

# THE MESSENGER

## A Journal of Orthodox Christianity

Summer 2019



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## THE MESSENGER, SUMMER 2019

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*The Messenger* is a labor of love, published quarterly, from the parish community of Saint Michael Orthodox Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

Saint Michael Orthodox Church has been witnessing to the truth of Orthodox Christianity in Louisville since the early 1930's, but its Faith has been preached unchanged for two thousand years. Orthodox Christianity is the historic and apostolic Christian Faith founded by Jesus Christ.

Glory to God for all things.

# Letter from the Editor

In response to Eugene Rose and Gleb Podmoshensky's starting *The Orthodox Word* magazine in 1965 with their Archbishop John Maximovitch's blessing, and desiring his constant editorial oversight, the hierarch saint finally said to them, in paraphrase:

*Take responsibility for what you are doing. Each Christian is himself responsible for the fullness of Christianity. Each member of the Orthodox Church is responsible for the whole Church. In taking such responsibility we are saved from the temptation to blame others for our mistakes. It is crucial for the preservation of Christianity that Orthodox workers be able to work for Christ without depending on others every step of the way. It is praiseworthy when they do creative work without waiting for detailed instructions.*<sup>1</sup>

It is with this in mind that I, as the new editor of this reimagined publication (what was formerly our parish newsletter), ask for your patience as we find our footing, your forgiveness as we make mistakes, and your attention as we seek to glorify God in this new creative work.

As our general means of communications have changed, much of what this newsletter used to be — a schedule of events, upcoming services, parish council reports, etc — is now more effectively and pertinently made available in our weekly email, bulletin, and website. This has created

<sup>1</sup> Hieromonk Damascene, *Father Seraphim Rose: His Life and Works* (Platina, Calif.: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2003), p. 296.

an opportunity for us to do something new. As God has allowed, with Father Alexis's blessing, and (I daresay) as the Holy Spirit seems to have directed, the vision for this newsletter has become not a newsletter at all, but a mission-minded, evangelical, and catechetical journal of Orthodox Christianity. With new essays, artwork, book reviews, stories, spiritual counsel, lives of saints, and more, we hope that it will serve especially the catechetical needs of so many newly illumined in our own parish, bolster the faith of those long established, and speak as a firm and reverberating voice of Orthodoxy in our city and anywhere else it may spread.

This first new issue is a seed. By your prayers and support — and, indeed, your contributions! — I believe our parish community has what it takes to fulfill this new effort in ministry, to see it take root and grow, bearing fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold. May God give the growth! May He help us and be glorified.

*R. Irvine*

*Holy Ascension, 2019*



## In the Way *by R. Irvine*

There is no man who loves something and  
does not multiply his efforts. No man is able  
to be engrossed in divine things if he has not  
forsaken and despised temporal things, becoming  
estranged from the world's honors and pleasures,  
cleaving to the shame of the cross...

Force yourself, then, to imitate the humility of Christ...

—Saint Isaac of Syria<sup>1</sup>

In a pastoral message for Palm Sunday, Father Josiah Trenham (Riverside, California) prepares us for meeting Jesus entering Jerusalem, saying, “The Humble One is now coming. He comes to us now, humble and meek, seated on the foal of an ass to save us, to reveal true humility to us.”<sup>2</sup> The days following this revelation, however, suffer another sort of revelation, that of our inattentive and fickle hearts, on account of which Jesus manifests the ultimate expression of the Way, perfect obedience to his Father’s will unto death on the Cross.

It is in light of this, Christ’s extreme humility (“not my will, but yours be done”), that his more difficult teachings really begin to make sense, and the way of salvation becomes clear: deny yourself, renounce all that you have, sit in the lowest place, be poor, be hungry, weep. *Follow me*. At every

1 Homilies 25 and 16 in *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian* (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2011), pp. 249, 210.

2 <https://youtu.be/JCnO88qegLE>

turn the world opposes this way of living exemplified by the Son of God. Our fears and passions and selfish desires refuse to enter through that narrow gate. We are fooled into thinking temporal comforts actually satisfy us. But by not denying ourselves, we deny God's consolation. How is this? Saint Isaac calls the Cross "the door to mysteries."<sup>3</sup> That is, only by participating in its sufferings can we experience the joy in resurrection. Only by taking the lowest place are we in a position to be honored unto a higher place. Only by emptying ourselves (of our selves) can God fill us with Himself. Lent and Holy Week give us a renewed taste for this, humbling our bodies in the fast, stretching our schedules to attend extra church services, and silencing the legion demands for our attention.

Calling our attention to Saint John of Sinai's counsel in the twenty-fifth chapter of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Father Josiah also says, "Many have been saved who never had any prophecies or revelations . . . Many have been saved without any signs or wonders. But no one has been saved without humility. Without humility no one will enter the Bridal Chamber." Echoing Saint John is another great teacher of Christian life, Saint Seraphim of Sarov, calling the grace of the Holy Spirit *the fruit of virtue*, "without which no one is or can be saved."<sup>4</sup> The need for increasing humility is never satiated, nor must our hunger for a greater presence of God's Spirit in our lives. Salvation depends on these. Christ and his saints show us the way.

3 Homily 74 in *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian* (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 2011), p. 513.

4 "The Acquisition of the Holy Spirit" in *Little Russian Philokalia*, vol. 1: St. Seraphim (Platina, Calif.: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, fourth edition, 1996), p. 82.

What gets in the way? We all struggle against the various sin misshaping our lives, against the unique weaknesses and passions distracting us and impeding our growth in likeness to Christ. But, addressing one prevalent and powerful example, Father Josiah in his same Palm Sunday message emphasizes our common attachment to social media as a “tremendous enemy to humility.” To help us understand this pitfall he recommends Jaron Lanier’s 2018 book *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*. He calls it “a profound book by a man who was one of the fathers of virtual reality, absolutely immersed in the development of the digital revolution, who has thought twice about how it has developed and how it’s working against the development of human character and significant human relationships.” Lanier’s arguments for quitting social media are like none I’ve seen elsewhere. He argues that these platforms are turning us into jerks, undermining truth, destroying our capacity for empathy, voiding our communications of meaning, making us unhappy, causing us to lose our free will. Despite these, he doesn’t advocate against social media fundamentally, but against the current business model supporting our free access to its services. He demonstrates that social media’s current business structure, which sells access to our personal data to hidden third-parties wishing to influence (or stifle) our worldview, cannot truthfully be described as simple advertising. He calls it Behavior Modification. By participating in it, our worst tendencies are amplified and we are robbed of human dignity, of independent thinking, even of true religion — not because social media is intrinsically bad but because its current business model reduces human attention to a commodity and defines our very personhood according to desires-based statistics and shifting algorithms. Social media



today is an impediment to a rich and productive spiritual life.

For believers in Jesus Christ striving to follow in the Way, Lanier's *Ten Arguments* are important and worthy of our consideration. With Father Josiah I hope that many of us will be persuaded to read it, not necessarily as a rally against social media but as a call to deeper attention to God's Spirit working in our lives, and to greater watchfulness against what unseen powers we may be unwittingly given to, whether online, in television, in books, in music, or other engagements. *Watch and pray lest you enter into temptation* (Mark 14:38). For some of us, this may mean actually deleting our social media accounts.

As we enter into the Great Feast of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Church, let us *multiply our efforts* in being attentive to Him, in *imitating the humility of Christ*. For, like the Apostles early in their ministry, we cannot hope to begin understanding the Gospel nor fulfill our calling to be saints without the Holy Spirit's illuminating guidance. This Pentecost, let us stand with the Apostles in witness to the Way revealed by our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ, and be willing to *forsake and despise temporal things* — social media, comforts, defenses, justifications, passions — *becoming estranged from the world's honors and pleasures, cleaving to the shame of the cross*, for the sake of acquiring an ever increasing presence of God's Spirit manifest in our lives.



# Healing Comes When We Recognize Our Illness

by Father Alexis Kouri

*Adapted from a homily given for the Sunday of the Blind Man, June 2, 2019, at Saint Michael Orthodox Church, Louisville, Ky.*

In college I took courses in logic and C.S. Lewis from a wonderful man, my philosophy professor, Dr. Peter Kreeft. One of the many things I studied under him was the teachings of the Ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates. Socrates ended up being arrested and executed because, as was charged against him, he was corrupting the youth. He was accused of this because he didn't believe in the many Greek gods. Remember, he lived four hundred years before Christ, and he wasn't a Jew who would have believed in the One True God. He was living in the Greek world where they believed in many gods. But he said, *It's more logical that there is one God rather than all these many gods, and I worship the one God.* So they called him an atheist and a corrupter of the youth because he didn't believe in all the different gods. He annoyed people in his persistence to keep asking questions. He kept trying to find out the truth behind things, and he wouldn't settle for surface answers. He knew that he didn't know anything, and he wanted to find out the truth.

One of Socrates's friends went to what was called the Oracle at Delphi, who was a priestess and prophetess who supposedly knew all things. Socrates's friend went to her and asked her who was the wisest man on earth. She told this friend, *No one is wiser than Socrates.* So he went back home and he told Socrates, *I spoke to the Oracle at Delphi. She said no one is wiser than you.* But Socrates said, *I don't know anything!*

He was really confused about this. He knew many people that were very wise. He didn't know anything. How could he be the wisest? So he set out to find out if what the Oracle had said was true. He went to lawyers, and he went to doctors, and he went to politicians, and he asked them questions to discern their wisdom. What he began to realize is that these people knew about their craft, their speciality — doctors knew about medicine, and lawyers knew about law, and politicians knew about politics. But when he asked them about the deeper things — *what is truth? what is the meaning of life?* — they had unsatisfying answers. He kept asking them these questions, *Why?*, until finally he said, *What you're saying is illogical. It doesn't make sense.* And they would be fed up with him. So, in this way he realized that, although they knew their own craft, they really didn't know anything about these deeper things, despite their claim that they had the answers he sought.

Over time Socrates realized it wasn't because of his own intelligence that no one was wiser than him. But it was that he recognized that he didn't know. He said, *I am wiser than this man, for neither of us appears to know anything great or good; but he thinks he knows something, even though he knows nothing; whereas I, I don't know anything, so I don't think I do.* This is what made Socrates wise. Not that he was filled with knowledge, but that he knew that he knew nothing. Whereas other people also knew nothing, but they thought they knew something.

Today in our Gospel reading we have something similar. And I think there is something we, as Christians, can learn from not only the Gospel reading but even from Socrates, who my professor loved so much he called Saint Socrates. And that is, it's important that we recognize our weaknesses, recognize our lack of knowledge, and in the case of today's

Gospel reading, that recognize our blindness. In the service last night, in Great Vespers, we heard this hymn:

*The man who was born blind thought to himself, Was I born without eyes because of my parents' sins? Was I born to be a reproof because of the Gentiles' unbelief? I'm not competent to ask when it is night and when it is day. My feet cannot endure stumbling on the stones. You see, I've never seen the sun shining, nor ever seen the image of Him who created me. But I pray you O Christ God to look upon me and have mercy upon me.*

Like Socrates, this blind man knew that he was blind. He struggled in life. He said, according to the hymn, that it hurts him all the time to hit his feet on the stones that are in the way because he can't see them. He doesn't know when it's daylight or night time. He knows he's blind. And, because he knows he's blind, the Lord can heal him. Whereas the Pharisees think they know everything. They think they are very bright. They think they understand all things. Jesus says that they are actually the blind ones because they say they see, but in fact, in terms of spiritual insight, they can't see at all. It is only when a person recognizes that they are blind that the Lord can give them sight. It's only when we recognize that we have no wisdom and no knowledge that the Lord can give us wisdom and understanding. It is only when we recognize that we are wounded and that we are sick that we can open up our hearts for the Lord to heal us.

Saint Isaac the Syrian says that a humble person — one who recognizes who they really are, one who knows that they are wounded and sick and blind — is not *rushed, hasty, or agitated*. So, there are benefits to knowing you are ill. When we know that we are ill, then we can place our lives at the feet of the Heavenly Physician. Saint Isaac continues, *He doesn't*

*have hot or volatile thoughts, but he's always calm.*<sup>1</sup> He's not fearful of unexpected events. He knows his own weakness and recognizes his need for divine help. These are the benefits of recognizing our own weakness.

In our culture today it's a sin to recognize our weaknesses, to say that we're wounded, to say that we need help from God, to say *Lord have mercy on me a sinner*, to say, *I am a sinner*. It is countercultural to recognize and look at our woundedness. We are supposed to present and assume *greatness* all the time. But, if we don't see who we really are, we can't allow the Lord to bring healing to us. Actually, in confession, when we come to confession and we confess sins, the most important thing is not any counsel that we might hear from the priest. The most important aspect of confession is recognizing our own sin, our own weakness. The priest isn't necessarily very wise. He might not even have anything helpful to say. But, just to go to confession and recognize our sins, rather than continuing on thinking we don't really have any, is very important.

We are recognized as wise and able to be healed to the extent that we recognize our ignorance and our weakness. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Hilarion Alfeyev, *The Spiritual World of Saint Isaac the Syrian* (Trappist, Kent: Cistercian Publications/Liturgical Press, 2008), p. 120.

# Morning Prayer of the Last Elders of Optina

In an article commemorating the Holy Elders of Optina, the editors of [orthochristian.com](http://orthochristian.com) said, “Besides the written lives, and the many letters of spiritual instruction, a beautiful and powerful prayer was left to us by the holy elders of Optina. This prayer has become so essential to many people’s lives that they often paste it into their prayer books, to be read every day along with the other morning prayers.”

Father Stephen Freeman (Oak Ridge, Tennessee) has said, “I have loved this prayer for years and found it essential in beginning the day. Key phrases have a way of coming back throughout the events of each day. It is worth committing to heart.”

\* \* \*

*O Lord, grant that I may meet all that this coming day brings to me with spiritual tranquility. Grant that I may fully surrender myself to Thy holy Will. At every hour of this day, direct and support me in all things. Whatsoever news may reach me in the course of the day, teach me to accept it with a calm soul and the firm conviction that all is subject to Thy holy Will. Direct my thoughts and feelings in all my words and actions. In all unexpected occurrences, do not let me forget that all is sent down from Thee. Grant that I may deal straightforwardly and wisely with every member of my family, neither embarrassing nor saddening anyone. O Lord, grant me the strength to endure the fatigue of the coming day and all the events that take place during it. Direct my will and teach me to pray, to believe, to hope, to be patient, to forgive, and to love. Amen.*





# The Fast and the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul<sup>1</sup>

*by Bishop Thomas Joseph and Peter Schweitzer*

Having celebrated the feast of feasts, the Lord's Pascha, and Pentecost fifty days thereafter, we are about to embark upon the Apostles' Fast, which this year begins on [June 24, 2019 —Ed.], and ends with the commemoration of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul on June 29.

The Apostles' Fast is a prescribed fasting period of the Church, lasting from the day after the Sunday of All Saints to the 29th of June, the feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul.

It is a sad truth that many neglect this particular fast for a variety of reasons inconsistent with the apostolic and patristic tradition. Prior to reflecting upon the importance of the Apostles' Fast, a review of the ancient history of this particular fast may help us to recognize its integral place in the life of each and every Orthodox Christian.

The fast of the holy Apostles is very ancient, dating back to the first centuries of Christianity. We have the testimony of St. Athanasius the Great, St. Ambrose of Milan, St. Leo the Great and Theodoret of Cyrrhus regarding it. The oldest testimony regarding the Apostles' Fast is given to us by St. Athanasius the Great (†373).

In her Diary, the pilgrim Egeria (fourth century) records that on the day following the feast of Pentecost a period of fasting began. The Apostolic Constitutions, a work composed no later than the fourth century, prescribes: "After the feast of Pentecost, celebrate one week, then observe a

<sup>1</sup> <http://ww1.antiochian.org/fast-and-feast-saints-peter-and-paul>

fast, for justice demands rejoicing after the reception of the gifts of God and lasting after the body has been refreshed.”

From the testimonies of the fourth century we ascertain that in Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Antioch the fast of the holy Apostles was connected with Pentecost and not with the feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul on June 29. In the first centuries, after Pentecost there was one week of rejoicing, that is a fast-free week, followed by about one week of fasting.

The canons of Nicephoros, Patriarch of Constantinople (806-816), mention the Apostle’s Fast. The Typicon of St. Theodore the Studite for the Monastery of Studios in Constantinople speaks of the Forty Days Fast of the holy Apostles. St. Symeon of Thessalonica (†1429) explains the purpose of this fast in this manner: “The Fast of the Apostles is justly established in their honor, for through them we have received numerous benefits and for us they are exemplars and teachers of the fast ... For one week after the descent of the Holy Spirit, in accordance with the Apostolic Constitution composed by Clement, we celebrate, and then during the following week, we fast in honor of the Apostles.”

The spiritual benefit derived from the Apostles’ Fast is great. Saint Leo the Great noted that, “After the extended feast of Pentecost, the fast is particularly needed in order to cleanse our mind by ascetic labors, and to make us worthy of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.” Saint Leo also reminds us, “In the Apostolic canons inspired by God Himself, the Church fathers have, at the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, established first and foremost that all virtuous labors begin with fasting.”

Periods of fasting such as the one upon which we are about to embark are not, as some in the West would have us believe, exercises in mortification or penance but the

divinely inspired method to gain mastery over the self and conquer the passions of the flesh. It is to liberate oneself from dependence on the things of this world in order to concentrate on the things of the Kingdom of God. It is to give power to the soul so that it would not yield to temptation and sin. According to St. Seraphim of Sarov, fasting is an “indispensable means” of gaining the fruit of the Holy Spirit in one’s life (cf. Conversation with Motovilov), and Jesus Himself taught that some forms of evil cannot be conquered without it (Matthew 17:21, Mark 9:29)

Neglecting the fast is not the only pitfall to be avoided however. Those who fast may be tempted to judge those who do not fast, thus losing the efficacy of their labors. We should not concern ourselves with what others are doing but concentrate on our own spiritual life.

Fasting periods, particularly the Apostles’ Fast, assist us in avoiding the spiritual pitfalls to which we are so accustomed after the ascetical struggle of Great Lent and the joyous celebration of Pascha.

In turning our attention to the feast of the holy apostles Peter and Paul, the connection between the feast of Pentecost, the Apostles’ Fast, and the actual feast of the two preeminent apostles becomes clearer. As I noted earlier, this fast was originally connected to the feast of Pentecost and we understand this connection by examining the feast itself. As Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos writes,

*Pentecost had a significant place in the life of the Apostles. Having previously passed through purification of the heart and illumination – something that also existed in the Old Testament in the Prophets and the righteous – they then saw the Risen Christ, and on the day of Pentecost they became members of the risen Body*

*of Christ. This is particularly important because every Apostle had to have the Risen Christ within Him. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit made the Disciples members of the theanthropic Body of Christ. Whereas at the Transfiguration the Light acted from within the three Disciples, through glorification, but the Body of Christ was outside them, at Pentecost the Disciples are united with Christ. They become members of the theanthropic Body and as members of the Body of Christ they share in the uncreated Light. This difference also exists between the Old Testament and Pentecost. . . In addition, on the day of Pentecost, the Disciples attained to "all truth". Before His Passion, Christ told His Disciples: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth" (John 16:12-13).*

*These words of Christ are closely linked with the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, with the revelation of the whole truth, which the Disciples were unable to bear; they could not receive it earlier, without the Holy Spirit.*

*This "all truth" revealed on the day of Pentecost to the Apostles is the truth of the Church as the Body of Christ: that the Disciples will become members of this rise Body and that in the Church they will know the mysteries of the glory and rule (vasileia) of God in the flesh of Christ. On the day of Pentecost they knew the whole truth. It follows that the complete truth does not exist outside the Church. The Church has the truth, because it is the Body of Christ and a community of glorification.*

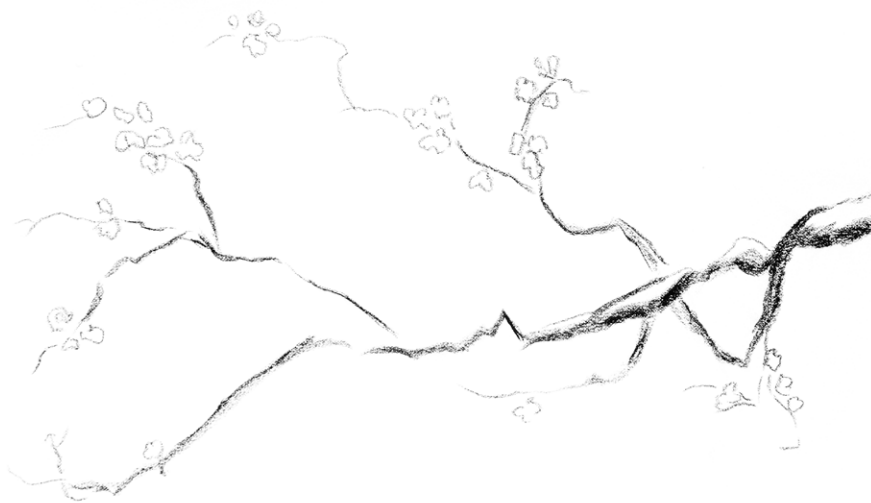
As the foremost of the holy apostles, it is fitting that after the feast of Pentecost, wherein the apostles received the revelation of truth in its fullness, we commemorate Saints Peter and Paul jointly. As Saint Gregory Palamas writes in his sermon on the occasion of the saints' feast,

*If, as we have said, we commemorate each of the saints with hymns and appropriate songs of praise, how much more should we celebrate the memory of Peter and Paul, the supreme Leaders of the pre-eminent company of the Apostles? They are the fathers and guides of all Christians: Apostles, martyrs, holy ascetics, priests, hierarchs, pastors and teachers. As chief shepherds and master builders of our common godliness and virtue, they tend and teach us all, like lights in the world, holding forth the word of life (Phil. 2:15-16). Their brightness excels that of the other radiantly pious and virtuous saints as the sun outshines the stars, or as the heavens, which declare the sublime glory of God (cf. Ps. 19:1), transcend the skies. In their order and strength they are greater than the heavens, more beautiful than the stars, and swifter than both, and as regards what lies beyond the realm of the senses, it is they who reveal things which surpass the very heavens themselves and indeed the whole universe, and who make them bright with the light in which there is no variableness neither shadow of turning (cf. Jas. 1:17). Not only do they bring people out of darkness into this wonderful light, but by enlightening them they make them light, the offspring of the perfect light, that each of them may shine like the sun (Matt. 13:43), when the Author of light, the God-man and Word, appears in glory.*

On the day of Pentecost, the apostles received the fullness of the revelation of truth because the Lord Christ had prepared them for the advent of the Comforter. As the preeminent apostles, Saints Peter and Paul were the guardians of that truth which was to be passed on to the faithful. Saint Seraphim of Sarov tells us, “The true aim of our Christian life consists of the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God. As for fasts, and vigils, and prayer, and almsgiving, and every good deed done for Christ’s sake, are the only means of acquiring the Holy Spirit of God.”

We know from Holy Scripture and Tradition that the Holy Spirit does not abide in a vessel that is not being purified. Saint Luke of Crimea notes, “For could the Holy Spirit possibly abide in an impure heart that is filled with sin? As smoke chases away the bees, as stench repels all people, so does the stench of the human heart repel the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit lives only in pure hearts, and only to them does he grant His Divine grace, His holy gifts, for He is the ‘Treasury of good things’—all the true and most precious goods that the human heart could possibly possess. Could the impure heart receive them? Could the heart that is sinful and deprived of mercy and love possibly receive the grace of the Holy Spirit?”

This is precisely why, in her wisdom, the holy Church offers us the period of the Apostles’ Fast soon after Pentecost and just prior to the feast of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul who were worthy to receive the Holy Spirit. If the aim of the Christian life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit, we must engage in the struggle through fasting and continual prayer. It is only then that we may acquire the Holy Spirit and can properly appreciate and be joyous in the feast of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul.



## **Stars of the Orient** *by Derek Matthew Holt*

The Lord saith: A little while and you will weep  
and mourn, yet the impious world will rejoice.  
You the faithful will all be sorrowful, yet your  
sorrow shall be turned into rejoicing . . .

—Akathist to the Chinese Martyr  
Saints of the Boxer Rebellion<sup>1</sup>

As Orthodox Christians, we regularly encounter stories of heroic witnesses to the faith. The stories often recount how these witnesses went so far as to shed their blood and their very lives for their love of Christ. These witnesses

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.asna.ca/resources/akathist-chinese-martyrs-1900.pdf>

we otherwise know as martyrs. It is not uncommon at the Matins or Vespers services to hear tell — often in graphic detail — of the great lengths godless authorities have gone to in order to dissuade Christians from the Way. In the course of millennia no doubt many Christians have indeed been dissuaded from the faith by ruthless tactics. But these we rarely remember. It's very possible that for all the thousands of Christians we commemorate in a year, there are many thousands more that we have completely forgotten, wiped from history on account of their cowardice in the face of persecution. While the severity of their tribulation may make their apostasy seem reasonable, neither scripture nor Church teaching offers much sympathy to one who saves himself at the expense of his Savior. The five foolish virgins were shut out of the wedding banquet without appeal (Matt. 25:12); “and if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:15).

The Martyrs witness Christ's victory not only to their persecutors, but more importantly to those of us who profess the selfsame Creed, participate in the same Divine services and partake of the same sacraments throughout the ages. In this age, however, and in this particular locale, most of us have yet to experience anything of the tribulation our forebears endured. We are humbled by their sacrifice and inspired by their resolve, but the questions remain: do we know what we would do in their place? Do we fathom that this opportunity to emulate their example could come to us, as well?

The thought is daunting. The hagiographies often portray seemingly flawless faith and impeccable resolve under the most dire of circumstances, stories that span from ancient to modern times. We are bolstered by the faith and deeds of Fr. George Calciu and Fr. Roman Braga, of Fr. Arseny and the



stories from Richard Wurmbrand<sup>2</sup>, of St. Maria Skobsova and very recently Fr. Daniel Sysoev. But do we also fret just a little? These shining examples all had the benefit of being reared in a culture steeped in Holy Orthodoxy for centuries if not millennia. They were not from fledgling Orthodox communities balkanized by language and ethnicity. The question arises: How will we in our infancy face our own trials and tribulation, even as the cultural grounds beneath us shift at an alarming speed?

In the face of our culture's shifting sands, it is important to remember that revolution — both cultural and political — is nothing new to the Orthodox. Whether we sit upon millennia of imbued grace within our land or only a few decades of trial and error, the rubric lies plain before us. Our Lord's beatitude applies to anyone who is reviled and persecuted for His sake (Matt. 5:11).

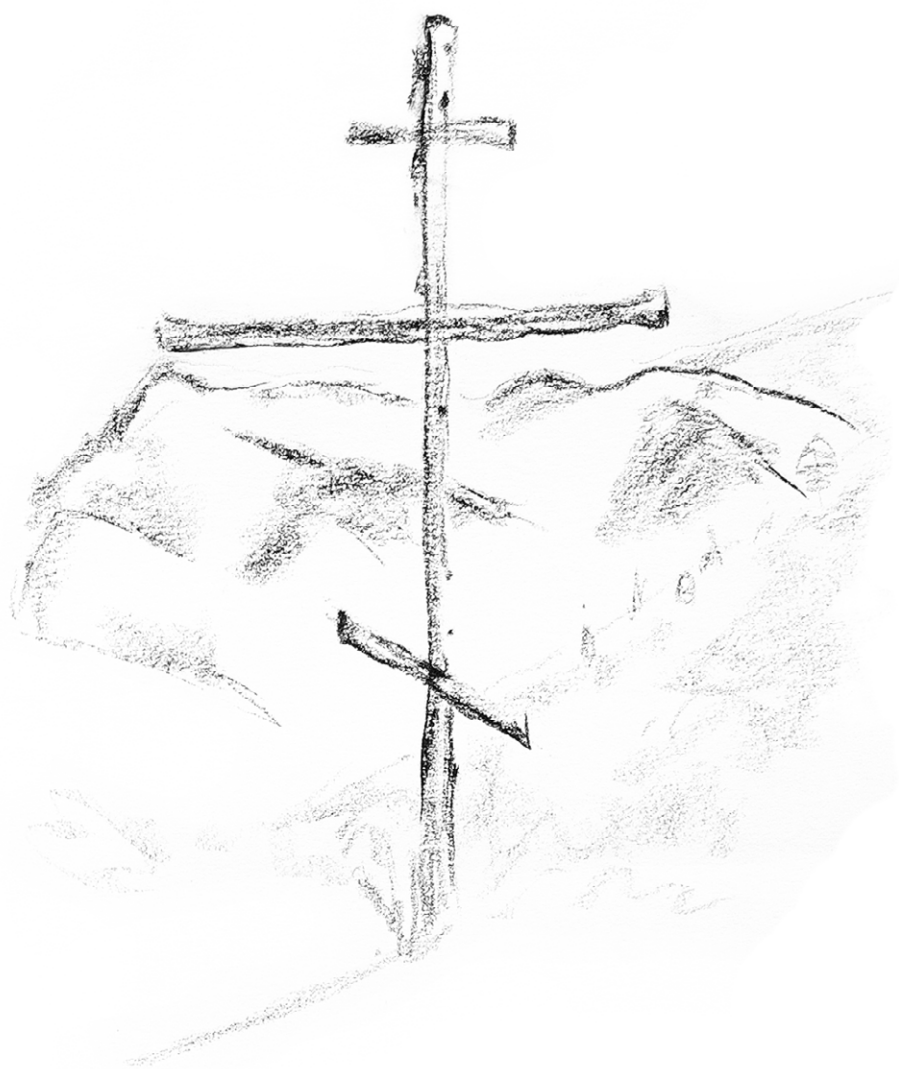
There has been a whole lot of that over the last century. With the exception of St. Maria and Fr. Daniel, the aforementioned luminaries all strove from behind the Iron Curtain before it fell. But every one of them experienced some facet of the early symptoms of a modernity turning to madness, symptoms that continue to radiate throughout the sophisticated societies of the world. Among those societies we must include the formerly great Chinese civilization. At the turn of the 20th century, China was also beginning to be infected by the madness, with the rulers of its waning last dynasty at odds with the advances of imperialist Western powers. The Opium Wars of the mid-19th century had undermined Chinese sovereignty, forcing its government to

2 Although not himself an Orthodox Christian, Richard Wurmbrand's book *Tortured for Christ* is a great source for stories of various Orthodox sufferers under the Communist regime.

deal in a commodity destructive to its communities. Within China, any and all Western influence became the target of xenophobic sentiment, including religions considered non-native to the Chinese culture, namely Christianity. By then, Orthodoxy had had a presence in the land of China for nearly 400 years, primarily associated with some military bases of its neighbor, Russia. Despite the proximity to the Russian Church, as well as its centuries-long presence in the Chinese land, the growth of the Orthodox Church in China was slow; there were only a handful of Orthodox communities throughout that vast kingdom by the turn of the 20th century. In Beijing, there existed a community of several hundred Orthodox that took the brunt of the jingoist outlash known as the Boxer Rebellion, and ultimately 222 Chinese Orthodox were martyred in the first year of the 20th century. Among them were the retiring priest Mitrophan, his wife Tatiana and their three children, and twice-martyred teacher Ia of the mission's school.

In hindsight, we must view these witnesses as the first-fruits of what was to be the most brutal and widespread period of martyrdom since the earliest centuries of Christianity. Commemorated annually on June 10, it was these faithful few of an unheralded mission — one by any worldly standard of growth analysis was hardly worth the effort — that were found worthy to become the teachers and model of faith to hundreds of thousands of Orthodox throughout the world who would endure the severest persecution in the coming decades. It was not that these Chinese martyrs were steeped in centuries of robust Orthodox culture. The accounts of their tribulation read nothing like the grandiose hagiographies of the early martyrs, and any exchange between the martyrs and their murderers is scant. At points the Saints even seem

timorous of what had fallen to them. But in their somewhat uninspired deaths, we recognize them for the victors they are, for they were the ones who stayed and did not give in to their persecutors' demands. There is hope for us in that. As Orthodox Christians in an era growing ever more hostile and intolerant toward our beliefs as well as our presence on the same soil as those hell-bent on refashioning American culture, we stand to learn something invaluable from the 222 martyrs of the Boxer Rebellion. Indeed, through their prayers and by their example may we too glorify God by standing firm in our faith against our own passions and what persecution may come. Amen.



## Platina Pilgrimage *by R. Irvine*

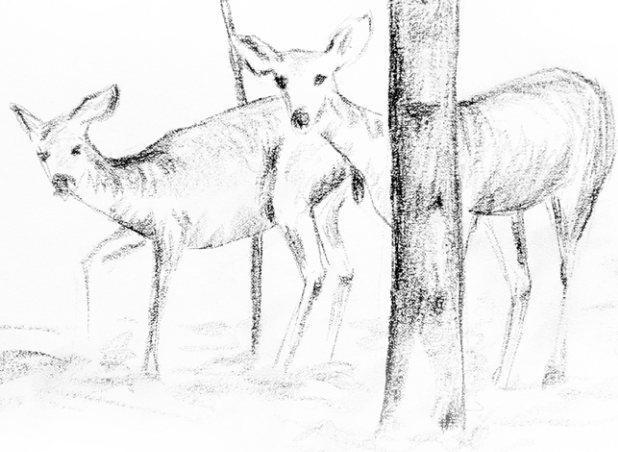
On a mountainside ridge under bright stars I sat on the porch of a little cabin that the young monk said was built by Father Seraphim Rose himself. Only five months earlier I had finished reading Rose's biography, *His Life and Works* by Hieromonk Damascene, which had occupied most of my nights the previous year. I knew that some day I wanted to visit the monastery he built with Father Herman Podmoshensky. I did not know that my work would have me traveling so near so soon. My flight was to Sacramento. Then I drove three hours up I-5 past orchards and fields of grapes to the mountains. Ah, the mountains! They stood in every distant direction as ancient shepherds of the landscape, icons of the very edge of the world, the edge of Eugene Rose's world, beckoning him to their solitary wisdom. From Red Bluff the road to Platina ascends three thousand feet. Its hills of ranch pasture continually unfold something new to marvel at. I kept thinking, *this* is what Father Seraphim came home to, these mountains, these pastoral views. It is a glimpse of heaven even before getting to the monastery. There were no signs to follow, just some loose directions I had copied from the website. I turned off the main road onto a gravel drive which immediately forked, and soon I saw a large cross affirming my way. My black Kia Soul made the final ascent up the steep drive, and the monastery's white church jumped out of the trees. Through the gate I went into the monastery nearly in disbelief. For a while I just stood there. I could see the outdoor chapel built over Father Seraphim's grave. An old gray monk was there. He crossed himself three times and bowed his head onto the grave's over-structure, then sat down by it. I walked slowly toward

him looking for company, for direction, but when I came too close he left. I stayed at Father Seraphim's grave a long time and no one came. I saw a few monks scurrying about their work. The monastery was so quiet. I was overwhelmed by it. I listened to birds above me and gentle wind sounding through the forest, but the stillness and solitude was like nothing I had known. I became dreadfully uncomfortable. I felt between peace and agitation. Maybe it was the hours driving alone, the several connecting flights, the preceding days working in Los Angeles, the weeks preparation, bewildered anticipation. My thoughts would not leave me alone. I had traveled nearly three thousand miles for this moment and I didn't know what to do with myself. I struggled to allow myself to be still in that stillness, to be at peace in that peacefulness. Still no one came. I began to wonder why I was even here, what am I doing here. I felt nothing. Why had God brought me here? I walked back toward the gate and, at last, a monk found me. Father Paisius greeted and welcomed me. I confessed to him that I was overwhelmed and I felt lost. I couldn't think of another word for how I was feeling. I had found my way here and now I was lost. I couldn't find my bearing. I couldn't bear the silence. I didn't know where I should be. "Go sit in the church," he said. "Maybe you'll find yourself in there." So making my way inside I found myself in company with the old gray monk I'd scared away from Father Seraphim's grave. I sat down and watched him light candles. This time he approached me. He sat by me and said nothing but prayed on his rope. I could no longer contain my heart. Every unspoken, unmet, extra-fulfilled hope and expectation overcame me in his quiet presence. I broke. I wept. The gray monk said nothing but kept praying, his old hand soothing my hundred knotted tears. We sat together. Soon he finished

his prayer and, for the second time, left me. More monks filled the church and we prayed the ninth hour. My lostness and brokenness began to subside. That evening I walked with Abbot Damascene up the mountain. I confessed to him the existential questions that plagued my journey. Why am I here? To what divine purpose? There must be some reason. What and *why* O Lord? Here I am! The abbot turned and interrupted me. “Stop!” he said. Just stop it! The reason I am here, he told me, is because I am a Christian and this is what Christians do. Simple. Nothing more. I am not special nor specially favored. Christians have always traveled to holy places to pray and to honor the saints who have sanctified those places. This is what Christians do. He quickly moved us on to other topics. We talked about many things while he took me further up the ridge. I asked him about the monastery’s legacy, and he surprised me by his great interest in my Evangelical upbringing. We returned late from our walk, and Father Damascene sent the young monk Sebastian to show me my lodging, the one-room cabin built by Father Seraphim Rose. I was tired and cold. There was no electricity, no hot water. The night was densely black. And I was glad. By prayer, confession, and a father’s loving rebuke, I was liberated from that which had confused my pilgrimage. Why was I here? Because I had read the life of a holy man, and because God’s ways and providences are perfect. I didn’t know what tomorrow held. Liturgy, yes. And what else? God knew. One more thing. The stars are so *bright*!

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In his Bright Saturday homily, Father Andrew, visiting from Spruce Island, spoke about Father Seraphim Rose. He said that the old Celtic saints had a tradition of setting out in a boat and letting the wind take them where it





would. Wherever they landed, they would consider that spot their ‘place of resurrection’. They would consider it God’s will to live there for the rest of their days, to work out their salvation, to die and rise there to meet the returning Savior. Father Andrew said that Platina in California was Father Seraphim’s place of resurrection. He had loved the very place, he even hugged and kissed the trees as though dear friends, for he knew he would die there and resurrect among them. Indeed, he almost never left the place. The black labrador had come along when we unexpectedly left the church through the swung-opened doors. Many of the monks and nuns and visiting women had confused looks when Father Andrew took the Gospel book and suddenly walked out. But we all followed him anyway, joyful when we realized we were going to finish our prayer up the hill at the outdoor chapel built over Father Seraphim’s grave. The morning sun shone low through the trees, directly ahead, as we moved into the liturgy. Then came Father Andrew’s resurrectional homily about the Celts. And, about the time when he announced *the holy things are for the holy*, a deer walked gracefully behind the altar, pausing a little uphill with his gaze toward our worship. He stayed there until the end, when we had venerated the Holy Cross. Then, as though fully aware that we had finished our prayer, and being joined by another, the deer withdrew into the woods. Attending with him had been the many birds contributing their own hymnody. Woodpeckers drummed especially loudly during our commemoration of souls. I wondered that this may have been the nearest to Heaven I have yet glimpsed. Or, at least, it was a vision of an altogether new possibility of Heaven meeting earth. The labrador, who had eagerly come with us to the chapel, had been tied up because he couldn’t contain his joy so reverently as the deer. But when we had finished

he was let loose and returned to us. I was trying to distract him from bothering the women when the priest motioned me forward. Father Andrew handed me a mounted Paschal cross, giving me to lead the procession back inside the church where we sang again, *Christ is risen!*

Bright Week, 2018  
Saint Herman of Alaska Monastery  
Platina, California

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