

II – The Pentecostarion

Pascha

Acts 1:1-9 John 1:1-17

CHRIST IS RISEN FROM THE DEAD and by His death He has trampled upon Death and has given life to those who are in the tombs.

This hymn, the troparion of Pascha, is chanted repeatedly on Pascha and throughout the forty days until the feast of Christ's ascension. Many of us know it by heart. Often, however, we have not plumbed the depth of its meaning, particularly as it applies to our lives.

Why Did Christ Die?

On the most basic level we can say that Christ died because humans die and He was fully human. By truly assuming all that is human apart from sin, the Word of God accepted all the weaknesses inherent in our human nature, from the indignities of birth and infancy to the final humiliation of death. Christ died because He was fully and completely human as well as divine.

But Christ did not simply die; by His death He defeated Death. The first and most obvious aspect of this victory is that He rose from the dead: Death could take Him because He was human; it could not hold Him because He was the Son of God. Christ rose from the dead because He was fully and completely divine as well as human.

Christ's Death Takes Away Sin

The Scriptures specify a particular result of Christ's victory over Death. Dying, they teach, He destroyed the power of sin over us. When St Paul summarized the Church's belief about the Lord Jesus for the Corinthians the first thing he mentioned was that Christ died for our sins: "*I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures...*" (1 Cor 15:3-4).

St Paul's summary has been described as an early creed, putting together various aspects of the Christian message in a systematic way. To say that Christ died "for our sins" means that His death on the cross, where His blood would be poured out, would somehow achieve the overthrow of sin; not that people would cease sinning but that sin would no longer have the ultimate power over mankind.

This message is depicted graphically in the Byzantine icon of the Resurrection – an image that may help us understand how our sins are affected by Christ's death.

Our icon is based, not on the Gospel accounts of the empty tomb but on the following passages from the teaching of St Peter. In his first sermon after the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Peter quoted this verse of Psalm 16: “*Moreover my flesh also will rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Hades, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption*” (Ps 16: 9-10) and applied it to Christ. The patriarch David, he wrote, being a prophet, “...*spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption*” (Acts 2:31). We refer to this when we say in the Apostles’ Creed that “He descended into hell.”

Christ’s descent among the dead is, in fact, an invasion, bringing to the dead the imminent expectation of eternal life. In the first universal epistle of St Peter we read: “*Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison who formerly were disobedient...*” (1 Pt 3:18-20). Christ’s presence proclaims the Kingdom of God to the dead and defeats their captors, sin and death.

The icon depicts the power of Christ’s presence in the realm of the dead. Locks and chains, representing the power of sin and death over mankind, are shown broken on the ground. Christ is depicted taking the “formerly disobedient” Adam and Eve by the hand and leading them out of the pit to God. The Psalmist King David and other Old Testament personages are often depicted with them sharing in Christ’s victory over Death. Christ’s mission to the imprisoned spirits is often described in English as the “harrowing (despoiling) of hell.”

We celebrate this confrontation with sin and death in our Paschal services. At the vespers of Pascha on Great Saturday we sing of the liberation of the dead: “Today Hades tearfully sighs: ‘My power has crumbled, for the Shepherd crucified has raised Adam; and those whom I had possessed, I lost. Those whom I had swallowed by my might, I have given up completely: for the Crucified has emptied the graves, and the power of death has vanished!’ O Lord, glory to Your Cross and to Your holy Resurrection!”

Paschal Matins begins with a representation of the King of glory banging on the gates of Hades and leading mankind (all of us) into the Kingdom of God, the Church. The assault on sin and death is successful and we are freed from their ultimate power.

Trampling Upon Death

We who are united to Christ in His death and resurrection through baptism are called to continue His defeat of sin and death in our own person, as the Scriptures make clear. “*For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: ‘Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth’; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed.*” (1 Pt 2:19-24)

Death is defeated when we allow Christ to take us by the hand and lead us along His way of not reacting to evil by copying it; rather to follow Christ's way of forgiveness and trust in God even to death. Then our deeds as well as our words will proclaim that Christ is risen and that we are as well.

***From a Homily for Holy Saturday
by St. Epiphanius of Cyprus (+403)***

“For your sake I, your God, became your son; I, the Lord, took the form of a slave; I, whose home is above the heavens, descended to the earth and beneath the earth. For your sake, for the sake of man, I became like a man without help, free among the dead. For the sake of you who left a garden, I was betrayed in a garden, and I was crucified in a garden.

“See on my face the spit I received in order to restore to you the life I once breathed into you. See there the marks of the blows I received in order to refashion your warped nature in my image. On my back see the marks of the scourging I endured to remove the burden of sin that weighs upon your back. See my hands, nailed firmly to a tree, for you who once stretched out your hand to a tree.

“I slept on the cross and a sword pierced my side for you who slept in paradise and brought forth Eve from your side. My side has healed the pain in yours. My sleep will rouse you from your sleep in hell. The sword that pierced me has sheathed the sword that was turned against you.

“Rise. Let us leave this place. The enemy led you out of the earthly paradise. I will not restore you to that paradise, but I will enthrone you in heaven. I forbade you the tree that was only a symbol of life, but see! I who am life itself am now one with you. I appointed cherubim to guard you as slaves are guarded, but now I make them worship you as God. The throne formed by cherubim awaits you, its bearers swift and eager. The bridal chamber is adorned, the banquet is ready, the eternal dwelling places are prepared, the treasure houses of all good things lie open. The kingdom of heaven has been prepared for you from all eternity.”

“I Am the Life of the Dead”

NO ONE SAW JESUS RISE from the dead. The Scriptures simply say that the tomb was found to be empty early on that Sunday morning. Later the risen Christ appeared to His disciples as we read in the Gospels, the Acts and the Epistles. This is why the Byzantine rules governing icons prohibit showing Christ rising from the dead. Instead they set forth two scenes for Paschal icons: the women at the empty tomb and the “harrowing of hell,” Christ’s descent into death.

In the description of St Peter’s first address to the people on Pentecost, we read that he applied the prophetic Psalm 16:8-11 to Christ, saying that the psalmist “*...spoke concerning the resurrection of Christ that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption*” (Acts 2:31).

Christ’s time among the dead was described with some detail in the first universal epistle of St Peter. We are told that Christ “*went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah....*” (1Peter 3:19–20) and that “*the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged as men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit*” (1 Peter 4:6).

This concept of Christ enlightening those in the darkness of death was thought to be so central to our faith that it was included in early creeds. We still profess, when we say the (2nd century) Apostles' Creed, that Christ "...descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead." The English version translated as "hell" the Greek word *katotata* (the lowest region), the place of the dead.

Early Images in Our Liturgy

"The Descent of Christ to the Depths" is a third-century text incorporated in later writings such as the apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus and the Acts of Pilate. This text – much abridged here – contains a dramatic scene involving Satan, Hades (the realm of death) and those held captive there.

"Behold, Satan, the prince and chief of death, said to Hades, 'Prepare to receive Jesus, who boasts that He is the Son of God, and yet is a man afraid of death...'

"As they were speaking, suddenly there came a voice like thunder, crying 'Remove your gates, you princes. Be lifted up, you everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in.' ... Then Hades said to his wicked ministers, 'Shut firm the gates of brass and put on them bars of iron...'

When all the saints heard it, they answered, rebuking Hades, "Open the gates that the King of Glory may come in."...

"Stretching forth His hand, the Lord said, 'Come to Me, all you holy ones who bear My image and likeness...'"

"And the Lord, stretched forth His hand and made the sign of the cross over Adam and over all His saints. He took the right hand of Adam and went up out of hell, with all the saints following Him... and brought them all into the glory and beauty of paradise" (From *The Descent of Christ to the Depths* 4, 5, 8, 9).

This text is the earliest source we have for our icon of Pascha. It does not attempt to describe Christ's physical resurrection but the spiritual reality of what His Death and Resurrection accomplished. The Lord Jesus, in radiant garments, is shown standing on the brazen gates of Hades (also called the "Doors of Death"), which are broken and have fallen in the form of a cross, illustrating the belief that by His death on the cross, Christ has trampled down death. At the bottom of the icon we see Hades as a chasm of darkness, often with various pieces of broken locks and chains strewn about.

Our paschal icon contains a second image from *The Descent of Christ to the Depths*. Christ is shown pulling Adam and Eve up out of Hades, surrounded by other righteous figures from the Old Testament, "the saints" mentioned in *The Descent*. In many versions of this icon Christ is not shown holding them by the hands, but by their wrists, to stress that mankind could not attach himself to God because of his ancestral sin; rather it is Christ's work alone which effects our recreation.

The Dialogue with Satan

This image of the brass gates in *The Descent* was taken in turn from Psalm 23, depicting a conqueror's entry into the city. In *The Descent* this psalm is used to describe Christ, the true King of Glory, breaking down the gates of Hades and leading mankind from the prison of death to paradise.

In the Middle Eastern Patriarchates this psalm is recited as the Paschal procession stands in darkness before the doors of the church. The priest outside and a "Satan," inside recreate this dialogue:

Priest: Lift up your gates, you princes; and be lifted up, you everlasting gates, and the King of Glory shall enter in.

Reader: Who is this King of Glory?

Priest: The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle. Lift up your gates, you princes; and be lifted up, you everlasting gates, and the King of Glory shall enter in.

Reader: Who is this King of Glory?

Priest: The Lord of hosts, He is the King of Glory.

The doors burst open and the congregation enters the brilliantly lit church, becoming themselves an icon of redeemed humanity.

Christ in Hades (*St Epiphanius of Cyprus*)

Something strange is happening—there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence because the King is asleep. It trembled and is still because God has fallen asleep in the flesh and He has raised up all who have slept ever since the world began. God has died in the flesh and Hell trembles with fear. He has gone to search for our first parent, as for a lost sheep. Greatly desiring to visit those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death, He has gone to free from sorrow the captives Adam and Eve, He who is both God and the Son of Eve. The Lord approached them bearing the Cross, the weapon that had won Him the victory. At the sight of Him Adam, the first man He had created, struck his breast in terror and cried out to everyone, 'My Lord be with you all.' Christ answered him: 'And with your spirit.' He took him by the hand and raised him up, saying: 'Awake, O sleeper, and rise from the dead, and Christ will give you light.

'I am your God, who for your sake have become your son. Out of love for you and your descendants I now by my own authority command all who are held in bondage to come forth, all who are in darkness to be enlightened, all who are sleeping to arise. Sleeper, awake. I did not create you to be held a prisoner in Hades. Rise from the dead, for I am the life of the dead. Rise up, work of my hands, you who were created in my image. Rise, let us leave this place, for you are in Me and I in you; together we form one person and cannot be separated.

Death Could Not Hold Him

THERE ARE A NUMBER of sacred images popular in the West which are considered inappropriate or uncanonical in the East. This means that their depictions are actually misrepresentations of the one they represent. The popular depiction of the Holy Trinity as an older man, a younger man and a dove is one such inappropriate image. The reason this image, copied in many 19th century icons, is considered uncanonical is because God the Father never became a man and the Holy Spirit never became a bird! Mixing these symbolic representations with the canonical and true depiction of the Word of God incarnate as Jesus is confusing at best.

Another uncanonical representation often presented as an icon shows the risen Christ emerging from the tomb, often carrying a banner or standard. This is considered inappropriate because no one actually saw Christ rise from the dead. The Gospels do not present us with any narrative of Jesus' resurrection. They simply speak of the apostles and the myrrh-bearers hearing the angelic proclamation that Jesus had risen. This is why canonical Byzantine iconography depicts either the empty tomb or the symbolic representation of Christ leading mankind to Paradise.

The Tomb in the Scriptures

St Matthew's Gospel tells us that the Lord Jesus was buried in a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea: *"Now when evening had come, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who himself had also become a disciple of Jesus. This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate commanded the body to be given to him. When Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his new tomb which he had hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a large stone against the door of the tomb, and departed"* (Mt 27:57-60). We learn from Mk 15:43 that this Joseph was not only well-to-do, but also a leading Jew, a member of the Sanhedrin. John adds that he was a disciple of Jesus, *"but secretly, for fear of the Jews"* (Jn 19:38).

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus wrote that the requirement to bury the dead before sunset was so important that even executed criminals would be buried, if only temporarily, while the Roman practice was that their bodies would be left exposed to the elements.

John also tells us that the tomb where Jesus was buried was near the place where He had been crucified, and therefore outside the city of Jerusalem. *"Now in the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. So there they laid Jesus, because of the Jews' Preparation Day, for the tomb was nearby"* (Jn 19:41, 42). At the time, most Jews in the area were still buried in caves hollowed out for the purpose or dug out of the nearby rock.

According to John, Joseph was accompanied by the Pharisee Nicodemus, a member of the ruling class. *"And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury"* (Jn 19:39, 40).

The Tomb of Jesus Today

The burial place of the Lord was not adorned outwardly in any way, but its location was firmly fixed in the hearts of believers. It became such a place of devotion that the Roman Emperor Hadrian had a temple built to the goddess Venus over the spot to affirm the superiority of the Roman state religion. According to the fourth-century historian Eusebius, “Certain impious and godless persons had thought to remove this sacred cave entirely from the eyes of men, supposing in their folly that thus they should be able effectually to obscure the truth. Accordingly, they brought a quantity of earth from a distance with much labor, and covered the entire spot; then, having raised this to a moderate height, they paved it with stone, concealing the holy cave beneath this massive mound. Then, as though their purpose had been effectually accomplished, they prepare on this foundation a truly dreadful sepulcher of souls, by building a gloomy shrine of lifeless idols to the impure spirit whom they call Venus, and offering detestable oblations therein on profane and accursed altars. For they supposed that their object could not otherwise be fully attained, than by thus burying the sacred cave beneath these foul pollutions” (*Life of Constantine*, III, XXVI).

Under Constantine, Christianity was freed from persecution and, later, obtained a protected status. Constantine had the temple to Venus destroyed and replaced it with a church in AD 335. Its dedication is celebrated in our liturgy on September 13 each year. Known in the West as the Holy Sepulchre, its authentic name is the *Anastasis*, the Church of the Resurrection.

This church was enlarged, damaged, repaired and destroyed again several times during the following centuries. The three main components – the basilica, the chapel of the crucifixion at Golgotha and the tomb – were enclosed in the single structure we have today.

The tomb itself was a cavern “*hewn out of the rock,*” as we read in Mt 27:59. Constantine’s builders isolated the tomb by removing the rockface around it. It was enclosed in a rotunda in the year 380. In 2016 restoration work began on the tomb-chapel. Marble cladding which protected the shelf or burial bed on which the Lord’s body had been laid, was removed, exposing the original limestone shelf. After some 60 hours of studying and documenting the site, archeologists replaced the cladding, reasonably certain that this was indeed the burial place of Jesus.

The Tomb Is Empty!

While archeologists can testify to the antiquity of the tomb, only faith can assent to the Gospels’ essential affirmation: the tomb is empty, Christ is risen! This was the heart of the Gospel message of Christ to the world. Perhaps the first recorded proclamation of the resurrection is that of St Peter told in the Acts of the Apostles: “*Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it. ... Therefore, let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ*” (Acts 2:23, 24,36).

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In the Byzantine Churches of the Mediterranean, both Catholic and Orthodox, it is customary to display the emptiness of the tomb and the powerlessness of death by means of the Red Eggs, blessed at the end of the Paschal Liturgy. Participants exchange the Paschal greeting (Christ is risen! – Indeed, He is risen!), cracking each other’s eggs. The broken shell, dyed red in remembrance of the blood of Christ, becomes an image of the empty tomb, powerless to contain the One who was confined in it. As we sing in the resurrection troparion on many Sundays, “Death is despoiled. Christ God is risen, bestowing on the world great mercy!”

Thomas Sunday

Acts 5:12-20 John 20:19-31

The Gospel Preached in Jerusalem (Acts 5:12–20)

ONE FEATURE OF THE PASCHAL SEASON in Byzantine Churches is the reading of the Acts of the Apostles. Every day, beginning with Pascha itself, this story of the early Church is read at the Divine Liturgy. While the text of Acts itself begins with Christ’s ascension, our public reading of it begins as we commemorate His resurrection. While Christ’s followers struggled until Pentecost to grasp the reality of the resurrection and its meaning for mankind, the Church sees Pascha as the source of its life, the fountainhead of its existence to this day.

Divine power in the Church comes from the empty tomb and the blessing of the risen Christ upon His disciples – “*Receive the Holy Spirit*” (Jn 20:22) – which we also hear read on this Sunday. The paschal liberation in Christ from captivity to death begins to touch individuals and communities as the Church develops in the first century AD.

Acts paints a picture of the first Christian community in Jerusalem, then in Samaria, in Damascus and Antioch and the cities of Asia Minor. Finally Acts affirms that within the lifetime of the apostles a Church had been established in Rome, capital of the empire, the focus of life in the Mediterranean world of that era. The events recorded in this book would occur again and again through the centuries as the Church became established among different peoples and cultures.

Some of these characteristics listed in today’s passage, Acts 5:12-20, are:

Signs and Wonders (vv.12, 14-16) – The Church is first of all characterized as a transforming presence, just as Christ’s own earthly ministry was, according to the Gospels. The sick are healed just by Peter’s passing shadow, and those “*tormented by unclean spirits*” (v.16) are delivered.

To this day physical healings are regularly reported at saints' graves or shrines, in connection with their relics or wonderworking icons. The 10th-century shrine of St George near Istanbul is one such place. Remarkable here is that most of those who come by the thousands to this shrine are Muslims. One of the priests at the shrine, Father Ephrem, confided, "During my three years here, we ourselves are witnesses of miracles, such as the healing of paralytics, mutes, and the giving birth to children."

Just as physical healing was not the chief object of Christ's ministry, the Church's focus is chiefly on spiritually healing the whole person. The Church's therapy may include Confession, spiritual guidance and the Mystery of Holy Unction, given "for healing, for relief from every passion, from defilement of flesh and spirit, and from every illness" (oil blessing prayer).

Proclaiming Christ (v. 12) – Rabbis and scholars would regularly be found gathering at Solomon's Porch, a colonnade east of the temple. It became the place where the first followers of Jesus would go to share the Gospel, sure of a curious audience.

The town square and the coffee house have in their time been places where Christians have gone to gather and to make their faith known to others. Today cyberspace may be the ultimate Solomon's Porch. As Pope Benedict XVI recently wrote, "I would like then to invite Christians, confidently and with an informed and responsible creativity, to join the network of relationships which the digital era has made possible... In this field too we are called to proclaim our faith that Christ is God, the Savior of humanity and of history, the one in whom all things find their fulfillment."

Reluctance of the Religious Establishment (v. 13) – While people from the Jewish rank and file were drawn to the Gospel message, their religious leaders at first held back and then directly opposed this teaching which threatened their power among the people.

The apostles encountered the same reception from the leaders of Israel as has the Lord Jesus, John the Forerunner and other prophets. Politicians – be they political or religious may be more concerned with keeping "good order" than with seeking the will of God.

A famous expression of this conflict between leaders and the Christ of the Gospel is the "Parable of the Grand Inquisitor" in Feodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. In it an atheist tells his brother, a monk, that Christ would be arrested and condemned to death were He to return today because His teachings would disturb the established way things are done.

Growth (v.14) – A major theme in the book of Acts is that, before the death of the chief apostles, the Church had spread from the first group at Solomon's Porch to the very heart of the empire, Rome itself. The Church began with "locals," Jews from Galilee and Judea. Hellenized (Greek-speaking) Jews soon joined them as did "proselytes," those pagans who had adopted the Jewish belief in one God, but had not formally joined the Jewish people as this would demand complete separation from their non-believing family and associates. Finally other pagans, never drawn to Judaism began accepting Christ ultimately outnumbering the first Jewish believers.

Is the number of Christians still growing today? In 2011 BBC reported that more people go to church on Sunday in China than in the whole of Europe. In 1900 there were approximately 10 million Christians in Africa, mostly in the historic Coptic and Ethiopian Churches and among Italians, Greeks and other settlers. A little over a century later the number has reached 500 million. And where, in 1900, Africans accounted for only 2% of the world's Christians, today they number 20%.

Persecution (v. 17-18) – As the number of Christians in the Roman Empire grew, they came to be seen as a threat to the state. Christians in the empire were persecuted from time to time and from region to region until AD 311, when the Great Persecution of Diocletian came to an end.

Religious persecution has often been carried out with political overtones. When Rome was persecuting Christians they were welcomed in its neighboring rival, the Persian Empire. When Rome embraced Christianity the Persians began persecuting Christians as Roman sympathizers.

Today Christians may be persecuted outright for political reasons, as in North Korea, or in strongholds of other religions in Asia and Africa. In the historically Christian nations of the West, the contemporary “powers that be” have increasingly marginalized religion, striving to keep it behind church doors for people who fancy that sort of thing. Public figures regularly pit Christian values against “human rights,” “women’s health” and the like. Thus even Mother Teresa of Calcutta was vilified for calling abortion “a great destroyer of peace” when accepting the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize. One lives Gospel values in the public sector at one’s own risk.

Divine Protection (vv.19-20) – The apostles, miraculously delivered from prison, went right back to the temple. As we reported to the Sanhedrin: “*Look, the men whom you put in prison are standing in the temple and teaching the people!*” (v. 25). When questioned about why they had disobeyed the council’s demand that they stop, Peter and the others replied with a phrase that has repeatedly been used since against opponents of the Gospel: “*We ought to obey God rather than men*” (v. 29).

From the apostles’ preaching at Solomon’s Porch to our own day the Holy Spirit, given by Christ, has protected and made fruitful the proclamation of the Gospel.

The Confession of Thomas (John 20:19-31)

The Sunday after Pascha is informally called Thomas Sunday because of the Gospel read on this day, Jn 20:19-31. Many people assume this means that Thomas Sunday is the feast of St Thomas. In fact, St Thomas is remembered in the Byzantine calendar on October 6. What we remember today is rather St Thomas’ confession of faith upon seeing the risen Christ, “*My Lord and my God!*” (v. 28).

The meaning of this event is spelled out for us by the Lord in the following verse: “*Jesus said to him, ‘Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed’*” (v.29). And if we did not see the implications of that statement for ourselves, the Gospel concludes this passage by saying, “*And truly Jesus did many other signs in*

the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name” (vv. 30, 31).

Thomas’ Confession

In our culture the exclamation “My Lord and my God!” sounds like a rather banal exclamation of surprise. We are used to hearing “Oh, God!” or “Jesus Christ!” used that way. In first-century Judea – and among many Orthodox Jews today – saying the name of God even in prayer would be considered presumptuous. Since the third century BC Jews have refrained from using the name of God even when reading the Torah. Only the high priest was permitted to read the name of God as written in the Torah, and only on Yom Kippur. Many Jews today simply say HaShem (the Name) when reading such passages or referring to God.

Claiming to be the Son of God was blasphemy in the eyes of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council of elders in Jerusalem. The Gospel indicates that Jesus was condemned to death precisely for making this claim. *“And the high priest answered and said to Him, ‘I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!’ Jesus said to him, ‘It is as you said... Then the high priest tore his clothes, saying, ‘He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, now you have heard His blasphemy! What do you think?’ They answered and said, ‘He is deserving of death’” (Mt 26:63-65).*

Claiming to see Christ in glory caused the death of the first martyr, St Stephen, as well. Brought before the Sanhedrin he spoke of God’s mercy toward Israel, and the elders listened. But then he said, *“Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’ Then they cried out with a loud voice, stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him” (Acts 7:56-58).*

Clearly Thomas’ exclamation is presented in the Gospel as an act of faith in Jesus as Lord.

The Apostles’ Teaching

From the beginning the Apostles taught that Jesus, risen from the dead, was Messiah and Lord. Believers were taught to make this their act of Christian faith: *“...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9).* They ascribed to Christ the title Lord (*Kyrios* in Greek) which was used in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, as the equivalent of God’s un-pronounceable name. To call Jesus *Lord* meant that you were calling Him *God*: precisely the confession of Thomas.

In the Roman world of the apostles’ day *Lord* was the title of the Emperor: the one who governed the lives of all his subjects. To call Jesus *Lord* was perceived by many as treason and caused the persecution of many, especially since the Christians often insisted that Jesus *alone* was Lord. The Roman world had many gods and goddesses; they could easily find room for one more. To claim, as we continue to do in our Liturgy, that only “one is holy, one is Lord: Jesus Christ” was another matter.

For a believer to claim that Jesus was Lord also meant that he or she was committed to Jesus’ way of life. The usual way of doing things in society was now subject to a new criterion for

believers: the Gospel of Christ. This was perceived as unpatriotic by many Romans, to use a contemporary term. Christians didn't give undivided allegiance to Rome – they had another Lord and another way of life.

Today in many societies Christians are perceived as second-class citizens because they do not follow the dominant culture. This was always true in Islam but is increasingly so in the secular west as well. In Great Britain, for example, Labour Party leader Andy Burnham has pledged to compel all faith schools to teach about gay rights, saying he has “no support” for religious schools who argue it may conflict with their teachings.

The consequence for Christians today is that we may be more frequently forced to choose between following the secular values of the state or the godly values of the Gospel. Choose your Lord.

“My Lord and My God”

WHY WOULD THE APOSTLE THOMAS, who moments before had refused to accept the other apostles' witness to Christ's resurrection, suddenly proclaim that Jesus is “*My Lord and my God*” (Jn 20:28)? This question has been discussed since the Gospel of John was written.

A Multiple Choice question on the words of St Thomas when he saw the risen Christ might look something like this:

What St Thomas meant was:

A – A simple exclamation (like OMG).

B – That Jesus was God (the Father).

C – That Jesus was the Son of the Father

D – That Jesus was a god

Each of these answers has been offered by serious authors to explain the meaning of Thomas' words. By themselves, this phrase could mean any of these things; in the context of John's Gospel and the Church of its day, however, the answer becomes clearer.

St John's Gospel, the only one to contain this narrative, is the last of the canonical Gospels to be written. In its final form it dates to the end of the first century AD, and manuscript fragments dating to c. AD 125 still exist. The author's purpose in writing this Gospel is clearly stated in Jn 20:30, 31: “*Truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.*”

The aim of John's Gospel, then, is to demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah/Christ, the Son of God. In line with this aim, Thomas' words here are not presented as an ordinary exclamation, but as an act of faith in Jesus as the Messiah. This rules out Answer A, above.

We are left, however, with another question: What might John have meant by calling Jesus “the Son of God”? This was not an unusual title for the Messiah – or for other important figures. It did not necessarily mean, however, what we mean by it. It was often a way of saying that the Messiah (or King or High Priest) was especially beloved or set apart by God.

When we look at the beginning of John's Gospel, however, we see that John has a higher vision of Christ as Son of God. The Gospel begins with this famous passage: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth... No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him*" (Jn 1:11-4, 14, 18). John describes the eternal Word of God, His only-begotten Son, as having become flesh and dwelt among us. He is clearly depicting the Lord Jesus as divine, eternally existing, and uniquely in the bosom of His Father.

St Jerome (c. 347-420) taught that John wrote when those who denied the unique person of the Lord were gaining a hearing in the Church. "Gospels" were being written, purporting to contain the "secret" wisdom of Jesus, which resembled Egyptian philosophy rather than the Word of God.

We find similar statements in St Paul who describes the genealogy of Christ in this way: "...*from them [the Israelites], according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen*" (Rom. 9:5). From the time of the apostles and evangelists, Christians recognized Jesus as the unique and divine Son of God. John expressed this belief more firmly and unequivocally than other Scriptural authors.

St Jerome (c. 347-420) taught that John wrote when those who denied the unique person of the Lord were gaining a hearing in the Church. "Gospels" were being written, purporting to contain the "secret" wisdom of Jesus, which resembled Egyptian philosophy rather than the Word of God. John's work is a clear rejection of these other "Gospels."

The Witness of Secular Society

Jesus' contemporaries in the wider society did not write about Him. They gradually began writing about His followers and thereby showed us what the first Christians believed about Him.

From AD 111-113 Pliny the Younger (Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus) was the Roman governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor. He wrote to Emperor Trajan for advice on how to deal with Christians, whose gatherings he described in part like this: "They recited a hymn antiphonally to Christus as to a god..." (*Epistles* book 10, letter 96). As a pagan, Pliny was used to the many gods and goddesses venerated in Roman religion as so he described the Christians as reverencing Christ as "a god." The Christians would never have said it quite like that, but Pliny is nonetheless witnessing that Christians considered Christ as divine.

A similar witness from the pagan world is Lucian of Samosata (c. AD 115-c. 200), a popular satirist in the Greek world of Asia Minor, who frequently lampooned the gods and public figures of his world as well as those who revere them. In his *Passing of Peregrinus*, 11 he notes that "The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day – the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account. ...it was impressed on them by

their original lawgiver that they are all brothers, from the moment that they are converted, deny the gods of Greece and worship the crucified sage and live after his laws.”

While Lucian does not call Jesus a god, he testifies that the Christians worship Him instead of the gods of Greece. For them He is clearly divine.

While Jesus never said, “I am God.” He did and said things that would lead us to believe and understand that He is God. It would take the next several centuries for all the local Churches to express clearly *how* the one God could have a Son, how that Son was like the Father and be both God and man.

At the First Council of Nicaea (AD 325), the description of Christ which we find in the Creed became the universal way of describing the Lord Jesus: “the only-begotten Son of God, Light from Light, true God from true God – begotten, not made, of one essence with the Father, by whom all things were made.”

Subsequent councils, which discussed how Christ is God and man, did not receive universal acceptance. This resulted in the break between the Greek and Latin Churches on one hand and the other Eastern Churches (Armenians, Copts, etc.) on the other. It is only in the modern era that Agreed Statements on Christology between these Churches have acknowledged a unity of faith in their different expressions.

While Thomas the Apostle may not have been able to articulate the Nicene definition of Christ, the Holy Spirit speaking through him gave us the words to express the Church’s ongoing faith: “You are my Lord and my God”

How great is Your immense mercy, O Lover of Mankind! You endured being struck by the law-transgressors, being touched by an Apostle, and being examined by the impious. How were You made man? How were You crucified, O You, the only sinless One? Teach us to cry out to You with Thomas, “My Lord and my God, glory to You!”

(Apostikhon of Vespers)

Myrrhbearers Sunday

Acts 6:1-7 Mark 15:43-16:8

Fearing But Faithful: Joseph and the Myrrhbearers (Mark 15:43-16:8)

“THE NOBLE JOSEPH took down from the tree Your spotless body, wrapped it in pure linen with aromatic spices and laid it for burial in a new tomb.” This troparion, which summarizes the Gospel account of the Lord’s burial, is sung as the holy shroud (epitaphios) is placed in the tomb on Great Friday evening. It is sung again on the Third Sunday of Pascha, but with this addition: “But on the third day, You arose, O Lord, and bestowed great mercy upon the world!”

The noble or righteous Joseph of Arimathea, along with Nicodemus, is commemorated on this Sunday together with the myrrhbearing women who ministered to Christ at the tomb. As we read in the Gospels, Joseph was “*a rich man*” (Mt 25:57) and “*a prominent member of the council*” (Mk15:43). This “council” may refer to one of the regional courts in Israel or to the Great Sanhedrin, the chief religious court of the Jews which met in Jerusalem. In any case, Joseph and Nicodemus, whom John describes as “*a ruler of the Jews*” (Jn 3:1) and one of those in the high priest’s circle (see Jn 7:50-52), had sufficient influence to approach Pontius Pilate and ask to bury Jesus’ body.

Jesus is often described as being poor – He Himself alluded to this when He said, “*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head*” (Mt 8:19-21; Lk 9:58). He had put aside His carpenter’s craft to preach the kingdom of God and depended on others to provide His needs. He attracted other tradesmen, like Andrew and Peter, James and John who did the same. His followers included the poor but also some prominent individuals as well. The Evangelist Matthew was a tax collector, a civil servant in the Roman administration, as was Zacchaeus who had grown rich in that pursuit (see Lk 19:1-10). Others, like the rich young man whom He invited to follow Him (Mt 19:16-22), were attracted to Jesus but could not break with their wealth or position to follow Him.

Jesus’ Secret Disciples

While Joseph is not mentioned in the Gospels before Christ’s death, Nicodemus is featured twice in John’s Gospel, giving us an insight into the struggle which a member of the Jewish establishment would have experienced when drawn to Jesus. Nicodemus first approached Jesus at night when he would not be noticed. This encounter is described in John’s Gospel: “*There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.’*”

“Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’”

“Jesus answered, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.’”

“Nicodemus answered and said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?’” (Jn 3:1-10).

Nicodemus appears in the Gospel a second time when the chief priests and Pharisees, alarmed at the people’s reaction to Jesus, were considering how to deal with Him (see Jn 7:45-52).

Nicodemus offers a timid resistance to their resentment. “*Does our law judge a man before it*

hears him and knows what he is doing?” (Jn 7:51). In response the Pharisees ridiculed him: “Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee” (Jn 7:52).

Their rebuke may have served to increase Nicodemus’ attachment to Jesus. He next appears as a public follower of Jesus at His death, assisting Joseph of Arimathea in burying His body.

“Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury” (Jn 19:39-40).

While the Jews regularly buried their dead enshrouded in spices, there is something more indicated here. Pope Benedict XVI, in his three-volume study *Jesus of Nazareth*, writes: “The quantity of balm is extraordinary and exceeds all normal proportions: this is a royal burial. If Jesus was manifested to us as high priest by the casting of lots for his robe [Christ’s *chiton*, like the high priest’s, was seamless], so now he is revealed to us as king by the manner of his burial.”

After Christ’s Burial

There is no further mention of either Joseph or Nicodemus in the Gospels or other contemporary sources. Many later writings, such as the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, became popular in the first millennium AD but are not regarded as historical today.

One of the most popular is a homily on the Burial of the Divine Body of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ attributed to St Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis (c.310–403). It is often read in monasteries on Great Saturday and an excerpt is frequently sung as people venerate the holy shroud.

“When evening had come – for the sun of Righteousness had then set into Hades – a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a secret disciple for fear of the Jews, came with Nicodemus, who had first come to Jesus by night. Two secret disciples came to conceal Jesus in a tomb, thus teaching by this concealment the mystery of God concealed in Hades in the flesh. Each of them surpassed the other in their affection for Christ. Nicodemus proved his magnanimity by the myrrh and aloes while Joseph proved worthy of praise by his daring and boldness before Pilate.

“Now when Joseph went in he acted very shrewdly in order to achieve his desired goal. He did not employ high sounding and pompous words but a humble plea: ‘O Judge, I have come with a trifling request. Give me a dead man for burial: Jesus of Nazareth – Jesus the poor, Jesus the homeless, Jesus the crucified, the naked ... Give me this Stranger, for what profit does this body bring you? Give me this Stranger whose country we know not, whose Father we know not, whose place of birth and ways we know not ...’

“Tell me, O Joseph, do you really bury toward the East a dead man who is the Dayspring of the East? Do you close the eyes of Him who opened the eyes of the blind? ... Do you empty out myrrh upon the celestial Myrrh who emptied Himself and sanctified the world? ... Do you wash with water God’s body which cleanses all and bestows purification? ...

“Fearlessly Joseph and Nicodemus bury Him before whom the cherubim stand with reverent fear. Looking upon You dead, stripped and exposed, in his grief and tender compassion he lamented, saying: ‘How shall I bury You, my God? How shall I wrap You in a winding sheet?’

How shall I touch Your most pure body with my hands? ... I magnify Your sufferings. I sing the praises of Your burial and resurrection, crying: O Lord, glory to You!”

Ministries of Service

SERVICE IN THE CHURCH TODAY can mean many things. The clergy are said to serve the Divine Liturgy and other services. They are not improvising or directing or even celebrating; their role as servers suggests that their personality take a back seat to what they serve, much as good waiters are unobtrusive when they serve at table.

Church members serve in a variety of ways in the worship, teaching and fellowship activities of the community. In many places they are honored today as the Church remembers those who volunteered to serve at the Lord’s burial: Joseph, Nicodemus and the Myrrhbearers. We also remember the Church’s first ordained servants, the deacons.

Both Myrrhbearers and deacons had one thing in common: they served Christ the Unwanted. The Myrrhbearers served the despised and rejected Jesus, condemned by the Jewish leaders and abandoned in death by even His closest followers. These volunteers stepped forward to provide a burial for Him when the alternative was to leave His body for animals to scavenge. The deacons were set apart by the Apostles to serve Christ unwanted in the weakest segment of society: those who had no family to care for them in their old age.

Joseph and the Myrrhbearers

In Mark 15:44-16:8 read at this Sunday’s Liturgy we see Joseph of Arimathea arrange for Jesus’ burial. In John 19:39 we are told that the seeker Nicodemus, a leading Pharisee, helped Joseph in this task. This service is memorialized in the troparion sung on this day, itself drawn from the Gospel of St Mark: *The noble Joseph took down from the tree Your spotless body. He wrapped it in fine linen with aromatic spices and laid it for burial in a new tomb...*

Mark notes that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses (whom John identifies as the wife of Clopas – Cleopas in the King James Bible – and a relative of the Theotokos) saw where Jesus had been buried and returned with others on Sunday morning with more spices. Mark 15:40 tells of a Salome, one of those who had witnessed the death of the Lord, who accompanied them. These women were among those whom Luke says provided for Jesus’ needs from their possessions during His ministry. Others among them, according to Luke were “*Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s steward, and Suzanna and many others*” (8:3). Matthew 27:56 mentions “*the mother of the sons of Zebedee*” (i.e. James and John). Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, are included among them as well.

The Jews did not embalm the dead like the Egyptians. Rather they anointed a corpse and surrounded it with large quantities of spices to counteract the odor of decay. John 19:39 says that Nicodemus brought one hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes for that purpose. When the women returned to the tomb at first light on Sunday morning, according to Mark and Luke, they brought more spices. The odor should have increased to such a degree that further masking would be

needed if people were to visit the tomb. But the Lord did not need their spices; not subject to corruption, He had conquered death and destroyed its hold over us.

The Myrrhbearers knew that the service they offered was fruitless in a sense – Jesus was dead and they not change that. They could simple perform the last act of love and remain by the tomb in witness to their love for Him. Their faithfulness to serve Christ even in death was rewarded; they were blessed to see the empty tomb and bear witness to the apostles that Christ was risen.

A Modern Myrrhbearer

WHEN WE THINK about Christian ministry, it is the liturgical ministry of priests or deacons, readers or chanters that most readily comes to mind. But in the Church’s tradition, ministry has a much broader meaning. The ministry of Christians includes many forms of service, all in imitation of “*the Son of Man [who] did not come to be served, but to serve*” (Mt 20:28).

In one sense, every baptized Christian is called to ministry because we all share in the priesthood of Christ through the mystery of chrismation. “*You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light*” (1 Pt 2:5, 9).

The *purpose* of our ministry as sharers in Christ’s priesthood is to “*proclaim the praises of Him*” who brought us to eternal life through baptism: to glorify God in word and deed. The *means* by which we exercise this ministry is by offering up “*spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*” In fact, everything can be done in a godly manner, offered as a spiritual sacrifice to proclaim the glory of God.

The Apostolate of the Laity

In the past century it has become customary to call the ministry of those believers who are not clergy “the apostolate of the laity.” It was particularly extolled at the Second Vatican Council in its Decree *On the Apostolic Activity of God’s People*, affirming that “The apostolate of the laity derives from their Christian vocation and the Church can never be without it” (AA 1).

The goal of Christian ministry, according to the Fathers of this Council, is that “the whole world might enter into a relationship with Christ” (AA 2). Everything in the Church is oriented to this goal in one way or another and everyone in the Church is called to work for this goal. As the Council Fathers went on to say, “No part of the structure of a living body is merely passive but has a share in the functions as well as life of the body: so, too, in the body of Christ, which is the Church.”

It is for this reason that the Council Fathers make this, perhaps their most daring assertion: “The member who fails to make his proper contribution to the development of the Church must be said to be useful neither to the Church nor to himself”. A baptized Christian who does not contribute to building up the Body of Christ is, the Fathers insist, a useless Christian!

Scriptural Patrons of the Lay Apostolate

The Biblical figures commemorated on this Sunday point to a principal way of exercising: using one's resources to build up the Kingdom of God. Two of them made sizeable contributions in accordance with their stations in life. Joseph of Arimathea, described in the Gospel as "*a rich man*" (Mt 27:57) and "*a prominent member of the Sanhedrin*" (Mk 15:43) used his influence with Pilate to obtain the crucified body of the Lord Jesus and donated his own tomb that the Lord might be buried, as St John Chrysostom said, "not as a criminal, but magnificently, after the Jewish fashion, as some great and admirable one" (Hom. on Matthew).

Along with "the noble Joseph," as our troparion calls him, Nicodemus, "a ruler of the Jews" brought a one-hundred-pound mixture of myrrh and aloes – worth thousands, by some estimations. Both these men made significant donations to cover the cost of Jesus' burial.

In the history of the Eastern Churches there have been many people who gave significant donations to the Church, building churches, schools, hospitals or clinics for the poor. The countryside in places like Greece or Lebanon is dotted with small chapels build by donors to honor their patron saints or in thanksgiving for favors received.

In our society, the equivalent is often an endowment given to the Church. The investments generated by such endowments contribute over the years to the cause specified by the donor. An endowment by the late Father Allen Maloof has helped make possible the publication of *Sophia*, the journal of the Eparchy of Newton, for over forty years.

Others remembered today contributed lesser amounts, but over an ongoing period of time. The myrrh-bearing women are those who provided for Jesus' everyday needs out of their own resources: Mary Magdalene, Joanna and other women whose ordinary contributions helped sustain Him during His ministry. While Joanna's husband was the steward of King Herod's household, there is no evidence that any of these women were wealthy. They were the equivalent of today's middle-class parishioners, many of whom continually underwrite the expenses of a church or ministry to the needy.

Applications in the Parish

There are ways based on a person's professional skills which can help build up the Church and thereby glorify God. But there are also countless believers whose everyday skills in the kitchen or in the workshop have helped build and maintain churches and other properties in Eastern Christian parishes throughout the country.

Our life-skills, even more than our talents, can help build up the Church. The witness-value of a committedly Christian family, for example, is enormous in our society where family values are neglected, if not disparaged. Couples can assist their pastors in preparing others for marriage or parenting by witnessing to the importance of the Gospel in their own family life.

In many parishes the Youth Group is a social club. People believe that they will keep their youth in church by making it fun. A much more effective approach is taken by those who help younger teens prepare for roles of service in the community. Teaching teens to serve enables them to see

that working to build up the Church and spread the Gospel in society are not “electives,” but are essential to living our baptismal union with Christ. Present

Applications in the Public Square

Assisting in the activities of the parish or other organized group is certainly one way of building up the Kingdom of God, but it is not the only one. Nor is it the primary one. As the Vatican Council Fathers noted, “The laity must take up the renewal of the temporal order as their own special obligation” (AA, 7). The Christian in the business or professional world must be a Christian all week long, not just on Sundays. Christian businesspeople are sometimes criticized for excusing their unchristian behavior in the workplace, saying “it’s just business.” The Christian in business can be an agent for renewal, transforming their business into a place of ministry.

Christian business people perhaps minister best by witnessing that increasing profits is not all that matters to them. The Christian owners of the Chick-Fil-A chain will not open any of their franchises on Sunday because it is “a day to rest and relax with family and friends.” Similarly, a number of retailers, and even entire malls, have opted to close on Thanksgiving Day to allow their employees to enjoy the day with their families. Since so many families travel great distances on that holiday to be together, workers greatly appreciate their employers’ concern. Some other businesses have made Thanksgiving the “first day” of Black Friday, demanding that their employees work on that day without holiday pay, overtime or even the possibility of breaks. Some of these same companies have also eliminated holiday bonuses.

The Apostles Institute the Order of Deacons (Acts 6:1-7)

WHY DO WE HAVE DEACONS in the Church? The emergence of this order came about in response to a specific issue which the apostles faced in Jerusalem. In Acts 6:1 we read that the “Hellenists” were complaining against the “Hebrews” *“because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution.”*

Almost from its beginning it seems the followers of Christ concerned themselves with feeding their poor. In first century society women who had outlived their breadwinner husbands were especially vulnerable, particularly if they had no sons to care for them. If a widow had no children or relatives she was reduced to the status of a beggar. Needless to say, they had nothing like today’s workplace where they could be employed.

In Jerusalem the synagogues tried to ease the hardships faced by these women. Early on Friday men from the synagogues would canvass the city for goods and money for the widows. These would be distributed that afternoon, before the onset of the Sabbath. The Jewish believers in Jesus would naturally do something similar.

These first followers of the Lord lived with the memory of His preaching, His miracles, His death and resurrection and the descent of His Spirit fresh in their minds. Yet, human weakness made itself felt as well. The local believers – the Aramaic-speaking Jews of the Holy Land,

whom Acts calls the Hebrews – seemed to be more attentive to their poor while neglecting the “Greeks,” those Hellenized Jews more inclined to embrace Greek culture, perhaps from places like Antioch or Caesarea, who had come to Jerusalem seeking help.

The Apostles were torn between the needs of those indigents and the mission from Christ to spread the Gospel. Wanting to address this problem without allowing it to distract them from their proper task of preaching the Gospel, the apostles instituted the order of deacon to deal with the matter. They ordained seven men as the first deacons for the purpose of caring for these widows. While the deacons served the material needs of the people, the apostles concentrated on the spiritual: “*We will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word*” (Acts 6:4).

The First Deacons

Acts identifies the first seven deacons and describes how they began their ministry. They were chosen by “*the whole multitude*” (v. 5) and presented to the apostles who prayed and laid hands on them. Prayer and the laying-on of hands has been the rite prescribed for the ordination of deacons, priests and bishops ever since.

Each of the seven listed in Acts bore Greek names. They may have been Hellenized Jews, the very people who felt as a disadvantage in the Jerusalem community. One, Nicholas, is identified as “*a proselyte from Antioch*” (v. 5) and would have been of pagan origin. The only two who appear elsewhere in Acts are Stephen and Philip.

Stephen, described as “*full of grace and power*” (Acts 6:8), incurred the resentment of some Jews with whom he disputed. They denounced him to the Sanhedrin where he was condemned to death and executed (Acts 7). The Church honors him as the Protomartyr, the first to die because of his faith in Christ. Chapter 8 of Acts tells of the activities of the deacon Philip who preached the Gospel in Samaria and converted an Ethiopian on the road to Gaza.

Various local traditions connect Prochoros with Nicomedia, Nicanor with Cyprus, Timon with Bosra, and Parmenas with Macedonia. According to St Irenaeus, the name of Nicholas was connected with the Nicolaitians, a sect condemned in the Book of Revelation. It is not known whether he was actually a part of this group or, as Clement of Alexandria believed, they corrupted his teachings.

Deacons in the Early Church

The importance which deacons assumed in the first-century Church is shown in 1 Tim 3:8-13 where the qualifications for deacons closely resemble the requirements for bishops, with this exception. Potential bishops should demonstrate hospitality (as the head of a family) and an ability to teach (see 1 Tim 3:2).

From the first the role of deacons has been connected with a developing range of administrative responsibilities, beginning with the distribution of goods to the poor. During the Roman persecutions they ministered to prisoners. The third-century *Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and*

Felicitas, tells how deacons served as intermediaries with the authorities to improve the condition of the prisoners and between the prisoners and their families. They arranged for the baptism of those who were catechumens and brought Holy Communion to the baptized, encouraging each one to remain strong in their witness to Christ.

As the Church developed, deacons were easily targeted during the persecutions. Their activities in tending to the needs of widows, orphans, the sick, and the imprisoned made them highly visible to the authorities. Since deacons were responsible for an increasing amount of church property and sacred items such as liturgical books and vessels as well as funds for the needy, it was lucrative to seek them out and seize these treasures.

In AD 258 the Archdeacon of Rome, Lawrence was arrested and ordered to hand over the Church's treasures. He gathered all the poor and the needy in his care and presented them to the Prefect, saying "Behold the treasures of the Church." Lawrence was martyred and today is commemorated in the Church on the anniversary of his death, August 10. Other early deacon-martyrs remembered in our Church are Saints Benjamin the Persian (October 13), Vincent of Saragossa (November 11), and Habib of Edessa (November 15).

Over the ages the deacons' ministry of service to the "Church's treasures" evolved to include service to the priest at the holy table. As the deacon handled the material side of the Church's affairs – particularly its charitable ministry – he also came to care for the material side of the Liturgy. He received and apportioned the holy gifts, carried the Holy Gospel, incensed the church and directed the work of the servers. In icons saintly deacons are often shown holding a censer – symbol of their liturgical ministry – and a church or cashbox, representing their material responsibilities.

Were There Women Deacons?

In Romans 16:1-2 we read, "*I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the Church in Cenchrea that you may receive her in the Lord...*" It is thought that Phoebe may have brought St Paul's epistle to the Church at Rome. The Greek word translated here as "servant" is *diakonos*, giving rise to the idea that Phoebe was an ordained deacon. Both Clement of Alexandria and John Chrysostom recognized Phoebe as a deacon and she is commemorated as such on September 3 with this troparion:

Enlightened by grace and taught the Faith by the chosen vessel of Christ, you were found worthy of the diaconate; and you carried Paul's words to Rome. O Deaconess Phoebe, pray to Christ God that His Spirit may enlighten our souls!

There are a number of references over the next few centuries to women deacons, but their place in the Church is debated. Many say that they ministered to women, particularly catechumens, preparing them for and assisting in their baptism where the presence of men would have been unseemly. They were ordained in a rite similar to but not identical with that of deacons.

Perhaps the best known deaconess in the Byzantine Church was St Olympia (July 25) who headed a community of some 250 women. She is known for her care of St John Chrysostom,

attending to his garments and preparing his meals, which she sent daily to the episcopate. Other leading deaconesses of her community known to us by name were the Pentadia, Procla, Sylvina, and Nicarete.

As Christianity became the norm in the Byzantine Empire the adult catechumenate – and the deaconesses' principal function – came to an end. Deaconesses survived for a time only in women's monasteries. They all but died out in the Armenian, Georgian and Greek Churches after World War I but have since been revived. Deaconesses in the Coptic Church are comparable to Catholic sisters. They are not ordained, but blessed.

Serving the Unwanted Today

In many traditional societies people would come together to bury those who died alone; that is not the case in our culture. In contrast, groups of Catholic high school students have dedicated themselves to caring for Christ the Unwanted in the St Joseph of Arimathea Pallbearer Society. They act as pall bearers for the poor and provide a Christian burial service for the deceased who do not have the funds to be buried at a private cemetery, many of whom have no one at end of their life to pray for them or to carry them to their final resting place. Members serve as pallbearers, lead prayers, read Scripture passages and offer condolences to the decedents' family and friends.

In the Louisville, KY chapter teens assist the Jefferson County Coroner's Office's indigent burial program. They have been called upon to bury the homeless, some of whom had died on the streets. They buried murder victims who had died at the prime of their lives. They buried babies and children whose death tore at the hearts of their parents. They buried the elderly and disabled who had lost touch with their families. At some of the funerals, grieving family members were present, thankful for their prayers and presence. While at others, there was no one, but the society members and the staff from the coroner's office.

Youth from a chapter at St Ignatius' High School in Cleveland OH witnessed how their service in the society helped develop their own faith. A thirteen year-old reported, "At my first funeral, as we walked the casket to the exit of the church, the doors opened and there was so much light coming through the doors. I felt God's presence, and the image it gave me was that I was carrying this person to a new life." As another student reported, "God walks alongside us, helping to carry the casket. He stands with the mourners, giving them comfort. He is with the soul of the deceased, carrying them to rest."

The unborn, the handicapped, the lonely and victims of prejudice of every sort have been identified as among our society's Unwanted. Those who respond to these marginalized brothers and sisters are the spiritual heirs of both the myrrhbearers and the seven deacons. By their untiring concern they both serve Christ in the Unwanted and make palpable the presence of Christ to them as well.

Sunday of the Paralytic

Acts 9:32-42 John 5:1-15

Consecrated Widows: An Order of Women in the Apostolic Church (Acts 9:32-42)

ALL THE WIDOWS STOOD AROUND HIM, crying..." (Acts 9:39). The description of the recently deceased Dorcas or Tabitha does not mention that she was a widow. It does note, however, that those who mourned her were not her relatives but widows. It is likely, then, that Dorcas herself was a widow.

As we know from the institution of deacons, care for widows was one of the first functions that the earliest Christians undertook. It was not long before these women were organized into formal groups with specific responsibilities in the Church.

St Paul's First Epistle to Timothy, written 20 to 25 years later, includes a chapter devoted to overseeing the formal group of widows in the Church at Ephesus. The epistle indicates that this group should include:

• ***Widows Who Had No One to Care for Them*** – “Give proper recognition to those widows who are really in need. But if a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family and so repaying their parents and grand-parents, for this is pleasing to God. The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help. But the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives. Give the people these instructions, so that no one may be open to blame. Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (verses 3-8).

That families care for their elderly members is a hallmark of most traditional societies. There are always exceptions, however, due to inability, greed or other circumstances such as upheavals in societies. In 2012 China enacted a law requiring adult children to visit their parents regularly. As Chinese traditional society changes into a modern urban nation, the elderly are often left to their own devices. The new law threatens court action against those who abandon or neglect their parents.

“If any woman who is a believer has widows in her care, she should continue to help them and not let the church be burdened with them, so that the church can help those widows who are really in need” (verse 16).

• ***Widows 60 Years of Age and Older*** – “No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, ... As for younger widows, do not put them on such a list. For when their sensual desires overcome their dedication to Christ, they want to marry. Thus they bring judgment on themselves, because they have broken their first pledge. Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also busybodies who talk nonsense, saying things they ought not to. So I counsel younger widows to marry, to have children, to manage their homes and to give the enemy no opportunity for slander. Some have in fact already turned away to follow Satan” (verses 9, 11-15).

By the time this epistle was written widows in Ephesus has a recognized status in the Church. Like the bishops and deacons, enrolled widows had to show a certain stability of life before they could be enrolled. They had to be content with their station in life, to be psychologically free to pledge themselves to the service of God and the Church. This is the same principle behind the later regulation that married men could be ordained deacons, but once ordained could not marry.

• **Widows Known for Doing Good** – “... and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, showing hospitality, washing the feet of the Lord’s people, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds” (verse 10).

Dorcas is described in the Scripture as “*always doing good and helping the poor*” (Acts 9:36). We do not know what else she did but we do know that she made “*robes and other clothing*” (Acts 9:36) because the mourners displayed them to Peter. Handiwork was a preferred occupation for women in the Church for centuries, lay and monastic. In nineteenth-century Britain a “Dorcas Society” was founded to provide clothing and other necessities to the poor. Chapters that continued to exist since then diversified to include other forms of community service.

Widows in Later Centuries

Widows’ institutes continued to be a feature of Church life in the second and third centuries. We find references to them in the letters of St. Ignatius of Antioch, in *The Shepherd* of Hermas and in the works of Clement of Alexandria and Origen.

The late second-century Didascalia or Instructions of the Apostles describes the principles governing enrolled widows in Antioch. Bishops are enjoined to only enroll widows over 50 who are mild and even-tempered. They were to be at the service of the bishop and have one particular occupation. Didascalia 15 lays down this precept: “A widow should have no other care save to be praying for those who give, and for the whole Church.”

In 1899 the Syriac Catholic Patriarch, Mar Ignatius Ephrem II Rahmani published a fifth-century Syrian work called *The Testament of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. In the Syrian Church at the time widows seem to have served as elders. They are charged with instructing other women, supervising the deaconesses, and visiting sick women, “but in the church let her be silent” (*Testament* 40). A prayer for instituting widows is given in which the bishop prays that the widow be instituted “for edification and good example.” In this prayer the widows are called “those who sit in front” in recognition of their special status within the Church.

In *The Testament’s* order for the Oblation (Liturgy), however, the widows are positioned “within the veil” on the left side of the sanctuary, behind the presbyters. The widows are directed to receive the Eucharist after the deacons, but before the readers and subdeacons.

This is the last reference to an order of widows that survives from the early Church. It is assumed that this order, like those of virgins and deaconesses, was absorbed in the newer institution of monasticism. Women monastics would exercise many of the same functions as these earlier women both in their monasteries and in the churches of the people.

Widows Today

Up to our own day widows and other older women continued to contribute their handiwork and other forms of service to the Church. Many of our churches dating from the nineteenth century were supported by the older women in the community who baked or cooked various foods every week to raise money for their church.

More recently the Church has focused on providing senior citizens (men as well as women) with opportunities to socialize (bingos, trips etc.). Would not some of these seniors find new life devoting themselves to prayer and/or service? The Church might best serve them by reminding them of the words of St. Paul: *“The widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives.”*

Paralyzed by Sins and Thoughtless Acts (John 5:1-15)

THE SCRIPTURES READ on the remaining Sundays in the Paschal season present us with some of life’s most debilitating hardships: blindness, isolation, and, today, paralysis. In the passage from the Acts of the Apostles read today we hear about the healing of a man named Aeneas in Lydda (Lod), some 23 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Aeneas, we are told, *“had been bedridden eight years and was paralyzed”* (Acts 9:33).

In the Gospel reading which follows, we hear about another man *“who had an infirmity thirty-eight years”* (Jn 5:5) and who was healed by the Lord Jesus, at the Pool of Bethesda (or Bethzatha) outside Jerusalem, where the infirm gathered hoping for healing. This pool was used to clean the animals destined for sacrifice before they would be brought into the temple.

It is not clear why the sick gathered there. There was no explicit mention of miracles at this pool in Jewish sources of the day such as Josephus or Philo. The pool itself, buried in the destruction of Jerusalem, was unknown until archeologists uncovered it in the nineteenth century. This led some to suggest that the passage was not historical at all. Rather it was meant to teach that the “angel in the water” foreshadowed the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in baptism, which heals us of sin (see Tertullian, *On Baptism*, chapter 5).

Others have noted that there were healing springs and pools in the ancient pagan world as well. Cures at those pools followed specific patterns like the one John records here: the first one entering the pool after the water was “stirred” would be healed. John affirms that Christ’s word alone, without any ritual or procedure, was enough to heal. Like the paralytic who had to stop relying on the pool for salvation and turn instead to Christ, so Israel had to stop relying upon the Law to save them, and turn to Christ instead.

What Does It Mean to be Paralyzed?

In the Early Church commentators did not often speculate on the pool or even the nature of the man’s illness. It was more common to compare the physical infirmity of the paralyzed man to the spiritual paralysis which afflicts Christians, either occasionally or in a regular way. It was often noted how, in the lives of each one of us, there will be spiritual paralysis: moments of weakness or failure, which can last for many years, as with the paralytic at the sheep pool.

In “spiritual paralysis,” the energies of our soul, of our mind, of our heart, of our will, of our body itself are fettered, fettered by the fact that we have no courage and we have no power within us to move and to act to the full of our longings. We stand, year after year on the very edge, on the bank of the pool that could give us life without being able to enter it.

Christian Life as Synergy

In one of the last New Testament books to reach its final form, the Second Epistle of St Peter, we see the Christian spiritual life addressed. Spiritual life, we read, comes “... *through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by whom have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature*” (2 Pt 1:3-4). The way to *theosis*, being partakers of the divine nature, comes because of Christ. God become incarnate so that we might become divinized.

We, however, need to embrace this gift, lest it wither away and we become blind or paralyzed. We do this, the epistle continues, by practicing virtue, self-control, godliness, perseverance, brotherly kindness and love. “*For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins*” (2 Pt 1:3-9). Fruitful Christian life, then, requires that we do our part to make our own the gift of divine life we have received.

We can become shortsighted or even blind to the gift of our baptism, remaining barren and unfruitful – in other words, paralyzed – without being committed to growing in virtue, knowledge, self-control and the rest. We may see this happen in the lives of some Christians who do not consider their baptism seriously, who rarely look to the Gospel, receive the Eucharist or even attend the Liturgy. They are blind to the gift of Christ and therefore paralyzed in the spiritual life. We see it in ourselves, when we cannot focus on the words we read or even the prayers we are saying, distracted by the concerns of daily life.

Paralysis and the Passions

As more philosophically-minded Greeks accepted Christ, they identified the signs of spiritual paralysis in terms of the classical passions: gluttony, lust, greed, anger, envy, sloth, pride and vainglory. A person who is focused on personal comforts (through food and drink, sex or material possessions) will find it difficult if not impossible to center on the spiritual life. If they attend church at all, they find their mind wandering back to the object of their passion.

A story is told about St Basil, the revered Fool for Christ, who confronted Tsar Ivan the Terrible one day because he was not at the Liturgy. Ivan protested that he was indeed in church for the service., Basil replied that the emperor’s body was in church, but his mind was on the Vorobiev hills (where he was having a palace built). When Basil died in 1557, the Tsar acted as one of his pallbearers.

It would be even harder for people ruled by their pride or vanity to look beyond themselves to God or others. Their piety dries up “*like baked clay*” (Ps 21:16), withered like a plant with too

much sun and no water. This is why combatting the passions has been seen as fundamental to a committed Christian life since the dawn of monasticism in the third century.

In his Homily 37 on the Gospel of John, St John Chrysostom discusses the spiritual medicines necessary to combat the passions and other distractions from the Christian life: “The divine oracles [the Scriptures] are a treasury of all manner of medicines, so that whether it be needful to quench pride, to lull desire to sleep, to tread underfoot the love of money, to despise pain, to inspire confidence, to gain patience, from them one may find abundant resource.” The Scriptures held the medicine; the illnesses were the passions.

The Church as Healer

While the Scriptures portray the incarnate Christ as Healer of the man at Bethesda, it depicts the Body of Christ, the Church, as the source of Aeneas’ recovery. The Church is meant to be a therapeutic community in which Christ continues His healing work in our midst.

“Yesterday you were flung on a bed, exhausted and paralyzed, and you had no one to put you into the pool when the water should be troubled. Today you have Him, who is in one Person God and Man. You were raised up from your bed, and even carried your bed, publicly acknowledging the benefit. Do not again be thrown on your bed by sinning, in the evil of a body paralyzed by its pleasures. As you now are, so walk, mindful of the command, ‘See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you’ (John 5:14), if you prove yourself bad after the blessing you have received. You have heard the loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out’.”

(St Gregory the Theologian, Oration on Holy Baptism, XL, 33)

Mid-Pentecost

Acts 14:6-18 John 7:14-30

Shining with the Light of Both Feasts

ON MOST FEASTS of our Church year we display an icon which depicts the event commemorated and explains its theological meaning. This is not the case on the Feast of Mid-Pentecost which is observed this week. To be sure, the icon shows Christ preaching in the Temple but that does not give us a hint of the depths of meaning contained in this feast.

This feast is observed on the 25th day of our 50 day Paschal season: the actual mid-point of this observance. It serves to turn our minds towards the climax of these fifty days, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. As the highpoint of the Lord’s presence in our midst was His death and resurrection, its climax was the event which brought us to share in His resurrection life: the coming of the Spirit upon mankind in the Church. In the words attributed to St Athanasius, “God became man so that we might receive the Holy Spirit.”

The Source of Living Water

In Jn 7:14-30, read at the Liturgy on this feast, we hear how Jesus taught in the temple “*about the middle of the feast*” of Tabernacles (v. 14) and confronted the Jewish leaders who challenged Him. This event may have prompted the choice of this day to celebrate His teachings. The heart of His teaching on this occasion, however, would only come as the feast was concluding: “*On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified*” (Jn 7:37-39).

In this passage Christ proclaims – and on this feast we celebrate – several connected aspects of the divine plan for our salvation:

- “*Rivers of living water*” are meant to flow from the hearts of those who believe in Christ.
- This would happen when believers receive the Spirit.
- This would only take place when Jesus was “glorified.”

In the theology of St John’s Gospel the idea of “exaltation” or “glorification” is used to describe Christ’s death and resurrection. This is drawn from Christ’s words at Bethany predicting His passion: “*The hour is come, that the Son of Man should be glorified*” (Jn 12:23). What would appear to be His humiliation would actually be His glorification. This truth is proclaimed in our icons of the crucifixion where the charge against Christ dictated by Pilate (“King of the Jews”) is replaced by the proclamation “The King of Glory.”

The image of “living [that is, running] water” used to describe the power of the Holy Spirit and the Lord as its source is drawn from the prophecy of Jeremiah: “*O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake You shall be put to shame...because they have forsaken the LORD, the fountain of living waters*” (Jer 17:13). This image was still powerful in the minds of early Christians who preferred that baptism be given in running (“living”) water.

Christ is proclaimed as the Source of this living water in the troparion of the feast: “At the middle point of this festive season give my thirsty soul to drink of the waters of true worship, for You called out to all men, ‘Whoever is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink.’ O Christ God, Fountain of life, glory to You!”

Christ as the Source of living water is a central theme in the Gospel of John which we read on three Sundays in the Paschal season. Christ heals the paralyzed man at the Pool of Bethesda (see Jn 5:1-15). He heals the blind man at the pool of Siloam (see Jn 9:1-38). He tells the Samaritan woman, “*whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life*” (Jn 4:14). All these passages, as well as the reading on Mid-Pentecost, would have been particularly meaningful to those newly baptized in living water at Pascha.

Conduits of the Spirit

Christ's words, "*He who believes in Me... out of his heart will flow rivers of living water*" (Jn 7:38) point to another important element in His teaching. Believers are not meant to receive the Holy Spirit as if they were closed vessels. Rather they are meant to be channels by which the grace of the Spirit touches others. Thus when St Seraphim of Sarov showed Nicholas Motovilov what happens when a person acquires the Holy Spirit, he insisted, "This is not given to you alone but through you it is for the whole world!" If a believer has truly received the Holy Spirit, others are affected. As St Seraphim phrased it, "Acquire the Spirit of peace and thousands around you will be saved."

Icon of the Feast

The icon of this feast shown here depicts the Gospel scene of the adult Christ teaching in the temple during the Jewish festival. Often, however, the icon venerated on Mid-Pentecost depicts the twelve year old Jesus "*in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions*" (Lk 2:46), indicating that at all times and in every way Christ is the Source of wisdom, the Illuminator of our souls.

Development of This Feast

We have no documented witness to the origins of this feast, but it was widely known by the fifth century. The Bishop of Ravenna, Peter Chrysologus (c. 380-c. 450), called it a divine festival from the tradition of the apostolic fathers. It existed in the time of St. John Chrysostom and its observance can be documented in sixth century Antioch and seventh century Jerusalem. Hymns for this feast were written by Ss Elias, Patriarch of Jerusalem from 494 to 513, Anatolius, Patriarch of Constantinople (449-458), Andrew of Crete (seventh century) John of Damascus (eighth century) and Theophan the Confessor (ninth century).

Today this feast is only observed in Byzantine Churches, but this was not always so. Peter Chrysologus, quoted above, was a Western bishop and the feast was observed in the Ambrosian rite and other Western usages.

In some Churches the Lesser Blessing of Waters is conducted on this feast, preferably at a river or stream ("living water") and the fields and gardens are then blessed as well.

St. Theophan the Recluse on This Feast

"On Mid-Pentecost we hear the call of the Lord: 'Whosoever is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink' (John 7:37). If this is so, then let us all run to Him. Whatever you thirst for – so long as it is not contrary to the spirit of the Lord – you will find relief in Him. If you thirst for knowledge, run to the Lord, for He is the one and only Light, enlightening every man. If you thirst for cleansing from sin and quenching of the flames of your conscience, run to the Lord, for He tore asunder the handwriting of our sins upon the Cross. If you thirst for peace in your heart, run to the Lord, for He is the treasury of all good, whose abundance will teach you to forget all deprivations and despise all earthly good, so as to be filled with Him alone. If you need strength, He is almighty. If you need glory, His glory surpasses the world. If you desire freedom, He gives true freedom. He will resolve all of our doubts, loose the bonds of our passions, dispel all our troubles and difficulties, will enable

us to overcome all obstacles, temptations and intrigues of the enemy, and will make smooth the path of our spiritual life. Let us all run to the Lord!"

Sunday of the Samaritan Woman

Acts 11:19-30

John 4:5-42

Where the Disciples Were First Called Christians (Acts 11:19-30)

BEGINNING WITH CHAPTER 8, the Acts of the Apostles tells how the message of Christ's resurrection spread from Jerusalem to surrounding areas. We see the deacon Philip evangelizing and baptizing in Samaria, where he is joined by the apostles Peter and John. Philip then travels westward, as far as Caesarea, the Roman provincial capital. In chapter 9 we learn that there are believers in Damascus whom Saul goes to capture. Peter also travels, healing Aeneas in Lydda (Lod) and raising Dorcas in Joppa, both today suburbs of Tel Aviv. He then goes some 75 miles up the coast to Caesarea where he ministers in the house of Cornelius.

As often happens, persecution in one place led to the spread of the Gospel in another, Chapter 11 tells how persecution scattered the disciples even further: "*as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch*" (Acts 11:19), The Gospel had now gone over 300 miles in its journey around the world.

Antioch the Great

Called "the Great" to distinguish it from cities in other provinces called Antioch, the city was founded in the 4th century BC by Seleucus I Nicator as a "court city" of his Seleucid Empire. In 64 BC Syria became part of the Roman Empire. Antioch eventually rivaled Alexandria as the chief city of the Middle East and played a particularly strong role in the Roman Empire.

Syria had a sizeable contingent of Jews who had full status as citizens. It is likely that the believers fleeing Jerusalem established themselves in the midst of this prosperous colony. We are told in Acts that these believers preached the Gospel, "*only among Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord*" (Acts 11:19-21). These first Gentile converts were called "Christians," probably not a complement at first.

The new community was instructed by Barnabas, himself a Levite, who was one of the first disciples in Jerusalem. He brought Saul – now Paul – with them and they remained there about a year. After that, Barnabas and Paul were sent by the Church of Antioch to spread the Gospel, first in Cyprus, and then in Asia Minor.

Towards the end of the third century Rome created a "super-province" called the "diocese of the East," with Antioch as its capital. Thus, when the principal local Churches were recognized at the First Council of Nicaea (AD 325), "Antioch and all the East" was placed third in rank, after Rome and Alexandria.

1st -3rd Centuries – Martyrs and Ascetics

While St Stephen the Deacon, killed in Jerusalem, is recognized as the Church's first Martyr, its first woman-martyr was St Takla. Converted by St Paul in Iconium, Asia Minor, she lived for many years in Syria's Isaurian Mountains. She was killed by pagan sorcerers, jealous of her influence over the local population.

The Church of Antioch numbers many martyrs from the official persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire. Among them its early bishops, Evodios (who died c. AD 68) and St Ignatius of Antioch, called "Theophoros" (the God-bearer), taken to Rome and martyred c. AD 107. Other much-revered martyrs of the age are Saints Lucian, a second century priest and catechist, Babylas, its third-century bishop, and the martyred soldiers Sergius and Bacchos.

Syria was one of the first areas in which asceticism began to thrive. A group of virgins settled near St Takla's dwelling after her death. It still exists as the Monastery of St Takla, near Maaloula, Syria. Another historic monastery still existence is the nearby Mar Sarkis (St. Sergios) Monastery. Built in the fourth century on the remains of a pagan temple, it is one of the oldest monasteries in the Christian world. It is thought to have been built prior to the First Council of Nicea (AD 325) because it has a round (originally pagan) altar, a practice prohibited at the Council.

Antioch's most famous ascetics were its fifth-century Stylites, Symeon and his disciples who spent their lives on platforms built on columns in a deserted area near today's Aleppo. Devotees –even including legates of the Byzantine emperors Theodosius II and Leo I – consulted Symeon from a ladder placed against the column. Ruins of the column and the church built around it remain today.

4th-6th Centuries – Councils and Disputes

Syria was also a center of the theological controversies with the Arians over the divinity of Christ, with the Monophysites, over how He could be both God and man and with the Monotheletes, over how He could be perfect man if He had no human will – all of which led to the early Ecumenical Councils. A lasting division in the Church arose between those who accepted the fifth century Council of Chalcedon and those who did not.

This council based its decisions on Greek philosophical expressions which differed from the terminology used previously, notably by St Cyril of Alexandria. This caused the non-Greek communities in the East – Armenians, Copts, and the Syriac-speaking part of the Antiochian Church – to reject this council. The patriarchates of Alexandria and Antioch were divided into Chalcedonian Greek (Melkite) and non-Greek Churches. These non-Chalcedonian Churches are today called "Oriental Orthodox".

Thus by the seventh century Christians of the Middle East were divided into "*Roum*" (Romans, i.e. Greeks), Jacobites (Copts and non-Chalcedonian Syrians), and Nestorians (the Church of the East).

7th -13th Centuries – Occupation & Exile

The weakened Chalcedonian or Greek patriarchate of Antioch was diminished further in succeeding centuries. The Arab conquerors saw the Greek Christians as allies of their enemies,

the Byzantine Empire. They were persecuted more for being Romans than for being Christians. Many fled to places like Cyprus and Sicily.

During this time there was often no patriarch or he lived outside the area. The Empire recaptured Antioch in 969 and provided the Church with 115 years of security and peace. This was shattered in 1085 when the Seljuk Turks conquered the area, soon followed by western Crusaders.

In 1098, Crusaders took the city, and set up a Latin Kingdom with a Latin Patriarchate. The Greek patriarchate continued in exile in Constantinople. During the nearly two centuries of Crusader rule, the Greek patriarchs of Antioch in exile gradually adopted their hosts' Byzantine rite in place of their own Antiochian usage. Finally, in 1268, Egyptian Mamelukes seized Antioch from the Latins and the Greek patriarch was able to return to the region. By this point, a series of earthquakes and economic changes had reduced the importance of Antioch and the patriarchs relocated their headquarters to Damascus, the new capital of Syria.

On the Mountain or in Jerusalem? (John 4:5-42)

ARGUMENTS ABOUT RELIGION are a favorite Middle Eastern pastime. Some are simply talk for talk's sake: my faith is the oldest, the truest or the best. Sometimes these disagreements have become causes for acrimonious divisions between believers as the number of Jewish, Christian and Muslim factions show. One of the most vehement in the ancient world is mentioned in the Gospel passage about the Woman at the Well (Jn 4:5-42): the conflict between Jews and Samaritans.

The division between Jews and Samaritans can be traced to the division of David's kingdom into northern and southern realms after the death of King Solomon. The northern kingdom, known as Israel, was overrun by the Assyrians in the eighth century BC. The South was called Judah and its inhabitants ultimately became known as Jews. The southern kingdom would remain until conquered by Babylon almost 200 years later.

The Samaritans claimed that they were the true Israel, descendants of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh who survived the destruction of the Northern kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 722 BC. To this day Samaritans prefer to call themselves Israelites (the word Samaritan means "Keeper of the Law"). There was reputedly one million of them in the first century AD. Only c. 750 remain as a distinct community today.

Both Jewish and Samaritan religious leaders taught that it was wrong to have any contact with the opposite group, and neither was to enter each other's territories or even to speak to one another. This is why the Samaritan woman responded to Jesus' request for a drink by saying, "*How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman? For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans*" (Jn 4:9). Given this relationship, Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan was especially forceful.

Samaritans only accept as Scripture the first five books of the Old Testament, the Torah (the Law), rejecting the authority of other sections of the Old Testament (the prophetic/historical

books) as well as the Talmud, a principal source of Jewish Tradition. Their text of the Torah differs from that used by the Jews as well. The Samaritans claim that their version of the Torah was the original and that the Jews had a falsified text produced by Ezra during the Babylonian exile. Modern Scripture scholars point to considerable editing of the Jewish Scriptures at that time; perhaps the Samaritans have a point.

Question of the Temple

Both Jews and Samaritans believed that God had a unique dwelling place on earth. It was there that the glory of God was manifested just as it had been to Moses on Mount Sinai. They disagreed, however, on the location of this holy place. Jews looked to Jerusalem, where Solomon had built his temple before the division between northern and southern kingdoms. Samaritan worship was focused on Mount Gerizim, near Shechem (modern Nablus), which they asserted was the original sanctuary, in use since the time of Joshua. This was the place, they believe, where Abraham was commanded by God to offer Isaac, his son, as a sacrifice (Genesis 22:2).

When the Jewish leadership, which had been deported to Babylon in the sixth century BC, were allowed to return, they rebuilt the Jerusalem temple and codified their Scriptures and ritual practices. While in earlier centuries sacrifices were regularly offered in shrines associated with Abraham and other early figures, the newly emergent Jewish leadership insisted that the Jerusalem temple was only legitimate place of sacrifice.

In the first half of the 5th century BC the Samaritans built a temple on Mount Gerizim and offered sacrifices there. This temple was destroyed in 128 BC by the Jewish high priest John Hyrcanus who captured Samaria and enlarged the Jewish kingdom.

Samaritans were not associated with the Jewish revolts against the Romans so, while the Romans expelled the Jews from Jerusalem in 135 AD, the Samaritans were allowed to remain. The Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim was rebuilt at that time and remained until the fifth century AD when the Samaritans revolted against Rome. They were defeated and barred from Mount Gerizim.

Samaritans continued to oppose Rome; they were recognized as a legitimate community under Islam. While they never rebuilt their temple, they still celebrate Passover every year at the “altar of Abraham,” at their ancient temple site.

Christ and the Temple Question

In Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman He touched on the issue of the temple. The woman said, “*Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you Jews say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship.*’ Jesus said to her, ‘*Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father... But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth...*’” (Jn

4 19-23). Jesus dismissed the importance of a physical temple as necessary to worship God. God's relationship with mankind was changing.

When Jesus was in the Jerusalem temple He made this cryptic announcement: “*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*’ Then the Jews said, ‘*It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?*’ But He was speaking of the temple of His body” (Jn 2:19-21). The place of sacrifice would not be in a shrine or a temple; it would be the very body of Christ Himself. That is where the one definitive sacrifice would be offered for the forgiveness of the sins of all mankind.

While Christ's earthly body would be the temple of His sacrifice on the cross, His spiritual body, the Church would also share in His role as the new temple of God. Since the Church is the Body of Christ, in which the Holy Spirit dwells, it is a temple made up of living stones, the first of whom is Christ, the Head of the Body.

And so it is as the temple of the Living God that we are reminded, “*Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*” (1 Peter 2:4-5). Those who are united to Christ in baptism become this holy priesthood whose sacrifice of praise, the Divine Liturgy, whose alms, whose gifts of fasting and other offerings are united to Christ's own sacrifice. The community of Christians throughout the world is the spiritual house built of living stones and joined to the Precious Stone chosen by God.

Confronting Sin and Sinners

SOME CHRISTIANS TODAY seem to believe that Jesus never judged anyone. They feel that He welcomed everyone, without calling them to turn from their sin. This “live and let live” attitude hardly describes the Jesus we see depicted in the Gospels. Rather these Scriptures show that the Lord reacted differently to different people in different circumstances, teaching us something about Himself and holding a mirror up to our actions as well.

Jesus' Public Preaching

The Gospel of Mark, perhaps the oldest of the canonical Gospels, describes the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in this way: “*Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel’*” (Mk 1:14, 15). The call to repentance was at the very heart of His teaching: of that there should be no doubt. How Jesus approached individuals who were living in sinful situations is another matter.

The Lord addressed very strong words to those who were the religious leaders of Israel – the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and teachers of the Law – whom He judged to be failing in their mission to pastor God's people. He publicly called them “*a wicked and adulterous generation*” (Mt 13:4); “*blind guides*” (Mt 23:16, 24); “*fools and blind*” (Mt 23:17, 19); “*white-washed tombs*” (Mt 23:27); and “*serpents, brood of vipers*” (Mt 23:33). He told them they had hard hearts! In Mt 23 He repeatedly threatened them, “*Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees:*

Hypocrites! ... How can you escape the condemnation of hell?" (Mt 23:13 ff.)" This is hardly the "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" beloved of so many. Yet, His hearers did not reproach Him for being politically incorrect; rather "*people were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes*" (Mt 7:28, 29).

Jesus' Approach to Individuals

When the Lord was trying to lead people to recognize their own sinfulness and repent, His approach was very different. He was not aggressive or condemnatory, but He was not timid either. When He was dining on the Sabbath with a leading Pharisee, a man with dropsy (edema) was brought before Him. The Gospel says that Jesus answered the (unasked) question of the onlookers by asking them a question, "*Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?*" (Lk 14:7) His questions forced people to examine their own beliefs or attitudes, opening a way for them to see their own errors and repent. He met them where they were, but He did not encourage them to remain there.

The Lord used parables in the same way. When He noticed that people were jockeying for the best places at the table, the Lord told a series of parables on being the guest or a host at a wedding. His hearers got the point He was making without any of them being singled out for their behavior.

Two Gospel incidents frequently heard in our Churches show Jesus dealing with people who were public sinners, yet ready to hear His call to repentance. Before the Great Fast we hear the story of Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector in Jericho, who admitted getting money by fraud (Lk 19:8). The Lord did not raise the issue of Zacchaeus' financial manipulations even indirectly. He simply told Zacchaeus that "*today I must stay at your house*" (v. 5). Jesus allowed Zacchaeus to see Him close up; that alone was sufficient to bring him to repentance.

Something similar happened in the case of the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at Jacob's Well. Like Zacchaeus, her way of life was already well-known and she was probably not welcome among the local women. This explains why she had come to draw water at the height of the midday heat. Yet Jesus did not bring up the matter of her multiple marriages; He innocently asks her to call her husband. When she tells Him, "*I have no husband,*" (Jn 4:17) then He responds, "*You have well said, 'I have no husband,' for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly*" (vv. 17, 18). Jesus led her to raise the irregularity of her marital situation herself so that He could reveal His mysterious knowledge of her past and lead her to repentance.

Both Zacchaeus and the Samaritan woman (Photini, in some accounts) responded to Jesus' presence by revealing their embarrassing secrets. They could not deceive Jesus into thinking them upright. They could not pretend an untruth in the face of the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

John's Gospel contains the story of another hapless woman: one caught in adultery (Jn 8:1-8). The scribes and Pharisees claimed that, according to the Law, she was to be stoned. They were right. The Law prescribed: "*If a man is found lying with a woman married to a husband, then*

both of them shall die—the man that lay with the woman, and the woman; so you shall put away the evil from Israel” (Dt 20:22).

In response, Jesus did not criticize the woman, her accusers or the Law. To the accusers He simply said, *“He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first”* (v. 8). He trusted that no one would dare to claim to be sinless, and He was right. They began drifting away, leaving Jesus and the woman together.

Daily during the Great Fast we say the Prayer of St Ephrem the Syrian, asking for some spiritual insight these accusers were brought to remember. We pray, *“Grant that I may see my own sins and not judge my brethren.”* We must know sin when we see it, but not in a way that is judgmental of others.

The Lord did not criticize the woman caught in the act, but neither did He say, *“I do not condemn you either; it’s all good.”* She had sinned – she knew it and so did He. His response was, *“go and sin no more”* (v.11).

Fraternal Correction in the Church

The Lord expected His disciples, the leaders of His new community, to deal with sin in its midst. He told them, *“Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him”* (Lk 17:3,4). Confronting sin in the community was as much part of their job as was extending forgiveness to the repentant.

Sometimes Church leaders turn a blind eye to the unchristian behavior of members of their flock so as to keep them in the congregation. The apostles were more concerned with helping their people avoid sin, even to the point of discussing it publicly. These are some of their directives found in the Epistles:

“Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself” (Gal 6:1-5).

“Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning” (1 Tim 5:20).

“My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins” {Jas 5:19, 20).

“On some have compassion, making a distinction; but others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire, hating even the garment defiled by the flesh” (Jude 1:22, 23).

Sunday of the Blind Man

Acts 16:16-34

John 9:1-38

The Gospel Reaches Europe (Acts 16:16–34)

IN ACTS 16 WE SEE THE GOSPEL spread to Philippi, a town in western Macedonia near the border of Thrace. . Originally established in the fourth century BC as a mining town and military garrison on an important east-west road, Philippi stood at the northernmost tip of the Aegean Sea, and was a prosperous city in the first century AD. It was considered a “miniature Rome,” governed by the laws of the capital by Roman officials.

Almost 900 miles from Jerusalem, Philippi was the northernmost place visited by St Paul in his journeys and the first place in Europe evangelized by the Apostle. Between AD 45 and 58 St Paul had visited a number of cities in Cyprus, Crete and Asia Minor (Turkey today) and would go on to visit the Greek cities of Thessalonica, Athens and Corinth. In all he made three circuits of this area, visiting some cities several times and spending over a year in some places where his message was well received.

Some ten years later, while in a Roman prison, Paul sent this community his Epistle to the Philippians, a letter included in the New Testament. In it we learn that the Philippians were the most generous to Paul personally in his travels. *“Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need”* (Phil 4:15-16).

The next generation of Fathers – notably St Ignatius of Antioch and St Polycarp of Smyrna – visited and wrote to the Philippian Christians. In the following generation St Irenaeus of Lyon referred to Polycarp’s Epistle to the Philippians as a forceful witness to the Gospel and a guide to salvation.

During the fourth through sixth centuries AD Philippi was a recognized Christian center in the Roman Empire. Its churches, particularly the great cathedral, were said to rival the churches of Constantinople. Weakened by invasions of Slavic tribes at the end of the sixth century, Philippi was largely destroyed by an earthquake in 619; after that it was little more than a village.

Philippi was rebuilt as a garrison in the tenth century as a defense against the neighboring Bulgar tribes. It prospered again at least until the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks when it fell into ruin. After the Greek War of Independence (1821-32) the area became part of the Kingdom of Greece. It was not until the twentieth century that archeologists began excavating the ruins of Philippi, identifying a number of structures including the great basilica of St. Paul.

Other Cities Visited by St Paul

Chapters from the Acts of the Apostles read in Church this week record St Paul's ministry in the following places as well:

Phrygia and Galatia (Acts 16) – Provinces in western and central Anatolia, in what came to be called “Turkey in Asia;”

Troas (Acts 16, 20) – On the Aegean Sea, the chief port of north-west Asia Minor. With a population of 100,000 at its height, Troas was the seat of a bishop at least until the tenth century. The city was destroyed during the Ottoman invasions of the fourteenth century.

Thessalonika (Acts 17) – Already 400 years old when St Paul visited it, this city, Thessalonika remained an important center through the later history of the Roman Empire. It fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1430 and remained as capital of their Balkan province until 1912 when it was surrendered to Greece. In Byzantine times and again today it is considered its nation's Second City.

Berea (Acts 17) – A small city in southwestern Macedonia, it has much the same history as its larger neighbor, Thessalonika.

Athens (Acts 17) – One of the oldest cities in Europe, it was the intellectual capital of ancient Greece. When St Paul was there, Athens had been given the status of a “free city” of the Roman Empire because of its classical past. It remained a center of pagan learning until AD 529 when the emperor closed its philosophical school. Conquered during the Fourth Crusade (1204), Athens quickly fell to the Ottomans until the Greek War of Independence in the nineteenth century. In 1838 it became the capital of modern Greece.

Corinth (Acts 18) – Julius Caesar founded the Roman city of Corinth in 44 BC on the site of the ancient Greek city destroyed a century earlier. It has been rebuilt again and again after successive invasions and earthquakes. After a particularly devastating earthquake in 1858, New Corinth was built a few miles away. This too suffered a major earthquake in 1928. Its location on the Gulf of Corinth has always made it a hub for the transport of goods and materials to Europe.

Ephesus (Acts 19, 20) – One of the largest cities in the Mediterranean world (c. 250,000) in Paul's day, Ephesus had been founded in the tenth century BC and prospered as the shrine city of the goddess Artemis through successive political regimes. Destroyed in AD 263 by Gothic invaders it was rebuilt as a Byzantine city. Its commercial importance declined as its harbor silted up and, by the time of the Ottoman conquest in the fourteenth century, Ephesus was a mere village. The town was completely abandoned in the fifteenth century.

These Churches Today

The Church in Athens believes itself in continuity with the first century Christians in the city. It names as its first bishops Hierotheus, who lead the Church from before AD.52, and Dionysius (53-96). The eparchy of Corinth looks to the apostles Onesiphorus, Silas and Apollos as its first-century leaders and the eparchy of Thessalonika traces itself back to the apostles Aristarchus and

Silvanos, two of Christ's Seventy disciples, and names Gaius as its first bishop, in the first century.

These eparchies, placed under the Patriarch of Constantinople in the fourth century, are currently dioceses in the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Greece. The Archbishop of Athens is the first hierarch of this Church, formed after the War of Greek Independence.

The Apostolic Church of Cyprus, consisting today of twelve eparchies, traced its history back to the apostle St Barnabas who accompanied St Paul to the island in the first century. Five years later Barnabas returned to Cyprus and established the Church there.

The Apostolic Church of Crete, consisting of nine eparchies, is an Autonomous Church dependent on the Ecumenical Patriarchate. It claims the Apostle St Titus, the disciple of St. Paul, as its first head.

The provinces of Asia Minor were placed under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Constantinople when that city was made the capital of the Roman Empire (AD 335). This is still the case, but few Christians reside there. In 1923 The "Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations" was signed by the governments of Greece and Turkey. Around 1.5 million Christians in Asia Minor were deported to northern Greece and 500,000 Muslims from Greece were relocated to Turkey. – around two million persons. Many of these Christians emigrated to North and South America as a result.

The patriarchate consists of five eparchies in Asia Minor and the "New Territories" ceded to Greece after the twentieth-century Balkan Wars and six eparchies in the Greek Islands (the Dodecanese). Some 30 eparchies in Western Europe, the Americas and Australia are also subject to the ecumenical patriarchate.

Our Radiant Light (John 9:1-38)

THE BAPTISM OF CATECHUMENS ON PASCHA was one of the most widespread practices of the early Church. Speaking of baptism, St. Paul had written, "*We were buried with [Christ] through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life*" (Rom 6:4). The connection Paul made between Christ's burial in the earth and our burial in the water was so powerful in the minds of early believers that Holy Saturday, the eve of Christ's resurrection, became the most appropriate day for baptism in both East and West. Those baptized on this day would share in the Eucharist for the first time on Pascha, the "Feast of Feasts" and celebrate their new life in the days that followed.

To this day the Scriptures we read at the Divine Liturgy on this Sunday reflect on various aspects of the mystery of baptism. In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles we saw the jailer and his family baptized after experiencing the power of God and hearing the word of the Lord. In the Gospel we see the Lord approach a blind man at the Pool of Siloam – water again – and healing him. The Lord anoints him and he is able to see for the first time in his life. More than that, he

sees with the eyes of his soul and confesses his faith in Christ. Countless people today are familiar with a similar image from the eighteenth-century hymn, *Amazing Grace*, where the new believer proclaims “I once was lost, but now am found; was blind but now I see.”

These readings taken together suggest a pattern that has been followed throughout the centuries. People have heard the word of God, then been baptized, and anointed (chrismated), when they came to faith in Him.

Sight and Light

In the Middle East Holy Saturday is still the most popular day for baptisms. Christians of all traditions call this day *sabt al-noor*, the Saturday of Light, from another early image of baptism. Very early in the Church’s life baptism came to be called Holy Illumination. The term is used by St Justin the Philosopher in Rome and St Clement of Alexandria in the second century to say that when we come to know God, then we are able to see clearly. Like the man once blind, we are delivered from darkness and, most particularly, we are able to see the divine plan. Our “spiritual eye becomes full of light” and we can recognize the hand of God at work among us.

At a baptism our radiant new nature is represented by the shining white garments the newly baptized puts on while we sing, “*Give me a robe of light, O You who clothe Yourself with light as with a garment, O most merciful Christ our God.*” We find the same image described beautifully in Agathangelos’ description of the baptism of the first Armenian Christians in the fourth century: “They went forth in great joy, in white garments, with psalms and blessings and lighted lamps and burning candles and blazing torches, with great rejoicing and happiness, illuminated and become like the angels.”

For the same reason the Church describes the Feast of the Theophany, the remembrance of Christ’s baptism, as the Feast of Light. As we say in Kondakion for the feast, actually the first verse of St. Romanos’ Kondakion on the Life of Christ:

Today you have appeared to the inhabited world, and your light, O Lord, has been signed upon us, who, with knowledge, sing your praise, ‘You have come, You have appeared, the unapproachable Light.’

The Gospels say that, at Christ’s baptism, the heavens were opened, which the Fathers assumed to mean that the mystery of the Trinity was revealed. Christ is the Light who enables us to see by revealing the mystery of God and His plan for our regeneration to the world.

Clement of Alexandria also speaks of this light as being “signed” upon us. He describes this sign as a “seal,” a mark of belonging – in this case, to Christ. At our chrismation, the completion of our baptism, we receive this “seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit” who affirms that we belong to the Lord. We are His, and He is ours, as a pledge of the life that awaits us in glory.

Our Call to Respond

In the passage from Romans quoted above, St Paul makes another connection. As we have seen, he links baptism in water with Christ’s burial; he also relates Christ’s risen life to the way the baptized should live here and now. We can live a ‘resurrection life’ by following the Scriptural precepts that characterize the new life for believers. Later in the epistle St Paul expresses it this

way, “...present your bodies a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. And do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...” (Rom 12:1, 2).

The first verse concerns our *actions*. Where in the Old Covenant people would offer animals, grain or other offerings in the temple, we the baptized are told to offer all our faculties as our act of worship. “Turn this body in which you are clothed into a censer...” we read in the letters of St Anthony the Great. There is nothing that we have or that we are which is not meant to be given over to God. We are called to commend “ourselves, one another and our whole life to Christ God.”

Sometimes this “spiritual worship” is a matter of giving things up, as during the Fasts. At other times, such as during this festive season, it may be a matter of sharing the things that we enjoy with others in acts of hospitality. In either case we are called to see all our actions as oblations, like the prosphora, the candles or the incense we give over completely to God in church.

The second verse is concerned with our *attitudes*. We are urged to avoid thinking like people who do not know God: to avoid thinking that the purpose of life is acquiring more and more of the world’s goods or respect. If our values are formed by the commercials we see on TV or the lifestyles promoted there, then we are conforming to this world. After all, sitcoms or reality shows never feature people who serve others, do they?

If we accept the social engineers’ idea that other people – even our own older relatives or unborn children – are an inconvenience to be put aside, then we are conforming to this world. If we endorse the concerns of special interest groups rather than the values of the Gospel, then we are conforming to this world. We have been given a new life; we need to develop a new mind as well.

Who Is the Blind Man?

WHO IS THE BLIND MAN? This question is not about the name of the man the Lord Jesus heals of blindness in Jn 9 (in Christian lore he is given the name Celidonius). He is not named in the Gospel account because his name is irrelevant to the meaning of the passage.

Rather the question is: Of all the people described in this Gospel passage, which one is the blind man?

Several groups are mentioned in the passage: the disciples, the neighbors of the blind man, his parents and the Pharisees. The passage reveals something about each of them.

The Disciples

Christ’s followers are depicted asking a theological question on seeing the man born blind: “*Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*” (v. 2) The assumption behind their question was commonly shared by people in the ancient world: if you experienced good fortune, you were pleasing to God but if you experienced evil, it was a result of your sinfulness.

This was considered true for individuals and the entire people as well. When Jerusalem fell to the Romans in the first century AD, Jewish thinkers attributed it to the sins of the nation: The people of Israel had offended God and were punished by God withdrawing His protection from them. When Christian Jerusalem fell to the Persians in the year 614 and then to the Arabs in 638, its leaders said the same thing: Jerusalem had fallen because its Church had sinned.

While this connection might be directly or indirectly true in some cases, it is not so here. Neither the man nor his parents had sinned. The man's condition was according to the providence of God: "*that the works of God should be revealed in him*" (v. 3).

Today most people are likely to say that our good or bad fortune is not caused by direct divine intervention, but because of purely natural causes. However, it is still important to say that our choices for good or evil can and do have consequences. Societies have fallen because they embraced an immoral culture (based on violence, slavery or perversion). Abortion is sinful; it also lowers birthrates and condemns societies to extinction. Divorce has consequences for the couple's children and grandchildren. Our sinful choices have effects beyond us.

While the disciples' reaction is not recorded, we find Christians today connecting their earthly fortune to God's blessing or punishment in an automatic way. The modern Protestant movement called "the prosperity gospel," promoted by preachers such as Joel Osteen and Creflo Dollar, teaches that God wants all His people to be physically healthy and financially successful. If a person is sick or not prosperous, they claim, it is because they are not "right with God."

While the inquiring disciples in Jn 9 were not "blind," we may wonder about those today who embrace either of these extremes: by living as if their choices affect only themselves or by following the prosperity gospel.

The Neighbors

Those who knew the blind man were amazed that he could now see. Some could not conceive the possibility and asked: "*Is not this he who sat and begged?*" Some said, "*This is he.*" Others said, "*He is like him*" (v.9). Church Fathers such as St Irenaeus, St Basil the Great and St John Chrysostom explained their confusion in this way: if the man's sight had been restored, they could accept it. This man, however, was blind from birth. He has no eyes at all. Jesus filled his eye sockets with clay, "adding [eyes] where before they were not" (St John Chrysostom) and gave them sight.

The Gospel says that Christ "*spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay*" (v. 6). The Fathers directly connect this making of clay with the creation story in Genesis. St John Chrysostom noted, "When He said, 'that the glory of God might be manifested', He spoke of Himself, ... To have said, I am He who took the dust of the earth, and made man, would have seemed a hard thing to His hearers; but this no longer stood in their way when shown by actual working. By taking earth, and mixing it with spittle, He showed forth His hidden glory; for no small glory was it that He should be deemed the Architect of creation" (St John Chrysostom, Homily 56 on John).

St Irenaeus said that this action “manifested the hand of God to those who could understand by what [hand] man was formed out of the dust” adding: “That which the artificer, the Word, had omitted to form in the womb, [viz., the blind man’s eyes], He then supplied in public, that the works of God might be manifested in him” (*Against Heresies* V, 15, 2).

The Parents

The man’s parents affirmed his identity: “*We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind*” (v. 20) but they evaded expressing their opinion on the miracle: “... *but by what means he now sees we do not know, or who opened his eyes we do not know. He is of age; ask him. He will speak for himself*” (v. 21). John explains their reticence in this way: to affirm the miracle would be to avow that Jesus was the Messiah. “*His parents said these things because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, ‘He is of age; ask him’*” (vv. 22, 23).

It may have to be explained to us, but Jews would assume that only the Messiah empowered by God could engage in a creative act. It would be easier to claim ignorance than to affirm that God was at work in Jesus and risk the consequences. This might be wisdom in the world, but it would be blindness in the spiritual realm.

The Pharisees

The Pharisees are the “heavies” in this portion of John. In the previous chapter, John 8, Jesus condemns them for not seeing God at work in Him, calling them sons of the devil (see Jn 8:44). In chapter 10, the leaders of the Jews again confront Jesus, demanding to know whether He was the Messiah. Jesus replies, “*I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in My Father’s name, they bear witness of Me. But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep*” (Jn 10:25, 26).

Jesus’ healing of the man born blind concludes with another encounter with the Pharisees (Jn 9:39-41). He reproaches them indirectly, saying “*For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind.*”

But the Pharisees challenge Him further. “*Then some of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these words, and said to Him, ‘Are we blind also?’ ‘Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, ‘We see.’ Therefore, your sin remains.’*”

The blind man had no sight through no fault of his own. The Pharisees claimed to see, without realizing that their pretension made them worse than blind.

Self-righteousness in religion can render us as blind as they. Relying on the Gospel as preached in the Church can free us from the blindness that results from being one’s own guide.

From the Pentecostarion

I have lost the very eyes of my soul, wherefore I come to You, O Christ, as did the man who had been blind from birth, and I cry out to You with repentance: "To those who stumble in darkness, You are a radiant and resplendent light."

O Sun of Justice, Christ our God, by Your pure touch You filled completely with light the man held in darkness from his mother's womb. Enlighten the eyes of our souls as well, making us children of light and of the day, that we may cry out to You with faith: "Great and wondrous is Your mercy toward us, O Lord, Lover of Mankind: glory to You!"

Who can speak of Your sovereign power, O Christ? Who can count the multitude of Your wonders? As You were seen in two natures on earth, so did You grant a double healing to the sick: You healed the eyes of the soul of the man born blind as well as his bodily eyes, so that he could see You. And he confessed that You are a hidden God, granting great mercy to the world!

Ascension Thursday

Acts 1:1-12 Luke 24: 36-53

"He Shall Come Again" (Luke 24: 36-53)

IN 1831 A BAPTIST PREACHER in upstate New York began to announce that the Second Coming of Christ was to take place in 1844. By that year over 100,000 people were anticipating that what William Miller had identified as the "*Blessed Hope*" of Titus 2:13 would take place on October 22. When Christ did not return on that date the "Blessed Hope" became known as the "Great Disappointment." Remnants of this group, the first Seventh Day Adventists, then said that the Last Judgment had begun in heaven on that day.

The date of choice for early Jehovah's Witnesses was 1914. When Christ didn't visibly return, they said that He came invisibly in the spirit. Members were told that the world would end in 1920, 1925, 1957, 1975 and 1984. In 1995 the Witnesses announced that the end of the world had been postponed.

California radio preacher Harold Camping claimed that the world would end in September 1994, in May, 2011 and then in October, 2011. He is not the last to make such predictions. There are still groups looking to 2012, 2016 and 2034 as their target dates. No doubt others will join the parade of false prophets before long.

Conflicting prophecies are certainly nothing new. The Old Testament tells of many such disputes among the Jews, such as the struggle between Elijah and the prophets of Baal. In the first century AD, of course, the Jewish leaders considered Jesus and His followers as false prophets.

From the very beginning of the Church there were rival teachers as well. As St Paul reminded the elders of the Church at Ephesus (see Acts 20:28-29), there were competing evangelists going from community to community with a different take on the Gospel. Inevitably members of the local community would be led to follow them and themselves "*rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves*" (Acts 20:30). We would do well to reread Paul's

warning when we hear on TV or read in novels about “secret” or “newly discovered” Scriptures which “the Vatican” has suppressed. Never secret and most known since the first centuries, these writings reflect the contending religious visions among the early believers.

The “Blessed Hope”

Among the central doctrines of the Church from its earliest days has been the expected second coming of Christ. “He shall come again,” the Creeds confess, “to judge the living and the dead.” We particularly focus on this promise during the Feast of the Ascension of Christ which we are celebrating this week. The Acts of the Apostles tells of this event. Christ instructs His disciples and then is taken up out of their sight. “*And while they looked steadfastly towards heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven’*” (Acts 1:10-11).

The promise of Christ’s return is found in almost every New Testament book. But do the Scriptures predict when this will happen? Apocalyptic books such as the Old Testament book of Daniel and the New Testament Revelation to John indicate that the events they describe “*must shortly take place*” (Rev 1:1) but even these books are nowhere nearly as precise in dating what “shortly” means as some people have predicted.

Look to the Here and Now

Just before Christ’s ascension the disciples asked Him a question which He refused to answer. Expecting, as did most Jews, that the Messiah would free their nation from foreign control, the disciples “*asked Him, ‘Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’*” (Acts 1:6) The Lord’s response has served as the Church’s yardstick in discussing the Second Coming. “*And He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority’*” (Acts 1:7). We are not meant to know when God will act; we are meant to be confident that He will do so and to live accordingly.

Earlier in His ministry the Lord Jesus told a parable that speaks to this issue: the story of the ten virgin attendants at a marriage feast (Mt 25:1-13). Five came prepared with sufficient oil for their lamps; the others did not. They had to go and buy more; and as a result they missed the feast. Jesus’ final words put this parable in the context we are discussing today. “*Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming*” (v.13). We are to keep alert, to be prepared for the coming of the Lord – whether it is His ultimate return at the end of the age or His coming to me at the end of my life.

Commenting on this parable, St John Chrysostom says that the “oil” required for the coming of the Bridegroom is the alms we offer to those in need. Refusing to give alms marks us as fools for we have neglected to do what is needed to enter the wedding feast with the Bridegroom. We have .come to the feast empty-handed because we have neglected to open our hand to the needy

Another image from this parable is found in the troparion of the Bridegroom, sung on the first days of Great Week. “Beware, therefore, O my soul lest you fall into a deep slumber and be delivered to death and the door of the kingdom be closed on you.” We can easily forget that the Lord is coming and drift off to sleep if we are not constantly alert. Cultivating the life in Christ (“trimming our lamps”) requires our continual attention

We are reminded to keep alert whenever we gather in the church for prayer where we stand facing east. This ancient custom which we inherit from the Old Testament era is connected in the Church to the words of Christ, “*For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be*” (Mt 24:27). We face the East, the direction of His coming, in the imagery of this saying

As we stand in church and look up we see the image of Christ in glory, the Pantocrator, in the dome or another prominent place. This is in fact the central detail in the icon of the Ascension: Christ, enthroned upon the cherubim, taken up from the disciples. Placing this icon in the domes of our churches is a graphic reminder that “*This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven*” (Acts 1:11).

O Lord, Your Angels spoke to Your Apostles: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking up at the skies? This Christ God who has been taken from you will return, just as you saw Him go up into the heavens. Serve Him in holiness and righteousness!”

Feast of the Ascension, Hymn at the Liti

A Feast of Hope for the Future

WHEN THE EMPEROR CONSTANTINE began his program of building churches in the Holy Land, the first shrines he sponsored were at Bethlehem (Christ’s birthplace), Jerusalem (the Anastasis) and the Mount of Olives (shrine of the Ascension and a grotto believed to be where Jesus instructed His disciples). Since that day, pilgrims from all over the world regularly flock to Bethlehem and Jerusalem, but the Mount of Olives does not have anywhere near as many visitors.

The most obvious – but not the most important reason – is that the ancient shrines on the Mount of Olives were destroyed, first during the Persian invasion of AD 614. Restored, they were later demolished by the “mad caliph,” al-Hakim, in AD 1209. Rebuilt by the Crusaders, the shrine of the Holy Ascension was turned into a mosque at the time of the fall of Jerusalem to Salah ad-Din in 1188. Still a mosque, it is currently operated as a tourist site.

The Holy Ascension

Perhaps the more important reason why we ignore the Ascension today is that it is overshadowed in the historical Churches of East and West by the more prominent celebrations of Pascha, which precedes it, and Pentecost, which follows it. Christ's Ascension, nonetheless, is of major importance for our understanding of the mystery of our salvation and of what is to come in God's plan for us. It is a feast that expresses hope that a place has been prepared for us in the Kingdom of God alongside the risen Christ.

The Ascension marks the end of Christ's time on earth, as recorded in the Scriptures. Matthew records the Lord's last words – "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations*" (Mt 28: 19) – but does not describe the Ascension. In Mark's Gospel the narrative continues: "*So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen*" (Mk 16:19-20).

It is the evangelist Luke who gives us the fullest picture. In his Gospel we read "*Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high. And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them. Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them*" (Lk 24:49-51).

In Luke's Acts of the Apostles, the Lord's words of farewell are followed by the following narrative: "*Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven'*" (Acts 1:9-11).

The risen Christ physically leaves this world, not by dying again, but by being "taken up" into heaven. He had not risen in order to resume the life of men on earth, and so His risen body was not limited in the way that earthly bodies are. He arose in a glorified body, immortal (never to die) and incorruptible (never to decay), for "He clothed the mortal in the splendor of incorruption" (St John Chrysostom).

This body, fully human but glorified, ascended into heaven and, as we say in the Creed, is now seated at the right hand of the Father. The Lord Jesus is exalted and glorified with His heavenly Father, as He was from all eternity, but now *in His humanity*, in the body incarnate from the holy Virgin Mary. As we pray in the canon at orthros:

- "O Christ, having taken upon Your shoulders our nature, which had gone astray, you ascended and brought it to God the Father" (Ode 7).
- "Having raised our nature, which was deadened by sin, You brought it to Your own Father, O Savior."

For the first time, a human body is glorified in the presence of the eternal God, offering our own fallen yet restored nature to Him who is the Source of all life. This is what the Protomartyr Stephen saw in his vision of the risen Lord: he "*gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and*

Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, 'Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!'" (Acts 7:55, 56).

And yet, Christ is also present to us, as we sing in the kondakion of this feast: "You gloriously ascended, O Christ our God, without abandoning us, but remained with us forever." Christ had promised to abide with us, as we read in the Gospel of John: "*I will not leave you orphans*" (Jn 14:18). His presence, by the power of the Holy Spirit, would be His Body, the Church.

This presence would be realized in various ways, all of which we experience in the Divine Liturgy. He is with us mystically in the Church which gathers to worship, in the Scriptures which are read, and in the Eucharist, our share in His eternal sacrifice. Again, listen to St John Chrysostom: "On high is His body, here below with us is His Spirit. And so, we have His token on high – that is, His body, which He received from us – and here below we have His Spirit with us. Heaven received the Holy Body, and the earth accepted the Holy Spirit. Christ came and sent the Spirit. He ascended, and with Him our body ascended also. ... Amazing! Look again, how He has raised the Church. As though He were lifting it up by some engine, He has raised it up to a vast height, and set it on that throne; for where the Head is, there is the body also. There is no interval of separation between the Head and the body; for if there were a separation, then the one would no longer be a body, nor would the other any longer be a Head."

We Are Ascended Also

In Christ, our humanity is now seated at the Father's right, but in a real sense He is not alone. His humanity in the heavens is but the first of many who will be glorified with Him. St Paul describes this in an agricultural image: Christ is the first of the crop; we are meant to be the rest of the crop! "*Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep... For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the first-fruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming*" (1 Cor 15:20-23).

Thus, St John Chrysostom, when speaking of the ascended Christ, uses the plural: "*we have ascended.*" If the "first-fruits" has ascended, the rest of the crop has as well. "We who seemed unworthy of the earth, are now raised to heaven. "We who were unworthy of earthly dominion have been raised to the Kingdom on high, have ascended higher than heaven, have come to occupy the King's throne, and the same nature from which the angels guarded Paradise, did not stop until it ascended to the throne of the Lord."

The Second, Glorious Coming

At the offering of the Divine Liturgy the priest prays "Remembering... everything that was done for our sake: the cross, the tomb, the resurrection on the third day, the ascension into heaven, the enthronement on the right hand, the second and glorious coming again, we offer You Your own..." In the Liturgy we celebrate the events of Christ's death, resurrection and ascension but also something in our future: Christ's second coming. We cannot speak of His going forth without celebrating His return.

Sunday after Ascension

Acts 20:16-18a, 28-38 John 17:1-13

Of True and False Apostles (Acts 20:16-18a, 28-38)

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN IT'S TIME for a strong leader to step down and be replaced by another? Sometimes there is continuity: the successor has similar gifts and a similar vision to his predecessor. Too often the successor is not up to the task: a poor choice to follow the predecessor's lead.

The Apostle Paul was a driving force in setting the Church at Ephesus firmly on the Rock of Christ. From AD 52 to 54, he lived in the city which became the base for his missionary travels as well during those years. St Paul, however, was not a local pastor but an apostle who traveled the Middle East and Europe preaching the Gospel, establishing or reinforcing local communities, then moving on.

Sometimes St Paul would leave his closest associates to oversee the development of the local Church. It seems that in Ephesus, however, Paul at first formed local leaders – bishops, presbyters (elders) – to be responsible for the local community, aided in their ministry by periodic visits and/or letters (the Epistles) from Paul himself. Only later did he send St Timothy to oversee the Church in this important city.

Chapter 20 of the Acts of the Apostles records how St Paul expressed his concern for the Church at Ephesus even when he could not pay them a personal visit. He called for the presbyters to meet him at the nearby port of Miletus for what we might call a pep talk, particularly as he feared they might not meet again in this life.

The Problem at Ephesus

St Paul warns the Ephesian elders, *“Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among you men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves”* (Acts 20: 28-30).

The Apostles were not the only preachers exercising an itinerant ministry at the time. Pagan philosophers and religious teachers of all kinds brought their message to the chief cities of the Roman Empire. The new churches set up in the Roman world provided fertile ground for some of these teachers claiming to be bringing the fullness of the Gospel to young believers.

St Paul had done exactly that on his own first visit to Ephesus. *“Finding some disciples he said to them ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ So they said to him, ‘We have not*

so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit” (Acts 19:1-2). Learning that these men had been baptized by followers of St John the Baptist, Paul preached Christ to them and baptized them in Jesus’ name. Paul then spent two years with the Ephesians grounding them in the Gospel.

St Paul feared his work would be undone by other itinerant preachers whom he called “*savage wolves*” and “*false apostles*” (2 Cor 11:13), worried that people would not be able to discern their teaching from the true Gospel of Christ: “*...if he who comes preached another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received or a different gospel which you have not accepted – you may well put up with it!*” (2 Cor 11:4).

Christ vs. the Law

One of the “different gospels” circulating in the first-century Church taught that pagans who became Christians also needed to be circumcised and to observe other laws in the Torah such as its dietary practices. Its proponents claimed that following the Law was required to insure that the believer remained pure and thus be assured a place in the kingdom of heaven.

St Paul’s epistles frequently address this challenge, insisting that what saves us is belief in Christ rather than observance of the Law. “*We have been delivered from the Law,*” he would write to the Romans, “*having died to what we were held by so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter*” (Rom 7:6). A Christian who continued to observe the Law, he came to believe, was actually denying Christ. “*You have become estranged from Christ – you who attempt to be justified by the Law. You have fallen from grace*” (Gal 5:4).

Proponents of Old Testament practices in the Church came to be known as Judaizers, and groups of them continued for many years. Some continued to observe the Sabbath, Passover, and Yom Kippur and to observe the Jewish dietary rules. By the fourth century such groups had distanced themselves from the Christian mainstream.

Faith in Christ vs. Secret Knowledge

A second brand of unorthodox teachers incorporated Gnostic philosophical ideas into their understanding of the Gospel. Some denied that God was the creator of the material world and taught that matter was evil, rejecting marriage and anything they perceived as unspiritual. Many taught that Jesus was a mere human who attained divinity through the secret lore (gnosis) which he knew and practiced. Acquiring such spiritual knowledge, reciting of mantras and the like, they taught, brings about the transformation of the human spirit and frees it from the body.

Several of the early strains of Gnosticism were described by St. Irenaeus of Lyons in his second century work, *Against Heresies*. He quotes from their writings and refutes them from the authentic Scriptures. He notes their widely divergent and inconsistent doctrines in contrast to the unity of faith in the Church. He credits this unity to the Holy Tradition preserved in the Apostolic

Churches. The common faith of these Churches puts "... within the power of all in every church who may wish to see the truth to contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the whole world" (*Against Heresies* 3.3.1).

Tradition: the Voice of the Spirit

Today the historic Churches – Catholic and Orthodox – look to a number of aspects of their life as manifesting the Apostolic Tradition. First among them are the Holy Scriptures (the Bible), the liturgy (the Church's worship), the teachings of the ecumenical councils and other authoritative teachings of the Church. In the writings of the Church Fathers, the holy icons, and the lives of the saints we also find authentic expressions of the Apostolic Tradition.

The fundamental expression of Tradition, however, is the Church itself which St Paul calls "*the pillar and ground of truth*" (1 *Tm* 3:16). The Church is the context within which all the expressions of Tradition find their true meaning. It is impossible to fully experience any element of the Tradition outside of the content of the Church.

Like St Paul, the Church today counsels us to hold fast to what we have received and to test every novel teaching or practice against the common tradition of the Apostolic Churches. Although there is a diversity in these expressions of Tradition from time to time and place to place (there are, after all, four Gospels and a number of liturgical traditions), there is still a fundamental unity coming from their common source, the Holy Spirit dwelling in the Church.

Being "One in Us" (John 17:1-13)

IN MONASTIC OR RELIGIOUS CIRCLES it is common for spiritual leaders to leave their followers a "spiritual testament," an outline of the teachings and instructions which they want uppermost in their disciples' minds. Christ's prayer in John 17 is a kind of spiritual testament. In it the Lord expresses His holy will for Himself, for His apostles, for the Church and for all mankind on the eve of His crucifixion.

The Time of His Glorification – The prayer begins with Christ praying for Himself: "*Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify You*" (verse 1). What the Scripture calls Christ's "hour" refers to the time of His redeeming sacrifice. Christ prays that He would be glorified by the completeness of this self-emptying. He totally enters into our experience of suffering and death in order to be one with us in all things except sin. His glory would not be the earthly idea of glory – power and might – but the glory of absolute and unconditional love.

Jesus as the Eternal Word Made Flesh – The prayer continues: "*glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with You before the world began*" (verse 5). The heavenly glory, known to the angels, was to be manifested to us on earth through the cross.

This reference brings us back to the proclamation of who Jesus is which is found in the very first verse of John's Gospel: "*In the beginning was the Word...*" The Gospel proclaims Jesus as the pre-eternal Word of God who is glorified with the Father before all ages. Jesus is not simply a prophet or inspired teacher – He is the One whom the Gospel says '*...was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him and without Him nothing was made that was made*' (John 1:2, 3).

This portrait of the eternal Word as one with the Father shows us a God who is in an eternal relationship and who is, therefore, love by His very nature (see 1 John 4:8). God's relationship is, first of all, with the true and entirely appropriate object of His love: His divine Word who is glorified with Him from all eternity. Based on the words of this prayer the Church would go on to speak of Christ as "equal in glory with the Father." Combining this with Christ's teaching on the Holy Spirit, later believers would express this relationship as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

Our Re-creation is in Christ – Between verses 1 and 5 we find a third concept recorded in the Gospel: "*...You have given Him authority over all flesh that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him*" (verse 2). The Word of God, through whom all things were made, is now incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth as the agent of a new creation. Mankind is given a new life which is, in fact, a second chance at the life intended for him from the beginning as described in the book of Genesis.

This life is then described: "*And this is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent*" (verse 3). Eternal life, authentic life is communion: that knowledge which flows from a relationship with God. It was a relationship of communion which Genesis describes as God "walking with Adam" in the Garden. That fellowship, once lost, is restored through Christ.

Some scholars believe that this verse is the Evangelist's commentary on Christ's prayer, an aside in the text, since it refers to the Lord in the third person. There were no quotation marks, punctuation or even paragraphs in first-century Greek manuscripts so it is possible that this is so.

This verse does make an excellent commentary, a kind of liturgical refrain not only to this prayer but to our entire life in Christ. All of the Church's life – our liturgies, icons, practices – draws its power from the relationship which we have with God. When we are in a living communion with Him, all that we do as Christians shows forth that life. Our interior eyes gain the power to see what is present in the Scriptures, the Eucharist or the saints. They become means for us to deepen the life which comes from our relationship with God in Christ. If we are not living in that relationship then these practices are simply outward forms which will increasingly bore us.

Prayer That His Disciples Be One – The prayer continues: "*I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given me out of the world.... and they have believed that you sent me*" (verses 6, 8). The apostles had been called forth by Christ to leave their families and their livelihoods to follow Him. They were about to see Him arrested, humiliated and killed. They in

their turn would face similar ends. Yet He prays, not that they remain steadfast, but that they remain one. “*Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given me, that they may be one as we are*” (verse 11). The unity of the apostles in Christ would be more significant than the physical lives of any one of them, because from that communion would come the ongoing life of the entire Church.

Prayer for the Church and the World – A few verses later we find a similar prayer for the whole Church and the world as well: “*I do not pray for those alone, but also for those who will believe through their word that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I in You that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me*” (verses 20-21).

This mutual interaction of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Trinity is extended to humanity in the Church. The bond we have with God is no longer simply that of creature to Creator; it is the filial relationship of the Son to the Father. “*as You, Father, are in Me and I in You.*” The Church, then, is not simply an human association of Jesus’ followers but an organic union of those who are “*one in Us.*”

Finally, the world’s conversion to Christ is tied to the communion of the Church with God. This passage is often explained to mean that when Christians are united to one another the rest of the world will believe. It is perhaps more accurate to say that when the Church in “*one in Us*” – finding the source of its unity in the life of the Trinity rather than in authority, political power or other external factors – people will be drawn to it.

The Icon of Our Communion with God

The icon which most perfectly expresses this vision for the communion of the Church as being “*one in Us*” is the adaptation by St Andrei Rublev of the traditional image, “The Hospitality of Abraham.” The patriarch himself and other details from the Genesis story are deleted and all we see are the three guests whom he entertained, seated around a table. In Gen 18:2 these visitors are described as “*three men*” but Rublev depicts them as angels. In fact Gen 18:13 and verses following refer to Abraham’s company as “*the LORD,*” causing the Fathers to see this visitation as an early indication of the Trinity. Their eternal relationship is expressed by the fluid motion of their gestures.

The fourth place at the table, included in these gestures, is set for us. Through baptism we have been brought into the eternal relationship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The single vessel on the table suggests the means of our ongoing communion with God, the Eucharist.

Holy Pentecost

Acts 2:1-11

John 7:37-52, 8:12

The Gift of the Holy Spirit

FROM TODAY TO PASCHA NEXT YEAR practically every church service and formal prayer in our Tradition will begin with the invocation, “O Heavenly King.” The presence of the Holy Spirit, whom the first Christians received on Pentecost, is called upon whenever we pray – whenever we do anything as Church, because the Spirit is the “soul” of the Body of Christ. The Spirit is the “living water” promised by Christ to refresh and enliven believers as we live our lives in service to the Lord.

In the Gospel of St. John we see Christ saying as His passion was about to begin, “*I will ask the Father and He will give you another Paraclete to be with you always: the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept since it neither sees Him nor recognizes Him...*” (Jn 14:16-17). In this promise the Spirit is called by another image. The Greek word *paracletos* meant a helper or an advocate, specifically someone who could guide you through the maze of the Roman legal system. This word is sometimes translated as comforter or consoler, a specific type of helper leading the believer along the path of this life. This image appears in the prayer mentioned above: “O heavenly King, Paraclete, Spirit of truth...”

The Spirit is portrayed as “*another Paraclete,*” implying that there is a first one whom we know. That Paraclete is the Lord Jesus who was the guide and advocate of His followers on earth and is our advocate before the throne of the heavenly Father. Because Christ was the Son of God incarnate, His earthly presence was limited. He lived in a certain place, in a specific time and His earthly life came to an end. The Holy Spirit, however, is not incarnate. His presence is spiritual and so not bound by those earthly limitations. He is, as the prayer we have been quoting says, “present in all places and filling all things.”

From the beginning of creation God’s plan was to dwell with His creation forever. This goal was frustrated by the fall, but not defeated. The incarnation of Christ was God’s response to His broken creation. The Son of God becomes man so that mankind can be divinized. As St. Athanasius the Great is to have said, “God became man so that we might receive the Holy Spirit.” Now, with the coming of this Spirit Paraclete, that plan has been fulfilled insofar as is possible in this life.

Our experience of the Holy Spirit is not the end of the story, however. The Spirit, says St. Paul, “...is the pledge of our inheritance, the first payment against the full redemption of a people God has made His own, to praise His glory” (Eph 1:14). The Holy Spirit as we experience Him now is merely a down-payment of the experience of God we are meant to have in glory.

How Does the Spirit Enliven Us?

When the first believers received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost there were some dramatic results: where before they were afraid, they now preached Christ boldly. They spoke in tongues, they healed the sick, they gave their lives rather than deny Christ. But the Spirit also worked – and still works – in individual believers in less spectacular but equally remarkable ways. The

Scriptures indicate several ways in which the Spirit of God activates our Christian life by His presence:

Our Ability to Believe – “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3).

Our Ability to Pray – “The Spirit too helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought; but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in speech” (Romans 8:26).

Our Confidence in God’s Love – “All who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God... The Spirit Himself gives witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:14-16).

The Growth of Our Inner Selves – “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness and chastity” (Galatians 5:23).

Our Ability to Serve in the Church – “There are different gifts, but the same Spirit; there are different ministries but the same Lord; there are different works but the same God who accomplishes all of them in everyone. To each person the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one the Spirit gives wisdom in discourse, to another the power to express knowledge. Through the Spirit one receives extraordinary faith; by the same Spirit another is given the gift of healing, and still another, miraculous powers. Prophecy is given to one; to another power to distinguish one spirit from another. One receives the gift of tongues, another that of interpreting the tongues. But it is one and the same Spirit who produces all these gifts, distributing them to each as He wills” (1 Corinthians 12:4-11).

When we were chrismated at our baptism we were anointed with the anointing of Christ, becoming sharers in His royal priesthood. As Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One, because He is penetrated by the Spirit of God, we too become *other christs* – other anointed ones – when we are chrismated. We believe that we received the gift of the Holy Spirit then as the Fathers teach. St Cyril of Jerusalem, for example, insists, “See that you do not mistake the chrism for mere ointment. For just as the Eucharistic Bread is not ordinary bread after the invocation of the Holy Spirit, so also this holy chrism is no longer simple ointment after the invocation, but the gift of Christ, bringing about the presence of the Holy Spirit by a divine operation” (*Mystagogic Catechesis* 3, 3).

Nevertheless, as the years go by we must still ask ourselves if and to what degree this relationship with the Holy Spirit has become a conscious focus in our life, for it is possible to have received this gift of the Holy Spirit and never to have truly realized the greatness of that gift or to have lived in His light. Thus St. Simeon the New Theologian maintains that the greatest misfortune which can befall us as Christians is not to know consciously that God is truly living within us. Many believers, he asserts, “say they have the Spirit of God without experiencing Him and believe that they possess the Spirit within them from Holy Baptism and will argue that they have this treasure, knowing that in reality they are utterly devoid of the Spirit.” In fact, he says, they do not know what it means to have this gift. Simeon compares the believer who has been filled with the Spirit to a woman pregnant with a child. Both must surely be aware of what has taken place within them.

Like many of the Fathers, St. Simeon recognizes that the gift of the Spirit is given when we are christened, but also that we must develop a conscious awareness of the Spirit's presence in our own life. Those who truly radiate the life of the Spirit are those who are deeply aware of His inner presence. It is for each of us to pray regularly that our hearts be open to the presence of the Spirit, that we be receptive to His guidance and that we be moved to act in accordance with His leading.

O Master, who at the third hour bestowed Your Holy Spirit upon Your disciples: take Him not away from us but renew Him in us, we pray.

Troparion at the Third Hour

The Promise Fulfilled

SEVERAL HYMNS OF PENTECOST allude to promises made by Christ concerning the coming Holy Spirit. He would be "*another Paraclete*" (Comforter or Advocate), Jesus Himself being their first Paraclete. The Holy Spirit, being immaterial, would "*abide with you forever*" (John 14:15). He would be "everywhere present and filling all things," as we say in the hymn to the Holy Spirit which begins most of our services. The Lord Jesus, took on our humanity to be like us in all things except sin. His earthly life, like ours would be limited to a certain time and a certain place so that we could be glorified like Him forever in His glory

According to Christ the first work of the Holy Spirit would be to help Jesus' followers understand God's plan for us. "*He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you*" (John 14:26). "*He will testify of Me*" (John 15:26), guiding you "*into all truth*" (John 16:12).

More than Understanding

The Scriptures read at the Divine Liturgy on this feast show us another dimension of the Spirit's presence among us. He would impart spiritual power to the Church by His presence. Before His ascension Christ promised His followers, "*But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*" (Acts 1:8). This power would give the courage to speak the Good News of Christ to men who, before the Spirit's coming, had been hiding in an upper room for fear of the Jewish authorities. The Spirit's presence brought clarity to their message as well as the boldness to transmit it to their disbelieving countrymen.

The Acts of the Apostles gives several instances of how the Holy Spirit's power worked among the apostles. It lists:

The Gift of Tongues (Acts 2:4-11) – The ability to proclaim the Gospel and to be understood in a number of languages otherwise unknown to the speaker.

The Gift of Teaching (Acts 2:14-36) – The ability to express the mystery of the Gospel with clarity despite their humble background and lack of education.

The Gift of Healing (Acts 3:1-10) – The ability to heal the physical illness of people and even, as in the case of Tabitha, to raise the dead.

The Gift of Discernment (Acts 4:36- 5:11) – The ability to distinguish between spiritual truth and delusion, as when Peter detected the deceitful hearts of Ananias and Sapphira.

The Gift of Passing on the Spirit (Acts 8:14-17) – The ability to confer the Gift of the Holy Spirit through the laying-on of hands.

The Gift of Exorcism (Acts 16:16-18) – The ability to drive out evil spirits.

All these gifts have been manifested throughout the life of the Church over the centuries with the exception of the first of these gifts, the multiplicity of tongues. According to St Augustine and St John Chrysostom, the purpose of the gift of tongues was to affirm “that the Gospel of God was to be proclaimed over the entire earth in all languages” (St Augustine, Homily on 1 John 6:10). That universal proclamation began almost immediately, fulfilling the purpose of the gift of tongues which ceased.

Other gifts were bestowed upon the growing Church, as described in the epistles of St. Paul. Some of them are celebrated in a hymn repeated frequently during this feast:

“The Holy Spirit provides every gift: He inspires prophecy, perfects the priesthood, grants wisdom to the illiterate, makes simple fishermen become wise theologians, and establishes perfect order in the organization of the Church. Wherefore, O Comforter, equal in nature and majesty with the Father and the Son, glory to You!”

Releasing the Spirit’s Power

The fruit of these gifts have been with us for centuries. The result is often that we take them for granted and fail to see the power in them. The Lord does not try to scare us into faith by brandishing these gifts in our faces. Rather He waits for us to seek a relationship with Him in the Holy Spirit. Then the power in these gifts will be revealed.

In 1968 the late Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, Ignatius IV, addressed these words to a meeting of the World Council of Churches. Quoted time and again since then, they testify to the Spirit’s power in these gifts, released when we seek to know Him, the Giver of them all.

“Without the Holy Spirit:
God is far away,
Christ stays in the past,

the Gospel is a dead letter,
the Church is simply an organization,
authority – a matter of domination,
mission – a matter of propaganda,
the liturgy – no more than an evocation, Christian living – a slave morality.

“But in the Holy Spirit:

The cosmos is resurrected and groans with the birth-pangs of the kingdom,
The risen Christ is there,
The Gospel is the source of life,
The Church shows forth the life of the Trinity,
Authority is a liberating service,
Mission is a Pentecost,
The liturgy is both memorial and anticipation,
Human action is deified.”

The River of Living Water

It is with an understanding like this that Christ describes the Holy Spirit in terms of living or flowing water:” “*If anyone thirsts let him come to me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’ But this He spoke concerning the Spirit whom those believing in Him would receive, for the Holy Spirit was not yet given because Jesus was not yet glorified”* (John 7:37-39).

This living water – the Holy Spirit – is not meant simply to remain in the heart of the believer but to flow out to others. He quenches the thirst of the believer but also goes forth to nourish others. Our celebration of this feast, then, is a reminder that we are conduits, vessels for the Holy Spirit. With-out the Holy Spirit we are empty vessels – with the Holy Spirit we water the world.

Behold, we celebrate today the Feast of Pentecost, the descent of the Holy Spirit, the fulfillment of the Promise and the realization of Hope. How noble and awesome is this great mystery!

Wherefore, O Lord and Creator of All, we cry out, “Glory to You!”

(Sticheron at “Lord I Cry” tone 1)

On this feast of fulfillment, O faithful, let us joyfully celebrate Pentecost, which is the end of the feast and the fulfillment of the promise of Christ. For today the Fire of the Paraclete comes down to earth in the form of tongues, enlightening the Apostles and making them wise in the things of heaven. Behold the Light of the Paraclete, making the world radiant!

(Kathisma Hymn, tone 4)

The Power coming down upon us today is the Holy Spirit, the Goodness and Wisdom of God. The Spirit which proceeds from the Father through the Son is revealed to us, the faithful: He communicates holiness to those whom He inhabits.

(Troparion from the Canon, Ode 5)

The Other Paraclete

AS THE TIME FOR THE LORD'S PASSION neared, Jesus tried to prepare His followers for what was to happen. He warned them about His impending arrest, their flight, and about His ultimate death. He also made a promise: *“And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Paraclete, that He may abide with you forever — the Spirit of truth...”* (Jn 14:16).

The word *Paraclete* comes from the world of civil law. In the Roman system, a Paraclete was an advocate, a counselor who advised and encouraged people in the courts. It was the Paraclete who would provide the first Christians with their defense when they were brought before a worldly judge.

Jesus identified this Paraclete as the Holy Spirit, advising His disciples, *“Now when they bring you to the synagogues and magistrates and authorities, do not worry about how or what you should answer, or what you should say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say”* (Lk 12:11, 12). The Holy Spirit would be their advocate when any authority challenged their preaching.

After His resurrection, the Lord Jesus repeated His promise, this time with an additional dimension. Prior to His Ascension He told His followers: *“Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high”* (Lk 24:49) *“...for John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now”* (Acts 1:5). The Paraclete, the promised Holy Spirit, would come, bestowing heavenly power on those who received Him.

The Promise is Kept

This bestowal of the Holy Spirit would come a few days later, on the day of Pentecost. This term, from the Greek word for fifty, referred to the Jewish feast of Shavuot or “Weeks,” when the first-fruits of the grain harvest in Israel were to be offered in the temple. Shavuot was observed fifty days after Passover as one of Judaism's pilgrimage feasts, when men were supposed to go to Jerusalem to make their offerings.

What took place during that feast is described in the Acts of the Apostles: *“When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.*

“And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:1-4).

Peter, the senior apostle, interpreted what had happened as the outpouring of the Spirit prophesied in Joel 2:28-32 for the start of the messianic age (the “last days”). He proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah and called on his hearers, attracted by the commotion, to repent and be baptized *“in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit... Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about*

three thousand souls were added to them. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers (Acts 2:38, 41, 42). This outpouring of the Spirit thus marked the beginning of a new community built around the apostolic faith, common prayer and the "breaking of bread" (communal meal/Eucharist).

The Spirit as a Sign of Authenticity

For most of human history communication was by writing, delivered by a messenger. You knew the message was authentic because it was sealed. The message was sealed with hot wax into which the writer's seal or signet was then stamped. The seal was the stamp guaranteeing the authenticity of the message.

Other seals were identifying marks branded on animals or even slaves. All Jewish men were sealed by circumcision, to demonstrate that they were members of God's people, Israel.

When the Lord Jesus was baptized in the Jordan, the Father's voice bore witness to Him, calling Him beloved Son. "And the Spirit, in the form of a dove, confirmed the truth of this word" (troparion). The Spirit was the seal on Christ, demonstrating that He was the Son of God.

The same Spirit, who descended on the disciples of Christ, confirmed the truth of their words, the Gospel message. His presence, at work among them and in the Church of every age, is the seal demonstrating the divine origin and truth of the Christian faith.

St Paul affirms that every Christian has been sealed with the Holy Spirit. Writing to the Corinthians, he teaches that the Holy Spirit is within us: "*Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?*" (1 Cor 3:16). He expresses this mystery of the indwelling Spirit as an anointing and a sealing: "*Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee*" (2 Cor 1:21, 22). We are, in fact, called Christians (anointed ones) because this sealing has confirmed our union to the Anointed One, the Lord Jesus.

In our Church this anointing is given to each newly baptized Christian in the mystery of Chrismation. As the priest anoints the newly-baptized, he announces "The seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit." The visible seal of the Chrism signifies the inner sealing of our hearts.

The Spirit marks each Christian as being in Christ, the eternal High Priest and, therefore members of the royal priesthood (see 1 Pt 2:9). Thus, when we join in the worship of the Church, we are acting in union with Christ the High Priest. We also are gifted by the Spirit in particular ways to help build up the Church. Thus every Christian has an individual gift, meant to be used for the good of all.

At Pentecost the Spirit energized the apostles in a remarkable way. The same Spirit works that way today as well, but only in some, generally those whom we call saints. Although not every saint is a wonderworker, each of them reflects the presence of God in some discernible way. Each saint is the "face of the Holy Spirit," making visible the presence of the Spirit within.

The Spirit as a Promise of Eternity

In his Epistle to the Ephesians, St Paul teaches that we are confirmed in the assurance of our union with Christ through our faith in Him and by being sealed with the Holy Spirit. *“In Him [Christ] we have redemption through His blood... In Him also we have obtained an inheritance... In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth...in Him also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory”* (Eph 1:9-14).

St Paul calls the Spirit “the Spirit of promise,” who assures us of our inheritance to come. If we have been given the Spirit to dwell within us now, how great a gift will be ours in the age to come.

St Cyril of Jerusalem on Chrismation

“With this unction, your forehead and sense organs are mystically anointed in such a way that, while your body is refreshed with the visible oil, your soul is enlivened by the holy life-giving Spirit.” (*Catechesis* 21, 3)

We Have Received the Heavenly Spirit

“ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK we pray standing, but everyone does not know why.” This issue, raised in the fourth century by St. Basil the Great, may be just as timely today. In most Eastern Churches standing is the most appropriate posture for prayer. Sitting is always in order for those who are physically weaker (due to sickness, age, pregnancy, etc). Kneeling, however, is not considered proper on Sundays or during the Paschal season, which ends today.

St Basil gives two reasons why we should pray standing on Sunday: the first is that it is the day on which Christ rose from the dead. St Peter of Alexandria (+311) notes that this practice was already a tradition in his day: “...on Sunday we celebrate a day of joy because of Him who was raised from the dead on that day, during which time we no longer kneel according to the tradition we have received.” St Hilary of Poitiers, a Western Father, wrote in his commentary on the psalms that this tradition was of Apostolic origin.

Is Kneeling Ever Allowed?

The first Christians followed the practice they inherited from Judaism: standing for prayer. The Lord’s own words confirm this: *“And when you shall stand to pray, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him”* (Mk 11:25). One of the earliest images of Christian art shows the Holy Virgin standing at prayer, with her arms outstretched, a practice many follow today.

But there were occasions when the Jews knelt for prayer. Repentance was such an occasion – to this day Jews kneel in the synagogue on Yom Kippur. They also knelt to emphasize the particular intensity of their prayer. Thus the Lord Himself, during His agony in the garden after the Last

Supper, “*knelt down and prayed*” (Lk 22:41). Kneeling expressed the powerful emotion in His prayer at that moment.

The Eastern Churches kneel for the same reasons. Kneeling is especially appropriate as a sign of repentance, such as during the Fasts or in the mystery of Confession. Whenever we are praying intensely, as for a special intention, kneeling is also appropriate, except... on Sundays. Proclaiming our faith in Christ’s holy resurrection trumps our personal concerns.

St Basil gives another reason why we pray standing on Sundays: it is the “eighth day,” the foreshadowing of eternity and our own resurrection. He writes, “...we not only remind ourselves by standing during prayer of the grace that was given to us on this Day of Resurrection, but also that the first day of the week seems to be somehow the image of the eternity to come.

“During all the fifty days after Pascha we are reminded of the anticipated resurrection ...during this time the customs and orientation of the Church have taught us to prefer the standing position in prayer, thus transposing our minds from the present to the future by this outward physical reminder” (cited in a 6th-7th century canonical collection).

The First Council of Nicaea extended this practice to the whole Church newly embraced by the Roman Emperor. The twentieth canon of that council states: “Seeing that certain people kneel on Sunday and during the Pentecost season, so that there might be the same practice in all the communities, it has been decided by the holy council that prayers should be addressed to the Lord standing.”

The “Kneeling Service” of Pentecost

In the evening of Pentecost, after the last and greatest day of the Paschal season has concluded, we kneel again for the first time since the end of the Great Fast. Three prayers of supplication, said kneeling, are added to the rite of vespers when the deacon invites us, “Again and again on bended knees let us pray to the Lord.”

The first prayer, addressed to the Father, is a prayer of repentance. The priest prays “...on bended knees and with heads bowed because of our sins and the unawareness of the people... recall our souls from the captivity of sin and accept us who kneel down before you.”

The second prayer, addressed to Christ, adds a note of intense supplication: “Guide my life along Your ways... Show me the road that I must walk... Let me be constantly aware of Your presence and of Your future coming in glory... and strengthen me in the hope of the treasures to come.”

The final “kneeling prayer” is a prayer of supplication for our departed brethren “imprisoned in Hades.” We ask that the all-merciful Lord “establish then in peace and joy in the mansions of the just.” With the end of the Paschal celebrations, repentance and intercession – and, therefore, kneeling – are once again our daily tasks.

There is another aspect to our ordinary Christian life which is emphasized at this service: the presence of the Holy Spirit in us, His temple. Once again we hear the prayer “O heavenly King,” which begins most of our services and formal prayers. We invoke the Holy Spirit, “present in all places and filling all things,” that He may enliven by His divine power our worship and all that

we do in Christ's name. The Church, which received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, continually prays that the power of this Spirit remain active in our midst. "Master, who at the third hour sent Your Holy Spirit upon the disciples, take Him not away from us but renew Him in us, we pray."

Pentecost and the Holy Trinity

The third kneeling prayer also introduces a theme which became particularly prominent in the Slavic Churches: that Pentecost is the feast of the Holy Trinity. The priest prays: "On this last day of the feast of Pentecost, You have revealed to us the mystery of the Holy Trinity, one in essence, co-eternal, undivided and yet distinct."

We know that the Church celebrates the Theophany at Christ's baptism as a manifestation of the Trinity in the world. As we pray in the troparion, "The Father's voice bore witness to You, calling You His beloved Son and the Spirit, in the form of a dove, confirmed the truth of this word." The Church also sees the Trinity revealed at Pentecost. The Spirit, who proceeds from the Father, is sent by the Son to rest on the Apostles and, through them, on all who would believe. The famous Trinity icon by St Andrei Rublev has been interpreted as portraying this moment in the history of our salvation. The Son, pointing to the Spirit (on the viewer's right) looks to the Father for His blessing. The Spirit bows His head in acceptance of His mission of revealing the Son to the world.

Today the Apostles of Christ have been strengthened by Power from on high. The Comforter has renewed them. He has placed in them a new knowledge of the Mysteries which they proclaim to us, teaching us to worship the compassionate God, Three Persons in one simple and eternal nature. Illumined by their preaching, let us adore the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, praying that we may be saved.

Come, all you nations of the world: let us adore God in three holy Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit – Three in One. From all eternity, the Father begets the Son, equal to Him in majesty and eternity, equal also to the Holy Spirit glorified with the Son in the Father – Three Persons, and yet a single Power and Essence and Godhead. In deep adoration, let us cry out to God: "Holy is God who made all things through the Son with the co-operation of the Holy Spirit! Holy the Mighty One through whom the Father was revealed to us and the Holy Spirit came to this world! Holy the Immortal One, the Spirit, the Counselor, who proceeds from the Father and reposes in the Son! All-Holy Trinity, glory to You!"

Stichera at the Kneeling Service

Sunday of All Saints

Hebrews 11:33-12:2a

Matthew 10:32-33, 37-38; 19:27-30

The Face of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 10:32-38; 19:27-30)

WHAT DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT LOOK LIKE? We know from the Scriptures that the Father cannot be seen but has manifested Himself to us in His Son. "No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him" (Jn 1:18). And we know that the Son, incarnate, became visible in His humanity. He looks like one of us. This is why we are able to have icons of Him. As St. John of Damascus wrote in *On the Divine Images*, "It is

impossible to make an image of the immeasurable, uncircumscribed, invisible God. ... But it is obvious that when you contemplate God becoming man, then you may depict Him clothed in human form. When the Invisible One becomes visible to flesh, then you may draw His likeness” (1: 7,8). But what about the Holy Spirit? Has He become visible to flesh? Can we see the face of the Holy Spirit?

In a sense we can. The “face” of the Holy Spirit is the face of the saints. The very existence of the saints testifies to the presence of holiness in the Church, for no one can become a saint except by the Holy Spirit. The “face” of the Holy Spirit is not in the monuments which have been erected by Christians over the centuries, impressive as they are. Rather it is in those who have lived the way they did because the Spirit of God dwelt within them.

The priest of the French village of Ars, St Jean Vianney knew the Holy Spirit firsthand, we might say. He wrote, “If the damned were asked: ‘Why are you in Hell?’ they would answer: ‘For having resisted the Holy Spirit.’ And if the saints were asked, ‘Why are you in Heaven?’ they would answer: ‘For having listened to the Holy Spirit.’ When good thoughts come into our minds, it is the Holy Spirit who is visiting us. The Holy Spirit is a power. The Holy Spirit supported St. Simeon on his column; He sustained the martyrs. Without the Holy Spirit, the martyrs would have fallen like the leaves from the trees.” (*Catechesis on the Holy Spirit*).

This intimate connection between the Holy Spirit and the saints is proclaimed in the Byzantine Churches which celebrate the Feast of All Saints in connection with the Feast of Pentecost. On Pentecost we say that the Holy Spirit has come upon the Church. On the next Sunday, we demonstrate the truth of this claim by pointing to the saints.

The Spirit is certainly present in any saint but it is in the totality of all saints that we find the “face” of the Holy Spirit. The gifts of the Spirit are many and varied; no one person can encompass them all. The Church describes the particular gifts of the saints by designating categories for us to understand and revere them. There are prophets and apostles, martyrs, hierarchs, ascetics, unmercenaries, fools for Christ and more. There are saints whose names we know and those we do not. There are saints whose lives are documented and others whose name is their only memorial. All together they reveal to us the “face” of the Holy Spirit. It is noteworthy that what the West calls “the communion of saints” is referred to in the East as “the communion of the Holy Spirit.”

In fully appointed Byzantine churches we find ourselves surrounded by icons of the saints. Frescoes of the saints cover the walls, panel icons in shrines or on icon stands are displayed for veneration. These are not distractions from the altar or pulpit but a wordless demonstration that we are one body with the saints in Christ by the operation of the Holy Spirit. The Church is not simply the assembly of those physically present; it is the gathering of all who are in Christ.

The Gospel on the Saints

The Gospel passage read at the Divine Liturgy on the Sunday of All Saints is not a continuous episode. Rather it is an assemblage of three teachings concerning what it means to aspire to holiness. The first step is that we are called to **bear witness** to Christ in the world. “*Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven*” (Mt 10:32). Our faith is not meant to be practiced privately, for our personal consolation. Rather we are to be witnesses to Him before others.

In today’s world “bearing witness” often means “pointing the finger at” some atrocity or injustice. We are called to “point the finger at” Christ, much as John the Baptist did: “*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (Jn 1:29). The simplest way to point the figure at the person of Christ is to wear a cross or display an icon in public. Often Evangelical Protestants who do not display icons will erect a plaque in their home or on their door with this verse “*But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD*” (Joshua 24:15).

Recently the British government has prohibited Christians from wearing a cross in the workplace. The policy has been challenged in court by two women who were disciplined for wearing a cross at work. A Foreign Office statement defending the policy said, “In neither case is there any suggestion that the wearing of a visible cross or crucifix was a generally recognised form of practising the Christian faith, still less one that is regarded (including by the applicants themselves) as a requirement of the faith.” In response the former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey commented, “The irony is that when governments and courts dictate to Christians that the cross is a matter of insignificance, it becomes an even more important symbol and expression of our faith.”

Witnessing to Christ – even in the Church – may make one unpopular and oppressed. “And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me” Mt 10:30). The witness to Christ is thus called to not only wear a cross but to **bear the cross** as Christ did.

The saint is one who has heard the Gospel call to **put God first** in their lives. We may be proud that we go to church, pray, or fast. So did the Pharisee in Christ’s parable. The saint, however, is a person who is ready to put everything else aside to focus on God and His love for us. “*He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me*” (Mt 10:37).

The spiritual son of St Simeon the New Theologian, Nicetas Stethatos, says that there are three kinds of people in the world: “the carnal man, who wants to live for his own pleasure, even if it harms others; the natural man, who wants to please both himself and others, and the spiritual man who wants to please only God, even if it harms himself” (cited in Tito Colliander’s *Way of the Ascetics*, 5). The ascetic in a monastic setting or in the world strives to be that spiritual man: to love nothing or no one more than God.

The final section in this Gospel pastiche is Christ’s promise that those who have left home and family for His sake will receive a hundred times more in this life and eternal life in the age to

come (see Mt 19:29). This promise is often interpreted to mean that those who go off to serve Christ will prosper materially, it may be the opposite: that those who place Christ first in their lives will find that He is worth a hundred times more than what the world has to offer and that they will find contentment in what they do have, a place in the kingdom of God.

Glorified in His Saints

CATHOLICS AND ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS are sometimes criticized by people because of the reverence we show to the saints. Critics may feel that we ignore the Lord, preferring to pay homage to favorite saints. Seeing how some believers act, we may understand why some Protestants and others may feel as they do. Some devotees of the saints lavish more praise on the saints than on Christ.

While such behavior may be misguided, an appropriate devotion to the Theotokos and other saints is not. For us, the saints are the “proof” that the Holy Spirit truly came upon the Church at Pentecost. The holiness of their lives points to the grace of the Holy Spirit powerfully working in our world. The saints reveal to us the “face” of the Holy Spirit manifest in the Church. For this reason Byzantine Churches celebrate the Feast of All Saints on the first Sunday after Pentecost.

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, we read of a number of Old Testament figures renowned in Israelite history for their righteous lives or powerful deeds. The selection read at today’s Divine Liturgy does not mention any of the individuals named in the Epistle (some of whom are not the most praiseworthy by modern standards). Rather it begins with the point made in conclusion: that some were powerful and defeated their enemies while others were tortured and put to death. Still others lived righteous lives in hiding and “*wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and holes in the ground*” (Heb 11:38). In either case nothing they could do could bring them eternal life. That would only become possible through Jesus Christ and His Church. As the biblical author explains, “*These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would then be made perfect*” (Heb 11:39-40). We can conclude that the gift of the Holy Spirit dwelling in the believer far exceeds the glory won by the rulers, soldiers and prophets of Israelite history. We can also strive to draw close to the One who is everywhere present, filling all things.

New Testament Saints

There is no one more filled with the Holy Spirit than she who is “full of grace,” the most holy Theotokos. Like her the holy prophet, forerunner and baptist John has a unique place among Christians as, in Christ’s own words, “*among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist*” (Mt 11:11). In addition to them, there are countless figures from every age in Christian history honored as saints by the various local Churches. In the Byzantine Churches, it has become customary to consider the saints as belonging to one or another of the following categories:

Prophets – God’s Old Testament spokesmen such as Elias or Isaiah who called the Jews back to the true God and His ways whenever they strayed.

Apostles – The Twelve closest followers of Christ as well as the Seventy who were their companions: eye-witnesses to the presence of Christ on earth.

Evangelists – The Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Hierarchs – Sainly bishops like Nicholas of Myra, Spyridon of Cyprus, or Basil the Great.

Righteous Ascetics – Giants in the monastic life, both men and women, including elders (guides in the spiritual life) and **solitaries**, living in forest or wilderness.

Martyrs – Those who gave their lives witnessing to Christ, from the Great Martyrs of the Roman persecutions, such as St. Barbara and St. George, to the new martyrs who died under modern dictators or religious extremists.

Hieromartyrs – Hierarchs and priests who sacrificed their own lives as well as offered the Divine Sacrifice of Christ.

Confessors - Those who survived torture or imprisonment for the Lord but escaped with their lives, like St. Maximos the Confessor.

Unmercenaries –Those who gave of their talents freely to help the poor and the sick, such as Ss. Cosmas and Damian.

Fools for Christ – Those who pretended to be mentally incompetent so that their spiritual gifts would not be noticed and praised, like St. Xenia of Petersburg.

Passionbearers – Those who accepted suffering, even death, rather than to repay violence with more violence.

On this First Sunday after Pentecost, the Byzantine Churches celebrate all the saints, whether their names are known or not. On the following Sundays various local Churches celebrate their own regional saints (All Saints of Russia, or North America, or the British Isles, etc.). Wherever the Holy Spirit has been at work in the Church, saints have been raised up to the glory of God.

Who “Makes” Saints?

Ultimately, of course, it is God who makes people holy by giving them the gift of the Holy Spirit. When people make this gift their own and live an heroic life in Christ, others recognize it. When a local Church recognizes that one of its sons or daughters has lived an exceptional Christian life and gives evidence that they are now in glory, it publicly proclaims him or her to be a saint.

In the Eastern Orthodox Churches it is the local Church (such as the Patriarchate of Constantinople or the Church of Greece) which declares saints. In the East this process is called **glorification**. In the West recognition of saints is called **canonization** (inclusion on the canon or list of saints) and is proclaimed by the Pope of Rome.

What Do We Do with the Saints?

God has placed certain saints in our lives and we would be remiss if we ignored them. We have our patron saints (those whose names we bear) and those whose icons may be found in our home. Most of our parishes have patron saints as well. We do well to venerate their icons regularly, asking their intercession with prayers like these:

Pray for me, St. N., for with fervor I come to you, speedy helper and intercessor for my soul.

Holy Father/Mother N., pray to God for us.

Observe their feast days according to the Church calendar. If there is no Liturgy scheduled, ask for one to be served in their honor. Why not?

From the *Synaxarion*

Our most godlike Fathers decreed that we should celebrate the present feast after the descent of the All-holy Spirit as showing in a certain way that the coming of the All-holy Spirit acted through the Apostles like this: sanctifying and making wise human beings taken from our mortal clay and, to replace that fallen angelic order [the demons], restoring them through Christ and sending them to God – some by the witness of blood-martyrdom, others by their virtuous conduct and way of life. Thus things beyond nature are achieved.... This is one reason why we celebrate the feast of All Saints.

A second reason is because, though so many people have been well-pleasing to God, they were unknown to humanity by name or...because it was not easy to honor them all properly because of their vast numbers. And therefore, so that we may attract the help of them all... the Godly Fathers ordained that we should celebrate this feast -all those in whom the Holy Spirit has dwelt He has made holy.

A third reason is this. It was necessary for the saints who are celebrated individually day by day to be gathered together on one day in order to demonstrate that, as they struggled for the one Christ and all ran the race in the same stadium of virtue, so they were all fittingly crowned as servants of one God and sustain the Church, having filled the world on high. They stir us also to accomplish the same struggle in its different and many forms, to the degree of power that each of us has, and to press onward with all eagerness.