiant about everything we call routine and ordinary, it gives new depth to the unremarkable details of human life...And with each birth the world is itself in some sense created anew and given as a gift to this new human being to be his life, his path, his creation.

This feast therefore is first a general celebration of Man's birth, and we no longer remember the anguish, as the Gospel says, "for joy that a human being is born into the world" (Jn. 16:21). Secondly, we now know whose particular birth, whose coming we celebrate: Mary's. We know the uniqueness, the beauty, the grace of precisely this child, her destiny, her meaning for us and for the whole world. And thirdly, we celebrate all who prepared the way for Mary, who contributed to her inheritance of grace and beauty... And therefore the Feast of her Nativity is also a celebration of human history, a celebration of faith in man, a celebration of man.

Sadly, the inheritance of evil is far more visible and better known. There is so much evil around us that this faith in man, in his freedom, in the possibility of handing down a radiant inheritance of goodness has almost evaporated and been replaced by cynicism and suspicion. This hostile cynicism and discouraging suspicion are precisely what seduce us to distance ourselves from the Church when it celebrates with such joy and faith this birth of a little girl in whom are concentrated all the goodness, spiritual beauty, harmony and perfection that are elements of genuine human nature. Thus, in celebrating Mary's birth we find ourselves already on the road to Bethlehem, moving toward the joyful mystery of Mary as the Mother to God.