

Our Intercessors in Heaven

Bishop Alexander (Mileant)

Translated by N. and N. Semyanko / Irina Zerebko

The Orthodox reverence of Saints

During baptism, a person is given a name in honor of one of the saints, who from that moment becomes his heavenly patron. Each Orthodox Christian should know the “life” — the history — of his heavenly patron and turn to him in prayer for help and guidance. Our devout ancestors tried to commemorate the day of their saint’s memory — “the angel’s day” — by partaking of the Holy Communion and celebrating this day more festively than their birthday.

What is the meaning of the orthodox reverence of the holy servants of God? Do the saints in Heaven know of our needs and difficulties and are they interested in us? Do they hear our prayers to them and do they try to help us? Indeed should we turn to saints for help, or is it enough to pray only to the Lord God? Sectarians, who have lost the apostolic traditions, do not understand the essence and purpose of Christ’s Church and thus deny the necessity of prayers to the saints in Heaven. We will briefly outline herein the Orthodox teaching concerning this.

Orthodox reverence of the holy servants of God comes from the conviction that all of us, those seeking salvation or those already saved, living and dead, form **a single family of God**. The Church is a great society, encompassing the visible and invisible world. It is a huge, universal organization, built on the principle of love, in which each member must care not only about himself, but about the well-being and salvation of others. Saints are those people which during their life more than others expressed love to others.

We orthodox believe that, when a righteous person dies, he does not sever his ties with the Church, but crosses over to its higher, heavenly domain — into **the Church triumphant**. Once in the spiritual world, the soul of the righteous person does not stop thinking, wanting, feeling. Just the opposite, these characteristics are revealed more fully and completely.

Modern non-Orthodox Christians, having lost the active connection with the heavenly-earthly Church, have the most vague and contradicting ideas concerning the afterlife. Some of them think that after death the soul of the person falls asleep and is as though shut off from everything; others — that the soul of a person, even if it continues its activity after death, does not concern itself with the world which it has departed. Others — that as a matter of principle one should not pray to saints, because a Christian has direct association with God.

What is the teaching of the Holy Scriptures concerning the righteous who have departed the earthly world, and the power of their prayers? In apostolic times the Church was considered as **one** Heavenly/earthly spiritual **family**. The Apostle Paul wrote to newly-converted Christians: *“But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn,*

which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect” (Heb. 12:22-23). In other words, you, by becoming Christians, have joined a great family and come into close contact with the heavenly world and with the righteous who are found therein. The parting words of the Apostle Peter — *“Moreover I will endeavor that ye may be able after my decease to have these things always in remembrance”* (2 Peter 1:15) — clearly attest to the fact that he promises to continue to care about them from that spiritual world.

The ancient practice of turning to the holy martyrs and servants of God for help is based on the recognition of the active association of the Heavenly-earthly Church and on the basis of faith in the power of prayer.

We know that not all, but only the most zealous and devout persons did God during their lifetime call His friends, and glorified them with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and miracles. Thus, Christ told the apostles at the Last Supper: *“Ye are my friends!... For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother”* (John 15:14-15; Mt. 12:50). The sacred history presents many examples of spiritual closeness, or “audacity,” of the saints with God. For example, Abraham asks God to have mercy on the citizens of Sodom and Gomorra, and God was willing to fulfill his request, if there were at least 10 righteous persons found there. Another time God rescinded his punishment of Abimelech, king of Gerar, by the prayers of Abraham (Gen. Chap. 18, Gen. Chap. 20). The Bible relates, that God spoke with the Prophet Moses face to face, *“as a man speaketh unto his friend.”* When Miriam, the sister of Moses, sinned and was punished with leprosy, Moses attained forgiveness for her from the Lord through prayer (Ex. 33:11; Numbers Chap. 12). Other examples can also be presented about the particular strength of the prayers of God’s servants.

The saints themselves do not overshadow God and do not weaken the need to turn to Him as the Heavenly Father. For even grown members of a family do not lessen the authority of the parents, when they care for their children together. Even more so: nothing pleases a parent more, than seeing how older brothers care for the younger. In similar fashion, our Heavenly Father rejoices, when the saints pray for us and try to help us. The holy servants of God possess a stronger faith than we, and are closer to God by their righteousness. For this reason we will turn to them as to our **older brothers**, appearing at the throne of the Almighty for us.

It is noteworthy that the righteous, while still **living** on earth, saw and knew much that was inaccessible to normal perception. Even more so should these gifts be inherent in them, when they, free from their mortal body, have passed on to the higher world. The Apostle Peter, for example, saw what was occurring in Ananias’ soul; the illegal act of his servant Giezia was revealed to Elisha and, what is more amazing, all the secret plans of the Syrian court were revealed to him, which he later related to the King of Israel. The saints, while on earth, penetrated the higher world with their spirit, and some saw hosts of angels, others earned the right to see the image of God (Isaiah, Ezekiel), others were transported to the third Heaven and heard secret indescribable words there, for example, the Apostle Paul. Even more so, being in Heaven, they are more capable of knowing what is happening on earth and hearing those who turn to them, since the saints in Heaven are *“equal to the angels”* (Acts 5:3; 4 [2] Kings Chapter 4; 4 [2] Kings 6:12; Luke 20:36). From the parable of the Lord about the rich man and Lazarus we find out, that Abraham, being in Heaven, could hear the cry of the rich man, suffering in hell, the *“great gulf”* dividing

them notwithstanding. The words of Abraham: your brothers have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them — clearly show that Abraham knows the life of the Hebrew nation, occurring after his death, knows of Moses and his law, about the prophets and their writings. The spiritual vision of the souls of the righteous in Heaven, without doubt, is greater than it was on earth. The Apostle writes: *“For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known”* (1 Cor. 13:12).

The nearness of the saints to God’s throne and the power of their prayers for the faithful existing on the earth, is obvious from the book of Revelations, in which the Apostle John writes: *“And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands.”* Later he describes the vision of the righteous in Heaven, praying for the people suffering on earth: *“And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel’s hand”* (Rev. 5:11; 8:3-4).

Great is the power of prayer! *“Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much,”* taught the Apostle James (Jam. 5:16). Praying for another is an expression of love for him; and the saints in Heaven, praying for us, show us their brotherly love and care.

In the Gospel and other New Testament books we find numerous examples witnessing the power of prayer for other people. Thus, for example, by request of the nobleman, the Lord healed his son; by request of the Canaanite woman her daughter was freed from the demon; by request of a father the Lord healed his possessed son; and by request of his friends, He forgave and healed the sick of the palsy, whom they lowered from the roof with ropes; by the faith of the Roman centurion, his servant was healed (John 4:46-53; Mat. 15:21-23; Mark 9:17-25; Mark 2:2-25; Mat. 8:5-13). In addition, the Lord performed most of the miraculous healings at a distance, in absentia.

In this way, if the prayers of simple people have such strength, then even more powerful are the prayers of the righteous, standing before the throne of God. *“And this is the confidence that we have in him (the Son of God), that, if we ask any thing according to his will, **he heareth us,**”* urges us the beloved pupil of Christ (1 John 5:14).

This is why the Church from the very earliest times taught about the benefits of prayerful appeal to the saints. This we see, for example, from ancient liturgies and other literary monuments of apostolic fathers. In the liturgy of the Apostle James we read: *“Especially we perform the memory of the Holy and Glorious Ever-virgin, Blessed Mother of God. Remember Her, Lord God, and by Her pure and holy prayers have mercy on us.”* Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, in describing the Liturgy of the church of Jerusalem, notes: *“Thus we remember (in the Liturgy) those deceased earlier, firstly the patriarchs, the prophets, apostles, martyrs, so that through their prayers and intercessions God would accept our prayers.”*

There are numerous accounts of the Fathers and teachers of the Church, particularly beginning with the 4th century, of the Church's reverence of the saints. But even from the beginning of the second century there is direct evidence of ancient Christian writings of faith in the prayers of the saints in Heaven about their brothers on earth. Witnesses of the martyrdom of St. Ignatius the God-Bearer (beginning in the second century) say "Returning home in tears, we conducted an all-night vigil... Later, dozing off, some of us saw the blessed Ignatius suddenly arisen, embracing us, and others also saw him praying for us." Similar notes containing mentions of prayers and intercessions for us by martyrs are contained in other writings from the era of persecutions on Christians.

The determination of the holiness of the dead person is confirmed by special evidence, such as: martyrdom for Christ, fearless espousal of their faith, selfless service to the Church, the gift of healing. Particularly, when the Lord confirms the holiness of the dead person through miracles after their death upon praying to them.

Besides the help of the saints through prayer, they help us attain salvation through the example of their own life. The familiarity with the lives of the saints enriches the Christian with the spiritual experience of those, who more zealously than others embodied the Gospel in their life. Here are so many clear examples of living faith, courage, patience. Being persons like ourselves, and overcoming the most difficult temptations, they inspire us to carry out our path of life patiently and uncomplainingly.

The Apostle James called upon Christians to imitate the patience of the ancient prophets and Job the Long-suffering, to acquire strong faith, like the prophet Elijah. The Apostle Peter taught Christian wives to take the example of modesty and obedience from the righteous Sarah, Abraham's wife. The Holy Apostle Paul presents the feats of the ancient righteous, beginning with Abel and ending with the Maccabees, and urges Christians to imitate them. In the conclusion of his thorough teaching on this theme he writes: "*Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us*" (James 5th chapter; 1 Peter 3:6; Heb. 12:1).

The Lord said: "*Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven*" (Matt. 5:15-16). Saints are bright stars, showing us the way to the Heavenly Kingdom.

Let us treasure the closeness to God of God's holy servants and turn to them for help, remembering that they love us and concern themselves with our salvation. Familiarity with the lives of the saints is particularly important in our time, when the general mass of "Christians" of the most varied direction has become so trivialized and the understanding of the Christian ideal has been distorted.

Witnesses to Truth

The great deeds of martyrs

When someone enters an Orthodox church, he enters into a special, heavenly world: on all sides he is surrounded by the images of angels and saints. Among these multitudes, there are people of different nationalities, of different epochs, social origins, educational backgrounds and ways of life. Here are princes and simple folk, rich and poor, educated and illiterate. What most of them have in common is that they violently left this world dying for Christ.

Those who gave their lives for their faith are known as **martyrs**. The Russian word, *muchenik*, has at its root the concept of suffering, of a violent death. The ancient Church used the term *martis*, which means, “witness” in Greek. Why they are so called, and what gave them the strength to stand so courageously for the Christian faith, are the issues we will discuss below.

The word “witness” is generally understood to mean **eyewitness**, i.e., a person who observed (or heard) something first-hand and testifies to it. Legal decisions are made based on a witness’ testimony for the prosecution and for the defense. The demand is made of the witness that he presents not opinions or hearsay, but only that which was actually observed. He must bring only facts to bear. The Christian becomes a “witness” to his faith when his words and his life bear witness to a new life in Christ, a life in which he is a participant. Here the object witnessed is not the external so much as the internal spiritual experience.

The Holy Gospel refers to our Lord Jesus Christ as “The True Witness (*martis*).” *“Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead. ... the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God”* (Rev. 1:5, 3:14). Following Pentecost, the Apostles and other preachers of the Gospel also become witnesses: *“... and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem ... one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection”* (Acts 1:8, 1:22). *“I ... who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ”* (1 Pet. 5:1). *“I know thy works and where thou dwellest ... the souls of them that were slain ... for the testimony which they held”* (Rev. 2:13, 6:9).

Our Lord Jesus Christ said of His mission in the world: *“To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice. And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free”* (Jn. 18:37, 8:32). The truth to which the Son of God bore witness was not an abstract religious-philosophical system, but a divine revelation of that which He had heard from His Father and seen in that heavenly world from whence He had come. He explained as someone who knew from experience, and taught how to live as the blessed live in the Kingdom of His Father.

Those who accepted His witness, He brought, inasmuch as it was possible for them, into contact with the heavenly life, giving them a foretaste of the joy of communing with God, and helping them to see the divine light. Those who experienced this state of grace in turn became witnesses of Christ — sometimes by word, but more often by deed — in their virtuous lives.

For the Apostles, the religious experience was particularly perceptible. The Apostle John wrote of that which he and the other Apostles experienced when communicating with the Savior:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the

Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full (1 Jn. 1:1-4).

If Christ had offered only abstract ideas, they would have been accepted calmly, and would not have caused the extreme split in society, which we see in the history of Christianity. The words of Christ, like a bright light, penetrate the sinner's darkened soul. Therefore believing in Christ and accepting His teaching invariably leads to the reconstruction of view of the world and to the most fundamental changes in the way of life. But, at the same time, they act upon a person as a beneficial balm. Bringing a renewing spiritual force for the internal struggle with evil, they inspire in him the desire to live for a higher good.

And, as a person cleanses himself and approaches moral perfection, he experiences the love of God. New horizons open before his spiritual eyes, and he begins better to comprehend the basis of spiritual life, the passing and false nature of all that takes place around him. He understands better, what he must attain and how he must act. Feeling from personal experience his own former baseness and the joy of communing with God, he no longer wishes to return to the old darkness from which he has escaped. Just the opposite — the Kingdom of God becomes for him something **precious**, “...*the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth*” (Mt. 13:44), for which he is ready to give everything, even his own life.

Unfortunately, not all are capable of seeing the light, not all find in themselves the strength to part with their sinful habits, to refuse material goods for the renewal of their soul. The Gospel tells us how from the first day of Christ's preaching, society began to divide into two camps — those who joyfully accepted His teaching and those who rejected it. Indeed, the latter group did not merely ignore Christ's teaching, but actively rose against it with indignation, even with uncontrollable hatred. Jesus Christ thus defined the reaction of people to his witness: “*For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov'd. But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God*” (Jn. 3:20-21). In other words, the teaching of Christ possesses the ability to expose the true nature of a person, his secret motivations. A person, who before hearing the teaching of the Gospel has been in a sort of neutral spiritual state, cannot stay indifferent any longer: he becomes either a follower or an enemy of Christ.

The animosity toward Christ held by the Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders ultimately led to their bringing false witness against Him at His judgment, sentencing Him to death and forcing Pilate to agree to his crucifixion. Thus, the first Witness to spiritual life (Rev 1:5) — our Lord Jesus Christ — also became its first Martyr. But He defeated the leader of lies and death, the devil, and promised to all who accept the Truth that they will triumph.

The Resurrection of the Savior and the descent of the Holy Spirit were the significant events that totally convinced the Apostles of the truth of all that the Lord Jesus Christ had taught, and as

witnesses, they devoted their lives to the preaching of the Gospel among all peoples. They understood their preaching to be a type of witness before people of that grace which they had received in Jesus Christ. And just as during the life of Jesus Christ, His witness appealed to some and antagonized others, so too in subsequent ages did Christian proselytism enter into society as a dividing force: *“Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household”* (Mt. 10:34-36).

The first Christian to suffer was the archdeacon Stephen, who was stoned by the Jews outside the walls of Jerusalem soon after the Apostles were visited by the Holy Ghost. In time, in different countries and at different times, all of His followers suffered for their faith in Christ. Probably only St. John the Evangelist died his own death; this was a reward for his courageous presence at the foot of the Cross.

Nero (54-68 A.D) was the first Roman emperor to embark on a course of **massive** and **systematic** persecution of Christians. During his reign, the Apostles Peter and Paul suffered in Rome. Christians were fed to wild beasts at Roman circuses or covered in tar and set aflame like torches to light the city streets.

A second-century author, St. Justin the Philosopher, who also ended his life as a martyr, illustrated how Christianity divided society in its most basic unit — the family. He related a story of how, in the city where he lived, one pagan woman converted to Christianity. Her husband, who remained a pagan, was angered by this conversion and complained to a local magistrate. Foreseeing no good in this, the woman received a continuance of her court appearance in order to tend to affairs relating to her property. While she was busy with these affairs, her angered husband brought before the court a certain Ptolemy, who, he had learned, had been responsible for his wife's conversion. Ptolemy was interrogated, and when he admitted his Christian faith, was sentenced to death by the judge. Two members of the court felt that a death sentence was rather harsh for a man whose only “crime” was his religious conviction. The judge inquired as to whether the dissenters were also Christians. When they confirmed this, he sentenced them to death as well. Thus, in the process of preparing for the trial of the Christian wife, three other Christians were executed. Later, the wife was also tried and executed.

In his Second Apology to the Roman Senate, St. Justin tells us that all this took place because the wife, having become a Christian, refused to participate in her husband's unnatural perversions, deeming them to be sinful.

Although we know the names of only a few thousand martyrs, their actual number runs into the tens of millions.

The persecution of Christians never completely subsided; however, its intensity alternated between greater and lesser, and its geographic focus shifted. Certain periods of time were especially difficult for Christians. Many Roman emperors and pagan rulers directed bitter campaigns of persecution against believers during the first three centuries of Christianity. After a period of relative calm, Moslem Arabs began a new wave of persecution in the 7th to 9th centuries. The

Turks followed in the 13th to 18th centuries. Notice the contrast between the methods used to spread Christianity and Islam: The Apostles came to people preaching love; they were full of gentleness and often became victims of unbelievers. However, from the first day of its appearance, the Moslem religion, spread literally by sword and flame. Finally, in our own century, ferociously anti-religious Communists attempted to root out all Christian faith mercilessly. Every new wave of persecution becomes more murderous and bloody than the previous one. The Holy Gospel predicts even greater persecution before the end of the world.

Thus, the battle against Christian faith is a continuing theme of all New Testament history. As the Holy Gospel explains, this warfare is directed by the fallen angel, the ancient dragon, become the *“prince of the world.”*

But, even having suffered physically for Christ, His witnesses were not destroyed. Just the opposite — they, like Christ, were victorious and now sit with Him in Heaven: *“To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne”* (Rev. 3:21).

The conditions of death are unique for every Christian confessor. They have a common logic in that the Lord Jesus Christ and the state of grace they found in Christianity became for them the most important element of their lives. “A Christian would sooner give his life for his faith than a pagan would give a piece of his cloak for all the gods,” wrote Origen (circa 182-215 A.D), in his letter to Celsius (7:39). To disavow Christ and His teaching meant for them the forfeiture of that which was dearest to them — God and eternal life. It would have meant to bow their heads before evil and untruth in order to prolong their insignificant earthly existence — and to do so would have been a terrible tragedy for them.

Christian martyrdom is at its core quite different from the self-sacrifice of fanatics. Fanaticism is a blind attachment to an idea. Fanatics are capable of sacrificing their lives in order to prove something to others, for example, as Buddhist monks recently set themselves on fire in order to draw public attention to problems in their country. Christianity forbids suicide as a great sin. *“When they persecute you in one city, go to another,”* said Christ (Mt. 10:23). Martyrs did not suffer in order to “prove” something, but to guard the spiritual grace their lives had acquired in the Lord Jesus Christ. To them, spiritual life was more important than physical life.

“For to me to live and die in Christ is a gain,” said the Apostle Paul (Phil. 1:21). He taught Christians to accept persecution with joy, as an honor and opportunity to receive an even greater reward in Heaven: *“For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake”* (Phil. 1:29).

Our Lord Jesus Christ knew of the sufferings that his followers would endure and sought to prepare them for their sacrificial deeds by saying:

I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues ... And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and

body in hell ... Also I say unto you, Whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man also confess before the angels of God: But he that denieth me before men shall be denied before the angels of God ... And when they bring you unto the synagogues, and unto magistrates, and powers, take ye no thought how or what thing ye shall answer, or what ye shall say. For the Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say... And the brother shall deliver up the brother to death, and the father the child: and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved... Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin and not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows (Mt. 10:16-42; Lk. 12:2-12; 21:12-19).

Upon witnessing the unshakeable faith of the Christians, the great courage with which they accepted suffering and death, many pagans saw the truth of the Christian teachings and were themselves, converted to Christianity. This justified Tertullian's comment in the 3rd century that "the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christianity."

So Christian martyrs bear witness to eternal qualities, spiritual wealth and true life. Leaving this mournful world, they stand forever, in indescribable joy, near the throne of God, just as envisaged by the Apostle John:

After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palm branches in their hands... These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall shepherd them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes (Rev. 7:9-17).

Through their sacrifice, the martyrs in Christ bear witness to the reality of spiritual values and the existence of another life, far superior to our own. They call on us to struggle courageously against evil, to love God and to feel for ourselves what a great gift it is to have Him in our souls. Through the prayers of the holy martyrs may the Lord grant to us a strong faith and the valor necessary to attain the quiet haven of the Kingdom of God.

Monastic asceticism

(Venerables)

There are some people who dedicate themselves wholly to science, art or politics or some other form of favorite activities. Why? Because such is their calling. They promote those branches of science and culture to which they have dedicated themselves. On the other hand, there are people

who are not drawn so much by intellectual or visible progress, as much as by the acquisition of inner perfection. They strive for righteousness, and, with this aim, they become monks or nuns.

Terrestrial life does little to promote spiritual perfection and rather hinders it. As the Evangelist St. John the Theologian explains; social life is poisoned by a triple evil: *“For all that is in the world; the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world”* Therefore he teaches further *“Do not love the world or the things in the world”* (1 John 2:15-16). Monastic life sets for itself the aim to help mankind rid itself from evil which is predominant on earth: from lasciviousness — through chastity and abstinence from “lust of the eyes” i.e. (from passion for riches and earthly goods), through the refusal of personal possessions and from pride, through obedience to the spiritual teacher. In striking down evil at its very root, monasticism sets man on a straight path toward spiritual perfection.

The word *“monk”* is derived from the Greek word *“alone.”* Monk means one living a solitary life. Monasteries arose as dwellings that were isolated and remote from the world. Monasticism is distinguished from the usual life of worldly people; hence the word *“inok”* — i.e. *“different”* person.

The Kingdom of God may be reached by many paths, and the Gospels give man a great scope of choice in his way of life: as long as he avoids evil and does good deeds. However, to those who are drawn to a more perfect way of life, the Lord says: *“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me....there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake ... if you want to be perfect go sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, come follow Me ...whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple...”* (Mtt. 16:24; 19:12-21; Luke 14:26-33). Here above are exemplified those main conditions from which the solemn vows are formed (a promise to God upon entry into a Monastery).

Aspirations toward achieving a specific type of life arose simultaneously with Christianity. According to Archimandrite Johannes Cassianus (4th century), the first monks were the disciples of the Evangelist Mark, who was the first bishop of Alexandria (Egypt). They removed themselves into the farthest areas from the town, where they carried on a special heightened type of life according to the rules established by St. Mark. The Jewish historian Philo Judaeus, a contemporary resident in Alexandria at the time of the Apostles, describes the life of certain *“Therapeutae”* who departed into the environs of Alexandria living exactly as described by the Archimandrite Cassian to be the life of the first Alexandrian monks and refers to their domicile as a Monastery.

There exists information that monasticism existed in Syria during the time of the Apostles. The Venerable Eudoxia; who lived in 96 AD., in the Syrian town of Iliopolis, during the rein of Trajan, was converted to the Christian faith by the Venerable Herman, the prior of the male monastery in which resided seventy monks. After becoming a Christian, she herself entered a monastery, which housed thirty nuns.

In spite of the meagerness of documented information, there is no doubt that monasticism arose during the time of the Apostles. It is difficult not to accept the fact that during those times of great spiritual zeal, there were no Christians who would not follow the teachings of Apostle Paul

regarding celibacy as stated in the Epistle to the Corinthians: “*It is good for a man not to touch a woman...*” (1 Cor. Ch. 7). A living example of such celibacy always was and will be the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the Most Holy Virgin Mary, the Prophet John the Baptist, the beloved disciple and celibate Apostle John the Theologian, Apostle Paul, Apostle James, the brother of the Lord and the first Bishop of Jerusalem, and many others. Monasticism followed these high examples, from whence it evolved and found its source.

Thus, the Venerable Abba Dorotheus explains the evolvement of monasticism as he writes: “They (Christians) understood, that finding themselves on earth, they could not comfortably perfect themselves through good deeds and therefore chose a specific way of life, a certain order in passing time and a certain manner in which to function — that is to say, a monastic way of life; they therefore began to separate themselves from people and live in deserts, devoting themselves to fast, poverty, sleeping on bare ground and enduring voluntary suffering, totally denying parents and family, possessions and acquisitions. In other words, they crucified themselves from the world.”

In ancient monasteries, attention was directed mainly to spiritual occupation: prayer, fasting and a contemplative meditation of God and the spiritual world. However, physical work was also considered necessary as a diversion of studies, which also gave sustenance and a means to help the poor.

At the beginning of the 4th century, there arose in Egypt a rudimentary aspiration toward monasticism. The weakening of strict rules of Christian life and accession to the church by such pagans, who, even as Christians were only concerned about earthly living, impelled the more zealous Christians to withdraw from cities and towns into the desert, so that there, far from earthly worries they could pass their life in actions of self-denial, prayer and contemplation of God. In the ranks of such achievers, the foremost was the Venerable St. Anthony the Great.

St. Anthony was born in Egypt during the 3rd century. Aspiring toward total isolation, he settled in the ruins of an old fort on the eastern bank of the Nile. He lived there for twenty years in total isolation, devoting himself to fasting and prayer and subjecting himself to various deprivations. In time, many heard of him and began to seek him out, and some even settled near him so that under his direction they could achieve the same type of life. Thus around St. Anthony there formed a circle of motivated disciples (year 305).

St. **Anthony** did not set specific rules for monastic life, however, in general, he explained the path by which moral perfection can be reached. Thus, using as an example his personal life, he taught them the denial of earthly goods, total submission to God’s will, perpetual prayer, solitary meditation of God, and of physical toil. St. Anthony founded the hermitage monasticism. Through his established order, those motivated were under the direction of an elder (*Abba* — father), lived apart from each other in huts or caves and devoted themselves to solitary ascetic accomplishments. Such eremitic communities were called *lauras*.

Even during St. Anthony’s lifetime, there emanated a new aspect to monastic life — communal living. The ascetics gathering into a community under the direction of the Abba, spent their life together in one or several lodgings following one set of rules. Such lodgings were referred to as

(coenobitic) monasteries. The founder of monastic communal living was the Venerable St. Pachomius the Great (348).

St. **Pachomius** was also born in Egypt. Being in the army, he had the opportunity during a campaign to become acquainted with Christian beneficence, and wished to become one; and truly, upon finishing his term in the army he was baptized. Becoming acquainted with the ascetic type of life in the Theban desert, Pachomius chose, for his future deeds a secluded area near the river Nile known by the name of Tabennisi. Here St. Pachomius had an idea to found a communal monastery. On one of the islands on the Nile, he founded a monastery in which those wishing could devote themselves to communal life.

News of Pachomius's deeds quickly drew to him so many disciples that the original monastery could not house them all, and he was forced to build other monasteries within reach of each other near the Nile. He also founded a women's monastery on the opposite bank where his own sister resided.

In the monasteries founded by him, Pachomius introduced specific rules for monastic communal life. These were the first monastic rules. The whole community of monks was divided by Pachomius into 24 categories, depending on the development of their spiritual life and was under the direction of one main Abba. Each monastery had its own administrators who were called priors and abbots. They came under the jurisdiction of the main Abba and reported to him the state of their monastery. In the monasteries themselves, there were stewards with helpers who were in charge of housekeeping duties. Those in supervisory capacity had to be examples of monastic life for their brothers. Under the direction of their superiors, the monks had to spend their time in prayer, religious reading especially the Holy Scripture and labor. Communal services were performed twice each day — morning and night. The monks gathered into the church by a prescribed signal, unassumingly and in silence; they read the Holy Scripture and prayers and sang psalms. On Sundays, they received communion. In addition, the monks had to pray by themselves before sleep and upon awakening. After the service the prior discussed with the brothers Christian life. The monks pursued their reading in their cells during free time from prayers or work. They received their books from the monastery library distributed by the housekeeper.

The monks tilled the soil, planted gardens, worked in the forge, mills, and tanneries, were carpenters, wove cloth and plaited baskets. Going to work, they followed their prior in an orderly fashion and silence. Silence was prescribed at all times. The monks had to complete all these duties with unquestionable obedience. Without the prior's permission, the brothers could not only, not leave the monastery, but could not begin a new type of work. All the monks wore the same simple habits. The undergarment was of linen — a robe without sleeves, the outer garment of leather, on the head was a hat of hair and on the feet — sandals. This habit was never removed, even during sleep. There were no beds for Pachomius's monks, instead there were seats between two walls; they could only sleep on a mat. They arose way before dawn. They received the simplest food once a day usually at noon. The monks ate bread, butter, cheese, vegetables and fruit. Saturday and Sunday an evening meal was offered. All ate communally in silence.

In Pachomius's by-laws, the main vow of the monks was the non-acquisition of personal property. In entering into the community of monks it was not allowed to bring any property, even

earthy garments of the newly arrived, were given to the needy. Work done by any brother belonged to the whole community. Everything necessary for their livelihood the monks receive from a common monastic fund. The stewards were in charge of furnishing the brothers with food and clothing from stock available at the monastery or bought by them with funds received from sale of monk's output. In order to have these rules followed, Pachomius established that new entrants into the order should be accepted no sooner than after a year's trial time.

During his lifetime, the communities established by Pachomius grew to 7 thousand, a century later — up to 50 thousand. Eremitic and coenobitic monasticism quickly spread throughout Egypt, spilling into other countries. Thus, Ammon established the society of desert dwellers on the Nitrian Mountain and its surrounding desert. Macarius the Egyptian — in the Skete desert where lived many wonderful ascetics. Illarion, the beloved disciple of Anthony, brought monasticism to Palestine, his fatherland, where near Gaza, he established a monastery. From here, monasticism spread throughout Palestine and Syria.

St. **Basil the Great**, having traveled throughout Egypt and Palestine and having become familiar with monastic life, spread both male and female monasticism to Cappadocia (in Asia Minor, presently Turkey). The by-laws, which he gave to his monks quickly spread throughout the east and became universal. During the 5th century, all of the Orient was broadcast with monasteries. From the ascetics of the 5th century come the remarkable Isidore Pelusiot, Simeon Stylites, Euthymius, Savva the Sanctified and many others.

St. **Simeon Stylites**, born in Syria, for many years devoted himself to prayer without descending from the pillar, enduring hunger and inclement weather. He founded a new order of ascetics, the "stylites." Euthemius, the founder of the Palestinian laura, received the gift of miracle working. Savva, the pupil of Euthemios, began his monastic life at eight. He founded many monasteries in Palestine and established for them the liturgical cycle.

In the 5th century, besides the stylites, there appeared another type of zeal in the form of the never-sleeping. The monk Alexander established a monastery where services continued non-stop daily. Studios, a rich inhabitant of Constantinople, who was drawn by this order, erected in Constantinople a similar monastery and invited into it a community of the never-sleeping. This monastery was thereafter called the Studion.

In the 6th century there lived some remarkable ascetics: Simeon, born a fool, who accepted this plight for the sake of Christ, reaching total impassivity, was henceforth known as the Fool of God; and John of the Ladder, who for many years spent his life on Mount Sinai and composed a poem known by the name "Ladder," in which he described the degrees of spiritual ascent toward moral perfection; in the 7th century, Alipius Stylites devoted himself to sit on a pillar for more than 50 years. At the end of the 8th and the beginning of the 9th century, the representative of the strict monastic life was the famous defender of veneration of icons — Theodore Studite: from his monastery, known for its strict monastic life, emanated many zealots of piety, as for example in the 9th century, Nicholas, who submitted to torture for the veneration of icons, and Joannicus, who was glorified with the gift of foresight, and many others.

In the 9th century, there appeared desert dwellers on Mt. Athos. Such as St. Peter (11th century), who devoted himself to staying there in solitude for more than 50 years and St. Athanasius (10th century), who founded on Athos a monastery in which there soon appeared many ascetics.

Russian monasticism reached vast dimensions and had a huge spiritual success, beginning with the Venerable **Anthony** and **Theodosius of Kiev-Pechersk** and ending with the great Optina monks. Unfortunately, there is no possibility to describe the history of the development and spiritual experience of Russian monasticism.

No previous way of life can inhibit entry into monkhood, since monkhood consists of repentance and the monastery is a healing place. One enters a monastery on a trial basis in order to determine how sincere and serious is the entrant's intention to dedicate himself to monastic life. In the case where the director of the monastery is convinced of the sincere objectives of the new entrant, he blesses him with the wearing of the under cassock with a belt and a skull cap (the under cassock is a long black garment with narrow sleeves and the skull cap is of conical form). Thus, the future monk who is on trial bears the name of "lay brother" since his main duty is to learn obedience to his spiritual father.

In conscientiously carrying out obedience, which was imposed upon him, the "lay brother" must manifest all of his **patience and humility** — which are the rudiments of a monk's virtue. A monastic saying is as follows: "Obedience is above fasting and prayer." That is because obedience based on patience and humility serves as an eradication of the main infirmity of mankind's soul — pride as well as egotism, from which emanate all passions.

After a while, when the lay brother proves by his good behavior the sincerity of his intent for a monastic life, he can then be invested as a "cassock wearer." At this time he does not make any vows; however, he does receive a new name and can wear over the under cassock and skull cap a cassock and biretta (the cassock is a long black garment with wide sleeves which is worn over the under cassock; a biretta is a type of head gear which is wider at the top). For investiture into this first preparation in the ascent to monastic life, there is a special liturgical assignation, which is called: "The assignation for the wearing of the cassock and biretta."

"He who is unmarried cares for the things that belong to the Lord — how he may please the Lord...but he who is married cares about the things of the world..." (1 Cor. 7:32-34). The Lord said to the youth who was seeking eternal life: *"If you wish to be perfect, sell whatever you have and give to the poor"* (Matt. 10:21). Basing on these principles, the monks in general totally renounce all possessions so that nothing would serve as an obstacle toward the acquisition of spiritual perfection.

St. Gregory the Theologian asks: "should a monk be concerned only with his own abudance? since his only possession are the rags on his body. Let others who are rich find measures for safeguarding. My only possession is God: no one can steal this treasure. As far as the previous is concerned, let them take it all; my property is secure; since what I possess will forever stay with me. The Lord is my lot. I do not wish to have anything besides the Lord; when I serve at the altar, then specifically am I nourished and clothed, herein I shall rejoice and as an indigent follow

the lowly cross, in order to aspire to reach the high plateau without obstacles, soaring, as the Apostle said, on clouds in the wake of the Lord in the air.

From monastic ranks there emanated the greatest number of saints; which is only natural; since monkhood places as its aim spiritual perfection. Saints from the ranks of monks are referred to as “godly,” as a sign that they more than others were Christ-like. One becomes a monk who felt that all in life is vanity and who wanted to break away from its bondage and attain God. Monasticism teaches that the straight path is the shortest path between two points — man and God.

Within the monastic milieu there developed the richest spiritual literature. For the majority of secular people it is “high mathematics.” The spiritual states described therein are unattainable to mere mortals. Nevertheless, many instructions in this ascetic literature is very instructive to all who seek God. The Russian populace loved to read books such as “Love of the Beautiful Good” (*Philokalia*, a collection of 5 vol.), in which are found the instructions of the ancient ascetics; “The Ladder” of John, the Abbot of Mount Sinai; “Unseen Warfare” of the Venerable Nicodimus the of the Holy Mountain; “Useful instructions for Spirituality” of Abba Dorotheus; the instructions of the monks Barsonotheus and John; Tales of the ancient ascetics in “Lausaik” by Bishop Palladius of Hellenopolis, and in “Spiritual Meadow” by the Blessed John Moschus. The letters of Bishop Theophanus the Recluse are more accessible to the contemporary reader, the treatises of Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov, the instructions of the Optina elders, the discourses of the Venerable Seraphim of Sarov with Motovilov.

Pre-revolutionary Russia was broadcast with monasteries. They had a vast influence on the customs and existence of the people, on Russian culture and history. Within the walls of the holy cloisters, the Russian pilgrims received a moral renewal, tranquility and strength to fight against sin. Here they drew on an ideal life. The monasteries were the healing centers of the whole country.

Fools-for-Christ-sake

Fool-for-Christ-sake (*Yurodstvo Hrista radi*) is one of the most difficult and inexplicable spiritual feats of asceticism. The word “Yurodstvo” means “insanity.” Some righteous people born normal and even very bright would fake insanity so that their feat would be harder. Historically Fools-for-Christ-Sake evoked two opposite reactions in people. Some reactions were malicious and scornful. People would persecute, beat and mock God’s fools. Others would feel compassion and be drawn to them in a subliminal way.

According to Venerable Seraphim of Sarov, the devotion of fool-for-Christ-Sake requires special courage and power of spirit, and no one should assume it on themselves without a special designation from God. Otherwise one may fail and become a false folly for Christ. Contemporary western Christianity cannot understand or value the feat of voluntary insanity.

The expression “fool-for-Christ’s-sake” was first applied by Apostle Paul saying, “We are insane for Christ’s sake.” In his letter to Corinthians he explains that preaching about the crucifixion of the God-and-man is in itself insanity for the people of the world. “*For the message of the Cross is foolishness for those who are perishing, but for us who are being saved, it is the power of*

God... Since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe” (1 Cor. 1:21 and 4:10). The Christians worshipping the crucified God-and-man are perceived by non believers as “fools-for-Christ;” People blinded by unspiritual wisdom, such as the ancient scholars, dared to allege that even Jesus Christ Himself was “raving mad” (John 10:20)! Interrogating Saint Paul, the pro-consul Festus said forthrightly to the great Apostle, “You are out of your mind, Paul! Your great learning is driving you insane” (Acts 26:24).

Fool-for-Christ-Sake, as a special form of asceticism, appeared in the middle of the 4th century in Egypt concurrently with monasticism. This phenomenon can be considered from two standpoints. Objectively, it is a godly calling. Fools-for-Christ-Sake are carrying out a special mission in this sinful world. Subjectively, it is a very difficult form of spiritual asceticism, “a narrow path” chosen by those aspiring for greater spiritual perfection.

Why would God call some of the righteous ones to live in such “humiliation?” In order for us to understand that, we have to take into account the fact that the life of the human society is permeated by evil through to its core — it is full of falsehood, lies, hypocrisy, greed, pride, wile and other sins. Often the most sinful feelings and intentions are concealed under a mask of righteousness, sophistication and nobility. Such people would willingly praise minor and illusory virtues while hating genuine goodness. A vivid example of such people can be seen in Judaic scribes contemporary with Christ. Once seeing their inability to accept His message, Jesus Christ, our Lord, exclaimed, “*I thank Thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that Thou hast hidden these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them to babes*” — that is to simple and humble people (Matt.11:25).

As we know from the Holy Script, the Lord exposed the wiles of the rulers acting in a seemingly strange way. In serving God, even such great prophets as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel sometimes turned into “fools-for-Christ-sake.” Their allegedly meaningless phrases and strange actions veiled the sublime wisdom and prophecy (See, e.g.: Isaiah 8:3; Jeremiah 13:1-9, 18:1-4, 19:1-4, 20:2-10, 27:2, 38:6; Ezekiel 4:1-15, 5:1-4, 12:2-7, 24:3-5).

But God’s calling to become a Fool-for-Christ-Sake does not subdue the person’s will. Fools for Christ subjected themselves to this extraordinary asceticism not just out of obedience, but because of their yearning for righteousness. Pride is the hardest passion to be quenched. Many saints, who overcame usual physical passions relatively easily, were struggling to suppress pride and vanity throughout their lives till their last breath. Venerable John of the Ladder says, “Vanity gloats in every virtue.”

Rejecting common sense and bearing humbly the daily scorn, Fools-for-Christ-Sake cut the very roots of pride. From among all the Fools-for-Christ-Sake especially renown are Andrew, Prokopius of Ustug, St. Basil, Paraskeva of the Diveyev Monastery. (Remembrance days: October 15, July 21 and August 15 acc. to the new calendar). The asceticism of giving up property and family was not enough for them. They rejected the most outstanding feature of a personality — common use of mind, and voluntarily assumed an attitude of a person unaware of a sense of measure, manners or embarrassment.

Fool-for-Christ-Sake is a mask applied by those who have a special calling to do it. It is known that at times Fools-for-Christ-Sake would remove the mask before some people and amaze them with their wisdom and talents. A Fool-for-Christ-Sake, Pelagia of the Diveyev monastery, who was blessed to that asceticism by venerable Seraphim, was going back to a usual state during her confessions. A newly appointed preacher was deeply impressed by her mental and spiritual power. Saint Andrew, God's fool, also removed his mask of folly when talking to his disciple Epiphanius, who was later to become a renowned bishop.

Yet, in everyday life Fools-for-Christ-Sake, pretending to be insane were constantly abused and outcast by everyone. Living in the society they were as lonely as those in an inaccessible desert. Having given up every worldly property and comfort, free from all attachments to earthly things and exposing themselves to all hazards of homeless life, those people chosen by God were like aliens from another world.

Despite all, Fools-for-Christ-Sake were always retaining sublime spirituality, constantly lifting up the eyes of their minds and hearts to God, their spirit ceaselessly aflame before Him. Acquiring great humbleness and spiritual cleanness Fools-for-Christ-Sake became particularly dear to God and received the gift of wonderworking and discernment. They sometimes accomplished such humane deeds of love to their neighbor, that would be beyond any other person. They were not shy to tell the truth openly regardless of the person; their words and sometimes extraordinary actions either criticized fiercely and condemned the unjust people who were often powerful and ominous; or gave joy and consolation to the righteous and God fearing ones. Generally Fools-for-Christ-Sake would mix with the most sinful classes of society for the purpose of correcting and saving these people. And they did lead them, and many other outcasts to the way of goodness. Being close to God, they often relieved their compatriots from various pending misfortunes and averted God's wrath from them through prayers.

The asceticism of Fool-for-Christ-Sake was not only hard in itself, but it required special wisdom from the saintly ascetics so that their own humiliation further served to honor God and guide people, being ridiculous without sinfulness and seeming to behave shamelessly without tempting or hurting anyone.

Missionary Leaflet # E35
Holy Protection Russian Orthodox Church
2049 Argyle Ave. Los Angeles, California 90068
Editor: Bishop Alexander (Mileant)

For more information on the Orthodox Church, please contact:
St. Vladimir Orthodox Church ~ Ann Arbor, MI
(734) 475-4590
www.stvladimiraami.org ~ stvladimiraami@yahoo.com