

# *The Faithful Servant*

Summer, 2023

*A newsletter of St. Catherine Orthodox Church, Hagerstown, Maryland*

## FASTS AND FEASTS

The fasting seasons of the Orthodox Church are offered to us to prepare spiritually for something momentous in the life of the Church, usually for a great feast. In a way, we fast so that we can more appropriately feast. We prepare ourselves for the feast to come by examining our lives, repenting of and confessing our sins and shortcomings, in order to train and reorient our lives to more greatly correspond to our life in Christ.

For two of the fasting seasons, this is rather apparent. In Great Lent, we are preparing to experience the Mystery of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Our Lord, Jesus Christ; the Nativity Fast prepares us for the Coming of Christ in the flesh at His birth and the beginning of His mission to the world at His Epiphany. But the purpose of the two summertime Fasts--the Apostles' Fast from All Saints Sunday until the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul June 29, and the Dormition Fast August 1-14--may seem rather more obscure.

Perhaps the rationale behind the Dormition Fast is the more apparent of the two. As Mary is reunited with her Son at her passing from this life, we can be assured of the same if we persevere in imitating her faithfulness, righteousness and purity; we look forward to our own eternal union with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit that we affirm is the case with the Mother of Our Lord. As our "great example" (rather than being the "great exception" to our state, as others may have it), she enjoys the fruits of the saving work of her Son, His Resurrection and Ascension into the heavenly Kingdom. So our fasting at this time is our preparation for "our share" in the works of Christ--we look forward to the life of the age to come and prepare ourselves for our part in it as we celebrate Mary's--and that of all the blessed departed--entrance into eternal life. More on that below.

But the reasoning for the Apostles' Fast may seem considerably more vague. The other three fasting seasons precede one of the Great Feasts. With all due respect, the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul is on a lower level, though we are still called to undergo a fasting season that can last for a rather extended period. Indeed, Peter and Paul are great saints, the foremost of the Apostles, as they are called in the hymns of the feast. But to such a degree that we set aside all the celebrations of Our Lord's work and the coming of the Spirit to enter again ("so soon?" as it may appear to us!) into another fast? The feast of two saints--however great and honored themselves--is that cause enough to set

aside the celebrations of the saving acts of Christ that we've experienced in the last couple months?

Let's consider those two saints, as well as their 11 compatriots who are celebrated the next day, the feast of the 12 Holy Apostles on June 30. And let's also consider how this time of the year has progressed. We have witnessed the Resurrection of Christ and His Ascension so that He may send the Holy Spirit upon His followers. That happens, as we know, at Pentecost, the founding of the Church. The following Sunday, then, is the commemoration of All Saints, known and unknown; and remember, "saints" are all God's faithful people, which is to include the "Church militant" on earth--you and me. All Saints Sunday in a very real way, should be **our** feast, as all are called to sanctity. And all are called to be apostles--those who are sent (Greek: "apostolein"--to send). Sent where and for what? Into the world, into our day-to-day lives, to proclaim Christ by whatever spiritual gifts we have, even simply in carrying on our lives faithful to God and His will for us. And so God's faithful people are called to prepare themselves for that spiritual task by prayer and fasting. The Church, then, gives us a season for that preparation leading to our remembrance of those who have been "sent"--Apostles, beginning with the foremost among them, Peter and Paul. We are preparing to be "sent out" to lead the Life of Christ in this age, as we prepare ourselves to join Our Lord and His Blessed Mother, then, in the Life of the age to come.

## ON THE DORMITION OF THE MOTHER OF GOD

"...the feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos is the celebration of the fact that all...are 'highly exalted' in the blessedness of the victorious Christ, and that this high exaltation has already been accomplished in Mary the Theotokos. The feast of the Dormition is the sign, the guarantee, and the celebration that Mary's fate is the fate of all those of 'low estate' whose souls magnify the Lord, whose spirits rejoice in God the Savior, [see Luke 3] whose lives are totally dedicated to hearing and keeping the Word of God which is given to [us] in Mary's child, the Savior and Redeemer of the world.

"Finally it must be stressed that in all the feasts of the Virgin Mother of God in the Church, the Orthodox Christians celebrate facts of their own lives in Christ and the Holy Spirit. What happens to Mary happens to all who imitate her holy life of humility, obedience and love. With her all people will be 'blessed' to be 'more honorable than the cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the seraphim' if they follow her example. All will become temples of the living God. All will have Christ born in them by the Holy Spirit. All will share in the eternal life of His Kingdom who live the life that Mary lived.

"In this sense everything that is praised and glorified in Mary is a sign of what is offered to all persons in the life of the Church..."

(from **The Orthodox Faith, v. 2, Worship** by Fr. Thomas Hopko)

## **BROTHERS AND SISTERS**

Around Pascha, I noticed there was discussion among some of the men in the parish about forming some kind of group, a "fellowship," or "brotherhood." Soon afterward, for the Mother's Day holiday, one of these particular individuals had taken it upon himself to supply a brunch in honor of the mothers in the parish. Those same guys who had been discussing the possibility of organizing together ended up pitching in to supply and serve the brunch. Voila! A Brotherhood! Soon, talk of such a thing intensified and word spread. And meanwhile, I had also noticed that one gentleman in the parish had pretty much taken it upon himself to set up the "Holy Horse Trough" for our recent adult baptisms. I approached him and the rest of the men involved and suggested that if they wanted to form such a group I had an idea for a task for them--helping their brother with the arranging of the baptistry for future adult baptisms--and at the time another one was quickly approaching. They agreed, and so it has subsequently occurred. A date for an initial meeting was set, at which ideas were batted around including a monastery pilgrimage. A heavenly patron was chosen; as one of their first projects had been to arrange for a baptism so recently, John the Baptist was picked. Among the organizations of St. Catherine Orthodox Church, we now have the St. John the Baptist...what?...Men's Group? Fellowship? Brotherhood? I don't think that part was formally determined. But may their patron, the Holy Prophet, Forerunner and Baptist John, assist the men in the parish who have come together to assist the ministry of St. Catherine's through the program suggested at that first meeting: "Prayer, Service, Fellowship."

Meanwhile, after that baptism had taken place, the newly-illuminated Anthony (Tony) Lemons came to me asking to extend thanks to the Sisterhood who had supplied the reception after his Baptism and the Liturgy. It was a pleasant surprise to hear of this. Our Sts. Martha and Mary Sisterhood had been in hiatus since COVID. Voila again! It was marvelous news to me that they had sprung back into action! I do not know who called them together to supply the reception for Tony, but I am eagerly looking forward to reporting to all of you about the meetings and subsequent activities of our Sts. Martha and Mary Sisterhood, which at one time I had characterized as "the engine that's driving the parish!"

Both the Sts. Martha and Mary Sisterhood and the St. John the Baptist Brotherhood meet regularly on the third Sundays of the month. All adult men and women over 18 are welcome and encouraged to take part.

## A PSALM FOR THE FASTS

"The psalms calling for victory over the enemies in battle refer to the only real Enemy, the devil, and all of his wicked works which Christ has come to destroy..." (Hopko, **The Orthodox Faith, v. 3, Bible and Church History**)

True enough, certainly, and that goes for all of the "difficult" psalms, the ones at seminary we would jokingly refer to as the "O Lord, break their teeth..." psalms (e.g. "Let death come upon them. Let them go down to Sheol alive. Let them go away in terror into their graves..." --Ps. 54/55). We certainly should read them in light of our own spiritual struggles against the temptations and the Tempter that lie in wait, as it were, waiting for the opportunity to bring our souls to ruin; we pray for God's help to overcome those adversaries. We recognize that, more often than not, it is a violent struggle to prevail against temptations--"Spiritual Warfare," as in the title of the classic work of St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain.

We might though be put off by the violence with which this struggle is sometimes portrayed in the Psalms. Can we, or even, should we relate to the wishes for the destruction of the forces--and individuals, as it seems--that are set against God and that oppress us? Should we not, rather, pray for their conversion even as we are praying for our deliverance? Are we truly to wish for the destruction of our adversaries? And, frankly, if we know something of the history of Israel and especially of David the King--his struggles against those who sought his life (e.g., the jealousy of Saul and the revolt of David's favorite son, Absalom)--perhaps applying the language of violent struggle to the circumstances of our own spiritual life seems less applicable--poetic perhaps, but perhaps overly vindictive.

We'd be missing some spiritual truth if we explained the "difficult" psalms away like that. The struggle, as witnessed by so many of our saints, is real. Some, such as St. Anthony the Great, even speak of physically wrestling with demons. Our own struggles with temptation to sin can have a devastating effect on us; it can be "wrestling" that can even have some physical, as well as emotional and mental, effect on us. I'm sure many of us have experienced this. No one said following Christ and doing God's will is easy.

One way I have come to deal with such psalms is to consider that they are the cries of a desparate human being. The perspective of David is that of a man in mortal danger, and that unjustly. It is a human perspective. What is his response? Do away with those who oppress me so, Lord, and the sooner and more completely, the better! And he places his hope and trust in God to deliver him, expressing it out of his desperation. And I, too, am a human being, often in desparate moral and spiritual straits, sometimes even physical peril. Best to cry out to God in hope and trust for relief from whatever

danger I may be in! To call for such immediate deliverance is certainly my first response.

Then there are also those psalms in which the Psalmist concentrates more on that hope and trust rather than direct divine retribution. I offer one below that has become a favorite of mine. I think it describes the nature of temptation and its effects on us accurately, and from the first verse, seeks help in the right place: "...be subjected to God...He only is my God...Savior...helper." Adversaries do indeed, "set upon a man to shatter him." Temptations "plot to thrust down...honor...take pleasure in falsehood...curse..." as did those who sought to harm David. But he repeats his appeal to God, for "patience" to face such onslaughts; he again is "subjected" to God, the "Savior" and "helper." Temptations remain, this time to seek other ways out of trouble: other men are "vain...illusion...false...vanity..." and would tempt us to seek help in wealth, even that gotten by "extortion" and "robbery." True deliverance comes from our hope--a key word throughout the Psalter--in the Lord. Our best response to the challenges and temptations we face is to turn to God for deliverance; in the words of another psalm, 120/121\*: "I lift up my eyes to the hills from whence my help will come. My help comes from the Lord Who made heaven and earth."

### **Psalm 61/62**

Shall not my soul be subjected to God,  
for from Him comes my salvation.  
He only is my God and my Savior, my helper;  
I shall not greatly be moved.  
How long will you set upon a man to shatter him, all of you,  
like a leaning wall, a tottering fence?  
They plotted to thrust down my honor;  
they take pleasure in falsehood.  
They blessed with their mouths,  
but in their mouths they cursed.  
Nevertheless, O my soul, be subjected to God,  
for from Him comes patience.  
He only is my God and my savior, my helper;  
I shall not be moved.  
On God rests my salvation and my glory,  
the God of my help; my hope is in God.  
Hope in Him, O assembly of the people;  
pour out your heart before Him, for God is our helper.  
But the sons of men are vain, the sons of men are a elusion;  
in the balances they are false; they are all alike vanity.  
Put no confidence in extortion; set no vain hopes on robbery;  
if wealth increases, set not your heart on it.

Once God has spoken;  
twice have I heard this:  
That power belongs to God,  
and that to You, O Lord, belongs mercy.  
For You requite everyone according to his works.

\* Translation is from **The Ancient Faith Psalter**, which will sound quite familiar to those used to the language of the Revised Standard Version, though with modern usage in pronoun and verb forms. The double numbering has the Septuagint Greek numbering first as is standard in many Orthodox sources; the more familiar numbering following, as would be found in Psalms 10-147, follows. Among other psalms in this vein would be 29/30, "I will extol You, O Lord, for You have drawn me up..." and 139/140, "Deliver me, O Lord, from evil men..."

## CLASS OF '23

Since our last issue we have welcomed into the Holy Orthodox Church Ellie (Elizabeth) McFarland, John Outen, Haddon (Theodore) Smith and Anthony Lemons, all adults, all by baptism. In our instruction classes there are a couple more to be received by baptism and a couple by chrismation, when the time comes. There has also been an infant baptism, Miranda Gilbert, daughter of Andrea (Changuris) Gilbert and granddaughter of Holly and Randy Changuris. We have not had this situation before in the history of this parish. We all should be feeling truly blessed to have this happening in our midst. I believe it witnesses to a great revival in the life of St. Catherine's in the post-COVID era. God keep the new members of His Body, the Church, and our expanding group of catechumens in His love and service all the days of their lives; and may He bless us by continuing to send more inquirers our way!

## NEWS AND NOTES

As September approaches, we prepare for several important events at St. Catherine's. Our major fund-raiser for the year, the Boonesboro Days community festival is September 9-10 at Shafer Park. We will again have a booth selling gyros, baklava and other goodies. Your church needs the efforts of all of our members and friends to make this successful. A sign-up list has already gone out a couple times--check it out, see what you can do and when you can do it, and sign on! That list will come out again from time to time and will follow this newsletter soon. Sign on and return it to Marlene Powell. There is also a copy of the sign-up sheet on the bulletin board as you enter the parish hall. The list includes our preparation day Friday, September 8, though work cannot start until **after** Divine Liturgy that day (figure 11:30), the great feast of the Nativity of the Theotokos. This takes the effort of the entire parish to be successful. It's

a lot of work, but it is also truly enjoyable--and for our many newcomers, a wonderful opportunity to get to know the parish and all your brothers and sisters here!

Instruction classes continue most Saturdays at 4:30 PM until the time to prepare for Vespers, about 6; 5:30 if there is a Panikhida scheduled. Materials for class are available freely to those seeking to learn about the Orthodox Church with a view to joining. The current group is currently about halfway through the program, but there has been enough interest from recent newcomers that we may have to begin a second section, perhaps to meet on alternating Saturdays. Keep watch on announcements at church, bulletins, emails, etc. for more news. Also, most of our sessions are live streamed on the parish Facebook page: [www.facebook.com/saintcatherineOCA](http://www.facebook.com/saintcatherineOCA) , as are most services.

Once we get through Boonesboro Days, our attention turns to the Church School program. We are thrilled that, with the newer families, we can again offer a class for secondary grades, middle and high school. Jessie Frushour teaches the preschoolers, Erin Mumma the elementary grades and Kate White will handle the secondary school level. The school year will begin with the blessing of the students and teachers at the end of Liturgy Sunday, September 17. We are looking forward to the revived and expanded Church School program this year, grateful to Jessie and Erin for their work last year under trying circumstances as we returned to normal post-COVID, and we welcome Kate back to handle the teens.

The focus of adult religious education is presently a book discussion group meeting the first Sunday of the month during coffee hour. We are discussing **Beginning To Pray** by Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom) of blessed memory, of the Russian Church in Great Britain. We started a discussion of this classic work last Lent during our dinners after the Wednesday Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts. It was a lively program, as far as it got, but we only delved into about 3 chapters. One session has already been held as of this writing (on the introductory interview) and it was lively and enthusiastic. Chapter 1 is up next for Sunday, September 3.

The time after Liturgy on Sundays has gotten quite busy. Meetings take up 3 out of the usual 4 Sundays: first Sunday, the book discussion group; second, parish council; third, Broherhood and Sisterhood meetings. The fourth Sunday we let go for a bit of a breather or rescheduling as may be necessary. There has also been some talk of reviving the 5th week's "Speaker Sunday" programs that we had for a while, where there would be a lunch and some sort of program--a speaker on religious or local topics, a film, etc. The next 5-Sunday month is October. Watch for it!

So you know, the usual time for Panikhidas (Parastasis, Pomen, Memorial Service) is 6 PM on Saturdays, just before Vespers. Contact Fr. Dennis if you desire one for your beloved departed. We have several scheduled in advance in August: we've already done one on the 5th for the departed of the Holovach/Riegler family, August 19 we will

do one for Eugene Aleshin and Gordana Ritchie, and August 26 for Benjamin Valora, son of Frances.

Monthly Divine Liturgy in Allegany County continues in Cumberland at Emmanuel Episcopal Church, 16 Washington St. We needed to move from St. Paul Lutheran after just a couple services once we found out we could not use incense there--a new sprinkler system had been installed since we last served there in 1997! So we are back to our original location from the 1980s and 90s, the side altar/ chapel at Emmanuel, a well-known landmark in the city, but our space is rather cramped and not well laid out for Orthodox worship. We look for another venue somewhere between Cumberland and Frostburg. A deacon attached to the Antiochian parish in Altoona, Anthony Payne, was one of the first to approach us about serving there. He has already put a bid in on a property for our use, but lost out. But he is also beginning a book discussion group on Metropolitan Kallistos Ware's **The Orthodox Way** mid-month. As at St. Catherine's, having newcomers arrive is the rule rather than the exception, thanks be to God.

We look forward to the next issue of **The Faithful Servant** for the Christmas season. Yes, I know I said that last year! With as much going on at present though, as you see above, there should be plenty to report upon, as well as material on the great feasts of that season--Christmas and Theophany. As always, by your prayers...