

# THE MESSENGER

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## THE MESSENGER, AUTUMN 2019

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Glory to God for all things!



# Letter from the Editor

If we do not know what we are like when God makes us, we shall not realize what sin has turned us into.<sup>1</sup>

—Saint Gregory of Sinai

Among the diverting books at my desk is an old travel guide for Paris. Recently a friend commented on it, enlightening me about a condition of severe anxiety suffered by some people visiting that ancient city. Paris Syndrome, as it's called, is a delusional and physically sickening state caused by the shock of realizing that Paris is actually not the quaint place of one's imagination. Writing about the syndrome for a travel website, Colette Davidson says, "Despite the name, Paris syndrome isn't something exclusively experienced in the French capital. The phenomenon can happen to anyone seeking paradise abroad: a tourist taking a trip to an exotic land, a teen taking his or her first solo adventure, an expatriate moving abroad, or a political refugee or immigrant leaving home for a better opportunity. Similar experiences can take place for religious individuals who travel to Jerusalem or Mecca, or westerners traveling to India for spiritual enlightenment."<sup>2</sup>

I would add to Davidson's list those who confuse *personal freedom* for the various masks of passion—lust, greed, pride, uncontrolled anger, and the rest. To say the least, our cultural models for happiness are not spiritual. Exemplars

<sup>1</sup> *The Philokalia*, vol. 4 (Faber & Faber, 1995), p. 221, 50.

<sup>2</sup> "Paris Syndrome: What Is It, and Is It Real?" *TripSavvy*, April 3, 2019, <https://www.tripsavvy.com/what-is-paris-syndrome-1618745>

of personal health are hardly even scientific anymore. Today's prevailing vision of the fully-alive, successful man is he who is attaining to and satisfying his every desire. And just yesterday he might not have even been a man at all. But the images of ourselves and the world that we have constructed in our imaginations will quickly collapse when finally confronted with the truth. Davidson says that some sufferers of Paris Syndrome experience "feelings of depersonalization—e.g temporarily losing one's normal sense of selfhood and identity." What do we see when we look in the mirror? Do we even see ourselves? What would we see of our selves if dispossessed of every vice and delusion? Would we recognize that person? Indeed, such a day will come. Meanwhile, falsehood is elevated to authenticity. It is devastating and ruinous. The lure to self-expression and self-fulfillment is strong. But, without a truthful vision of wholeness and personal fulfillment, how can we move toward perfection?

This small publication now in your hands is a lamp, boldly aglow against the world's undoing of that otherwise perfect creation, mankind. For, if we are at all interested in salvation through Jesus Christ, then our conception of the human person, of how we understand ourselves, is of vital importance. It isn't any wonder, then, that the eternal Tyrant would dig deep to trouble our very, fundamental sense of personal identity. Who am I? What am I? His work is on grand display, taking root in the unquiet of our minds. On the one hand, in our baptism we are washed clean of the stuff of darkness, saved by Jesus's victory over Death, freed from all confusion, fear, and anxiety. We have put on Christ! He lights our way. He is the Light, and he is the Way. On the other hand, we are so easily fooled to forget Him, to suggest by our actions that Christ is not enough, that the Way is not

worth the effort to follow, that the Light is not as compelling as the shadows.

But we are works in progress. We are sketches. The final rendering of our life, perfected in Christ through the sacraments of His Church, is still being drawn. Inasmuch as God is known only in experience, so man is known only in experience of God. That is, each person is made known and fully revealed—to himself and to the world—only inasmuch as he enters into experience of God: sacramentally, sacrificially, according to the divine commandments, in prayer, confession, forgiveness. Life outside this experience is no life at all, but a masquerade. The Holy Fathers say that this life is given to us for repentance, for turning to truth from vain imagination.

In the following pages we see where we may discover our only true identity. We see that we are not our thoughts, nor are other people what we think of them. We are not our anxieties, nor our desires. We are members of one eternal, holy Body. Jesus shows us how to see, if we would be his disciples. He shows us the Way of Heaven itself, and that we can live it here on earth, every day a potential movement in holy pilgrimage. Saint John of Kronstadt, in *My Life in Christ*, says, “In the Holy Scriptures we see God face to face, and ourselves as we are. Man, know thy self through them, and walk always as in the presence of God.” As we begin to see ourselves truly, stripped of the noise and lies of distracting thoughts and false conceptions—in light of Christ, in light of our membership of Him—this clarified vision of self can lead only to a prodigal’s confession, and thus our healing from the syndromes of this world’s confusions. May God grant the scales to fall from our eyes.

—R. Irvine, *Afterfeast of the Holy Cross*







# Have This Mind *by K. Cody Vest*

In Saint Paisios's *Spiritual Counsels on Family Life*, he tells the story that in the old coenobitic monasteries it was common to assign one monk with what would be a simple but profoundly important obedience. This monk was to stop his work at the appointed hour, and go from brother to brother with the greeting, "Brother, we are going to die." By reminding the brotherhood of their impending death, the brother's obedience was an encouragement to the entire community to not give quarter to any base desire, but to set their sights on eternal rewards.<sup>1</sup>

This may seem a bit morbid to us living in this century where we largely hide death away from public view, and try our best to avoid the existential crisis for another day. *Carpe Diem* and all that. But, I have to admit, whenever I remember this story it always brings a smile to my face. It is like cold water to the face. There will come a day when I part with everything I have, when I will no longer be able to do what I once enjoyed. There will come a day when my strength will fail, and my intellect won't serve me like it once did. And in that day, I will face not only death and the spiritual world with unfiltered vision, but I will also come face to face with who I am when all the trappings are worn away. Life's pleasures, my social status, my career path, all will wither away and I will be left only with who I am at the core of my being. I will be left with my self, my true identity.

*Brother, we are going to die.*

The world would have us believe that if we live a life

<sup>1</sup> Elder Paisios of Mount Athos, *Spiritual Counsels IV: Family Life* (Patmos: Monastery of Saint John the Theologian, 2012) pp. 271-72

that is “true to ourselves” and our desires, then we will finally be fulfilled. That if we check off our bucket list we will be heroes. We are led to believe that our identity comes from acting out whatever “instincts” we may feel, and that we are only truly free when we release ourselves to follow this course. And yet, every way we turn, like Solomon in Ecclesiastes, it is all just chasing the wind. All that we build on the foundation of our pleasure, desires, and instincts will gain us nothing. We *might* leave something behind for a generation. *Maybe* if we are great leaders our picture might gather dust in a museum. But, *Brother, we are going to die.*

In his letter to the Christians in Philippi, Saint Paul says that we should be of the same mind as Christ:

*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:5–11)*

Jesus doesn’t consider the fact that he is God’s Son something he has to fight for, cling to, or hold over our heads. That’s what Saint Paul means when he says that our Lord *does not count equality with God a thing to be grasped*. Jesus doesn’t desperately grasp at his identity or position, fearing it might slip through his fingers, anxious about receiving

his due respect. Instead, he actively lets it go. He empties himself.

The Eternal Word of God, who commanded the cosmos into being, gives no thought to his status, does not defend his position, but lowers and empties himself, becomes a human like us. But, although he takes on our nature, he doesn't take on our likeness. Think about it, when God actually lives a human existence, he chooses to live the life we see exemplified in the Gospels. He doesn't travel far, he doesn't live for blood-pumping enjoyment, he doesn't seek pleasures, possessions, and social status. Christ's life is truly the perfect life. While the world pines away for a lifestyle or philosophy that will give meaning and assuage the crushing pain of the inevitable tragedy of life without God, our Lord Jesus Christ shows us where he looks to fulfill a truly human identity. He becomes not just a human person, but an *obedient* human person. He is so obedient to his Father that he willingly takes upon himself a shameful death at the hand of the Gentiles, betrayed by his own, naked on a hill outside his nation's capital.

In this we see that our Lord Jesus Christ reveals what true personhood looks like to God: humbly emptying ourselves for the sake of our beloved. In Jesus we see that a Truly Human person finds his identity by laying down his own "kingdom" and serving the kingdom of his beloved. This is true of all love, but when the object of a person's love is God, such a person becomes a uniting point between the created and Uncreated. To say it another way, in the Christian a mere creation is joined with the Uncreated by grace. We lay aside our earthly cares and say with our whole heart to our beloved Lord, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

In Christ, God reveals Himself and teaches us this sacred

truth: our true identity can only be bestowed upon us by the Beloved One for whom we lay aside our life. When we lay aside our own kingdom, when we entrust ourselves and every detail of our life to God, and lovingly work for His kingdom, putting our trust in His promises, we are rewarded by discovering who and what we are truly meant to be.

Jesus relinquishes his whole self to his Father, sets his sights on his Father's kingdom, and trusts that He will fulfill His promises. *He humbles himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God highly exalts him and bestows on him the name that is above every name.* He lays everything aside and exchanges what he has, by virtue of his divine Sonship, for an obedient, humble, fully human life. He takes this obedience even to the point of death, even death on a cross. Saint Paul tells us that for this reason God highly exalts him and bestows on him the name above all names. Because of his extreme humility and love for us and his Father, he is given not only life but the name above every other.

In the mind of Christ there is no anxiety, no worry, nothing to cling to, nothing to fear losing. The Christian, enraptured in the love of God, trusts Him for all things large and small, trusting that all things work together for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28). Emptying himself of all earthly concern for status, possession, fulfillment of desire, instinct, or anything else that may hinder him, the Christian enters the kingdom of God while yet on this earth, agreeing with Christ saying, *Do not be anxious; but seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness* (Matt. 6:31–33).

Saint John the Theologian says, “Beloved, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). In the

book of Revelation he explains this further with these words to the victorious martyrs, “To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it” (2:17).

Jesus Christ, who is God’s Son by nature, humbles himself in his obedient death and for this reason he is given the name above all names. Likewise, when the martyr, who is a child of God by grace (1 John 3:2) is obedient unto death, that martyr receives a name uniquely and secretly his own. The reward for humble, ascetic love is to receive a true and heavenly identity.

So brothers and sisters, let this mind be in us which our Lord reveals to us. We are not our anxieties and fears. We are not our instincts and choices. No, let this mind be in us which is also in Christ Jesus. Let us pour out our life for our beloved, let us put off what might offend him, for truly, *If we live according to the flesh, we will die; but if by the Spirit we put to death the misdeeds of the body, we will live* (Rom. 8:13). So that on that last day we may eat of the heavenly manna kept safe for us in the Heavenly tabernacle, and receive the identity uniquely our own, known only to us, and hear: *Well done, (insert your true name here), thou good and faithful servant.* Because, truly, brother and sister, we are going to die.



# A definition of the Church

by Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos

*His Eminence Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) of Nafpaktos is regarded as one of the foremost authorities on Orthodox Christian spiritual life. He is a prolific writer, authoring more than fifteen books, many of which have been translated to English. As Professor of Ascetic and Pastoral Theology, he is a core faculty member of the Antiochian House of Studies PhD Program. The following article is an excerpt from the second chapter of his book, The mind of the Orthodox Church, translated by Esther Williams and published 1998 by Birth of the Theotokos Monastery. We have taken some liberty to edit it for clarity. —Ed.*

\* \* \*

First, it should be underlined that the Church is a mystery. Linked with Christ and being His Body, it is not a human organization, but a Divine-human Organism. At the same time the Church is not, as is usually said, the mystical Body of Christ, because the Christians, who are the members of the Church, are the real members of the Body of Christ. So we cannot speak of a mystical body, which is abstract and apprehended spiritually, but of the real Body of Christ. . . .

Many people, in speaking of the Church, mean either the hierarchy, that is only the Clergy and particularly the Bishops, who constitute the Pastoral order in the Church, or only the laity, who have been baptized in the name of the Trinitarian God. But these views are erroneous . . . I think that it will be useful to have a broader analysis of this point in order to clarify some essential elements.

As we said before, the Church is the Body of the Divine-

human Christ. The Christians are the real members of this Body. Thus the Church can never be an abstract organization nor an abstract institution, but it is the unity of the Christians with Christ. But the Christians are divided into two basic categories, Clergy and laity. The distinction is not related to privileges with regard to degrees of salvation, but to what those gifted Christians who are going to help the others towards deification should be in the Church, i.e. pastors who will lead the laity.<sup>1</sup>

So the Clergy and laity constitute the people of God. This, moreover, is not abstract, nor is the unity of Clergy and laity with Christ abstract, it is not only connected with the Sacrament of Baptism, because Baptism is not isolated from the whole life of the Church. St. Symeon the New Theologian says characteristically that the baptized and those steadfast in the faith will be saved. Moreover, Baptism is connected with the Sacrament of the Divine Eucharist. Thus, when we say that the Clergy and the laity living in Christ constitute the Church, it means that both Clergy and laymen are connected with the sacramental life of the Church, not magically, but ascetically. This means that they are connected with the purifying, illuminating and deifying energy of God.

In the patristic teaching it is clear that the three degrees of priesthood—deacon, priest, and bishop—are connected with the three stages of the spiritual life, which are purification of the heart, illumination of the nous and deification. This means that the priesthood either is a fruit

<sup>1</sup> Original translation: The distinction is not related to privileges with regard to degrees of salvation, but to what those gifted Christians who are going to help the others towards deification, i.e. the pastors who will lead the laity, should be in the Church.

of God's purifying, illuminating and deifying energy or at least is orientated in that direction. If it is neither the one nor the other, then the priesthood is not taken away—there is no deposition—but it is not satisfying its pastoral ministry. The work of the Clergy is twofold. First, to perform the Sacraments, and second to guide the faithful towards living the life of the Sacraments. But also, in order really to be members of the Church and to belong to the Body of Christ, the laity must partake, or struggle to partake, of the purifying, illuminating, and deifying energy of God.

These things are being said with the understanding that through Baptism we are enrolled as members of the Church. However, if we do not activate the grace of Baptism by the whole ascetic life which the Church has, then we are not really members of it. We can make a division. It is one thing to be a potential member of the Church, to have accepted the possibility of becoming a real member, and it is another thing to be an active member of the Church. St. Gregory Palamas uses the image of the son of the King. He is born in the palace and has the possibility of becoming King, of ascending the throne. But if in the meantime he dies, then he loses these rights. The same is true for everybody. By his biological birth he has the possibility of becoming heir to his father's estate. But if he dies prematurely or he is expelled from the house, then he loses the possibility of inheriting the good things. Christ says about the bishop of Sardis: "I know your works, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead."<sup>2</sup> True, he can repent, and therefore he is advised to "be watchful" and "repent," but at that moment he was spiritually dead. This does not mean that he did

<sup>2</sup> Rev. 3:2 —Ed.

not perform Sacraments, but that he performed them as a dead man. Nikolas Kavasilas says: “Let us live life, attracting sanctification through the mysteries from that head and heart” until we are bound together with Christ, until we are members of Him, “flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones.” However, when we become dead members, we cannot taste life. “When we cut ourselves off and fall away from the wholeness of the All-holy body, we taste the holy mysteries in vain; for life will not pass through to the dead and cut off limbs.”

Thus in the Church some are members potentially, some actually, and to express it better, some are dead limbs and others are living ones. This distinction, dead and alive, is seen in all the biblico-patristic tradition of the Church. And it is a pity when we do not know this whole tradition and teach that all who receive only Holy Baptism are members of the Church. To be sure, there are also members who have cut themselves off completely from the Church. But some dead members have the possibility of being made alive by the operation of divine grace and their own cooperation.

In this sense it is said that the Church is a spiritual clinic, a place of cure, or, as St. John Chrysostom calls it, “the great and marvelous capacious inn.” And just as there are doctors, nurses and sick people in the hospital, the same is true in the Church as well. There are doctors who know personally what is health, what is illness and the mod of cure, there are nurses who help the doctors in the work of curing and there are the sick who are seeking the cure.

In the Epistles of the Apostle Paul it is seen that in the Church there are the glorified, the illuminated, and the private individuals. The glorified are the deified, who partake of God’s deifying energy, the illuminated are all who have noetic prayer but have not yet reached deification, and the

private individuals are those baptized with water, who are in a state of purification and have not yet received the Holy Spirit. After these categories there are also those without faith who have not yet entered the state of purification and have not yet received Baptism.<sup>3</sup>

On these presuppositions the holy Fathers call the Church a communion of saints. It is not a collection of people who were once baptized and are in a state of stagnation, but a communion of charismatic people. Thus we can understand that the Church is life, and not a place of ideology. Within this perspective St. John of Damaskos called the Church an “orderly whole chosen by God,” “the people of the saints,” “Christ’s people,” “lambs of God, holy people.” In this sense, as Father George Florovsky says, the Church is a sacred community which is clearly distinguished from the “world,” that she is a holy Church. “St. Paul obviously uses the terms ‘Church’ and ‘Saints’ as coextensive and synonymous.”

Therefore it is a mistake for us to regard the Church as an ideological, religious or even magic place, but we should regard it is the Body of Christ and a communion of deification. With these presuppositions we can experience in the Church Christ’s victory over death. If we do not die to death and the sting of death—that is, the sin in us—by the power and energy of God, if we do not change from dead to living members of the Church, we cannot feel Christ’s victory over death, sin, and the devil. And then for us the whole work of the divine economy will not be a personal existential fact, but simply an historical event. Therefore the Church is a place of life and not an object of thought.

3 John Romanides: The ancestral sin, ed. Domos, 28-29

# **Identity** by Father Alexis Kouri

*Adapted from a homily given October 21, 2018 at Saint Michael Orthodox Church, Louisville, Kentucky.*

Today's scripture reading from Saint Luke's gospel (8:26–39) begins with our Lord crossing over the sea and landing in the area of the Gadarenes. This is not just crossing over the sea but it's crossing boundaries. The land of the Gadarenes was a land of the Gentiles, it was an area that was not faithful to the Jewish tradition. No well respecting rabbi would bring his followers across to the land of the Gadarenes. But Jesus does, and he sees a man who is possessed.

Actually, this man seems to be more than possessed, perhaps we could say *occupied*. He says his name is Legion. A legion was, generally, six thousand Roman soldiers. Oftentimes the Romans would use six thousand soldiers—a legion—to occupy a city that they were taking over. So here you have this man, *occupied* by demons. The Lord asks him his name. He doesn't really seem to have a name, or else he can't give it. He doesn't say, "My name is Elijah," or "My name is Isaac," or "My name is Samuel." He doesn't say anything like that. He says, "Legion." The demons not only have occupied him, but they have taken his identity. We don't know who he is. He has been completely defined—redefined—by what has occupied him. He has been defined by what assails him. He has been defined by what troubles him, by what torments him.

Perhaps we aren't all that different. It might not be legions of demons, but oftentimes we are occupied by so many thoughts, by so many feelings of inadequacy, we actually identify ourselves with those parts of us that we don't know

what to do with. We identify ourselves with our mistakes, with our failures, with our deficiencies and our inadequacies. We identify ourselves with our disappointments. We forget Who our true identity is.

Unhelpfully, we live in a culture that promotes our feeling of inadequacy with advertisements that say, *If you only had this you would feel better; if you only purchase this, your outlook on the world would be greater.* We have this advertisement way-of-life that makes us think we don't have enough. Combine that with our own sense of failure and deficiency, and our self-identity is really confused.

Looking again at this story about Jesus, we see that he takes a boat, crosses the Galilee, lands in the land of the Gadarenes, heals this man, then gets into a boat again and goes back. So, really, the whole purpose of him going over there was just for this single man, to heal this man who was occupied by demons. He healed him and gave him back his identity.

Jesus is still crossing boundaries to heal. He says to us that we are more than the sum total of our mistakes. We are more than our failures. We are more than our disappointments. We ought not to identify with those things that we or other people have deemed as insufficiencies. We are children of God. We have been baptized and chrismated. We have been marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit. As Christians this is where we see our identity. No matter how many people or advertisements tell us differently. No matter how much our own self-talk sometimes tells us differently. We have to remind ourselves of who we are, of what we were baptized into, of what we were sealed with. When we were sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit, this gave us a new identity, a real identity. When the people say *Amen* after each anointing with the chrism, they are saying, *This is a new*

*person, this is a new identity.* We're all agreeing with it. And we agree with it a bunch of times! We keep anointing, *The seal of the gift, the seal of the gift, . . . Amen! Amen! Amen!* This is an incredible part. The only other time we say all those Amens is the consecration of the Holy Gifts. We say three Amens. But at the chrismation, we say even more. *This is a new person now, than they were a moment ago.*

As our life becomes identified with Jesus Christ, it's important that we avoid a false understanding about identity, that identity would separate us or make us more distant from other people. In truth, being identified with Christ opens and enlarges our heart so that we can embrace more people. We notice that Jesus went to the people that the other religious people were afraid to go to. He visited the tax collectors. He visited the prostitutes and sinners. Jesus's understanding of who he was did not separate him from others but actually allowed him to embrace them.

Our identity in Christ gives us a foundation and stability, but it doesn't separate us, it doesn't divide us. In this day and age, there are so many things that are dividing people. Everybody seems to be picking a team. *I'm on this team, I'm not on that team.* We see people in our nation, republicans and democrats, black and white—all sorts of different divisions. (There's even Boston athletic divisions . . . and everybody else!) We have these divisions, but we shouldn't allow them to separate us. Our identity in Christ works to open our hearts so that we can embrace others.

Our participation in the sacramental life of the Church helps remind us of our identity in Christ. This includes fasting and confession, preparing for and receiving Holy Communion, participating in the social dimensions of parish life and serving in its various ministries, bringing our faith to our homes in daily prayer, knowing when the

upcoming services are, scheduling our life around the Great Feasts (and not being surprised when we see them in the bulletin the Sunday before, but knowing that these things are coming), and teaching our children the importance of all these things. Through an active life of the Church we find and preserve our identity in Christ.

So, let us remember our holy baptism and chrismation, that we have been sealed with Christ. In Christ we find our true identity. Perhaps we have to remind ourselves of this often. Perhaps in our prayer time we have to say, *Lord I come to you again, and I commit my life to you. Grant me to see myself as you see me, not as the world sees me, nor even how I see myself, for you have created me in your image and likeness, and you call me forth to great things.*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



# Don't Believe Everything You Think

by Derek Matthew Holt

Truly the soul is incapable by itself of studying its own thoughts and discerning them. But with the divine lamp lit, the light dispels the darkness from the house. Then a person sees his own thoughts, how they have been covered by impurity and the mud of sin. The sun rises and the soul sees its loss and begins to revoke the thoughts that had been so mixed with dirt and squalor.

— St. Macarius of Egypt<sup>1</sup>

The heart is deep beyond all things, and it is the man. Even so, who can know him?

— Jeremiah 17:5 (LXX)

When I was a new Orthodox Christian, a young priest's wife I was talking with impressed upon me an apt metaphor for my new faith. She likened the Orthodox Faith to the ocean; you can go as deep as you like—probing the seemingly endless depths—but it is also possible (and even recommended) to wade in the shallows for as long as you need. There is no pressure to be deified overnight. Not long afterwards, Father Alexander reiterated this notion to me in his own distinctive manner. “You won’t really be Orthodox until five years in,” he said with a wry smile, “then it starts to get hard.” Now, even eleven years into the Faith, perhaps the most difficult thing as a convert has been overcoming my old ways of thinking about God, the Gospel, the world, and

<sup>1</sup> St. Macarius the Great, “Homily 11,” *Orthodox Christianity*, <http://orthochristian.com/77887.html>

myself. These old ways were put into me in part from other Christian groups, emphasizing ideas and doctrines our own Orthodox faith does not emphasize, some of which even border on the heretical. An oft cited example of this would be the idea that God *predestines* a human soul to heaven or hell, regardless of the soul's own choice in the matter. However, another source of bad belief for me came from what I had previously considered an impartial boon to my faith: that is, learning and knowing the holy scriptures. To illustrate, consider the verse from Jeremiah quoted above. The verse you see printed comes from the Orthodox Study Bible, rendered to English from the Septuagint. Yet this rendering is very different from that which most Protestants and Catholics are familiar with. The language from the Masoretic text reads much differently in Jeremiah 17:9.<sup>2</sup> In the NIV we read, “The heart is *deceitful* above all things and *beyond cure*” and the KJV reads, “The heart is *deceitful* above all things and *desperately wicked*” (emphasis mine). These alternate renderings deeply inform the reader about the nature of mankind. From an Orthodox perspective, one might even say *misinform*. Indeed, rather than believing that we humans are incurably wicked in our deepest parts, the Orthodox scripture teaches us something very different about ourselves: that in our deepest parts lies the essence of who we become as God’s creatures, ultimately unknown to all but God, even to oneself.

How is it possible that we are not even aware of our own inward being? The God of all creation fashioned us to be good, whole creatures. He made us to know him and to be known by him. He put within us a spiritual eye, commonly

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, even the verse placement of this passage in the Masoretic is different from the Septuagint.

referred to as the *nous*, capable of governing our will and discerning good from evil, right from wrong, helpful from harmful. Yet because of the mire of sin we find ourselves in—the sins of others as well as our own—we are *practically blind* even to the thoughts that govern our own actions. We are blind to the dark forces working against us that St. Paul references in his letter to the Ephesians (6:12), and we do not recognize the urges that lead us to fear, anger, lust, and want. You might say our eye is deformed. Our Lord instructs us poignantly in this matter in his Sermon on the Mount: “The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Matt. 6:22–23) In this pitiable state, it is only by the light of Christ—the *divine lamp* from St. Macarius’ homily—that we begin to discern the movement of thoughts that agitate our will.

In the current age it seems the collective eye of our culture is growing considerably darker. We live in a time ruled almost entirely by sentiment. It’s as if we have put a megaphone to the mouths of the most sensitive and agitated among us, and asked them to tell us how to feel. If an idea or deed is deemed favorable, then we laud it the world over via the psychic extensions our social media provide; but if unfavorable, we offer it no quarter, pursuing it mercilessly in demand of either complete obeisance or exile. Inconsistent logic is rampant throughout the media, pornography has permeated much of it, and everyone comes off as rather angry or sarcastic most of the time. For one frequently *plugged in*—be it via the internet, television, or even radio—this mode of thinking seems a basic constant, and it is practically impossible to remain unformed by it.

“We who are fallen, like the fallen spirits,” teaches Elder Thaddeus of Vitovnica, “allow ourselves to become enslaved by things or people.”<sup>3</sup> The formation of thought from all manner of influence constitutes the formation of one’s *nous*, and by extension, one’s own self. “If our thoughts are kind, peaceful, and quiet, turned only toward good, then we also influence ourselves and radiate peace all around us—in our family, in the whole country, everywhere.... However, when we breed negative thoughts, that is a great evil. When there is evil in us, we radiate it among our family members and wherever we go.... Destructive thoughts destroy the stillness within, and then we have no peace.”<sup>4</sup> It’s easy to see which side of the Elder’s dichotomy we typically gravitate toward as a culture.

One can only wonder how we got here. Certainly the path can be traced backward through time to find pivotal developments in each century, be it the world at war in the 20th, the Industrial Revolution in the 19th, or the Enlightenment in the 18th. But as this paper is not meant to be an historical examination for the academy, I will try to explain it simply by fable.

Around the turn of the 20th Century, there was a wager between two of Satan’s top minions, the Director of the East and the Director of the West. They wanted to see which of them could more effectively dismantle the presence of the Christian faith throughout the world. The demon of the East said, “My method is simple: I will place over the Christians a yoke of government so heavy and misanthropic that they will

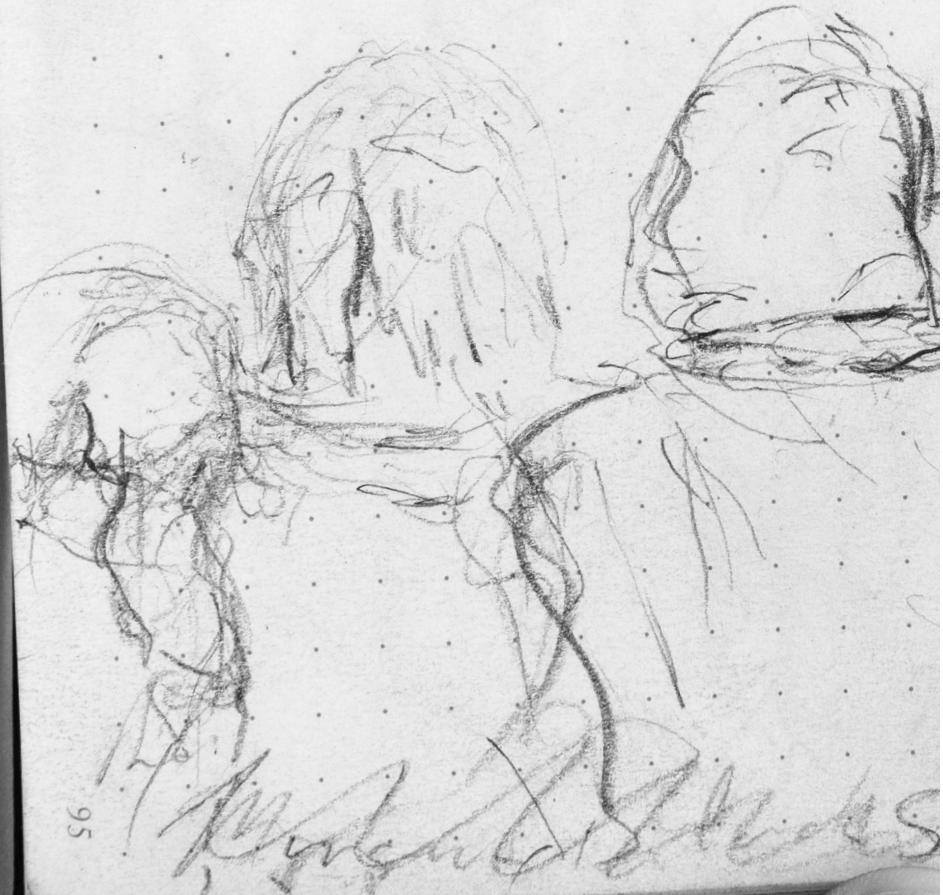
<sup>3</sup> *Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives*, (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2009), p. 123.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

quickly lose faith in a loving God and beneficent Creation. I will take away most of their freedoms, in particular their freedom of worship, and we will see just how quickly they give up on the whole venture.” And so the Director of the East stirred up revolution and war throughout his jurisdiction, killing millions and upending established governments. Then he set over the nations dictators who destroyed churches and established concentration camps for anyone who dared dissent, inspiring an outcry from the rest of the free world. Atheism was adopted as the official religion of many nations and great emphasis was put upon the people to serve the fatherland first and foremost.

But the demon of the West was the older, wiser and more crafty of the two. He told his companion that he would find only limited success with this approach. “You will discourage the faithful at first, of course,” he said, “but they will regroup underground and trust in God to deliver them in time. Afterwards, they will possess a fresh memory of just how terrible the tyranny was and cherish their freedom all the more.” So instead of opting for less freedom, the Director of the West devised to give the people as much freedom as possible. “Anything they think to do,” he crowed, “they shall be free to do. I will tell them it is their right to pursue their desires however they wish, so long as they are not physically harming each other. Any dissent or attempt to debate one’s desires will be decried as ‘hate’ or ‘bigotry.’ You will see, my friend, that though this method may take longer to implement, the result will be much more satisfying.”

In the philosophical novel, *Immortality*, Czech author Milan Kundera presciently observes the second demon’s plan unfolding just ahead of the 21st Century: “The concept of human rights goes back some two hundred years, but it reached its greatest glory in the second half of the 1970s.



95

Golden Blocks



Alexander Solzhenitsyn had just been exiled from his country and his striking figure, adorned with a beard and handcuffs, hypnotized Western intellectuals sick with a longing for the great destiny that had been denied them. It was only thanks to him that they started to believe, after a fifty-year delay, that in communist Russia there were concentration camps; even progressive people were now ready to admit that imprisoning someone for his opinions was not just. And they found an excellent justification for their new attitude: Russian communists violated human rights, in spite of the fact that these human rights had been gloriously proclaimed by the French Revolution itself! And so, thanks to Solzhenitsyn, human rights once again found their place in the vocabulary of our times; I don't know a single politician who doesn't mention ten times a day 'the fight for human rights' or 'violations of human rights.' But because people in the West are not violated by concentration camps and are free to say and write what they want, the more the fight for human rights gains in popularity the more it loses concrete content, becoming a kind of universal stance of everyone towards everything, a kind of energy that turns all human desires into rights. The world has become man's right and everything in it has become a right: the desire for love the right to love, the desire for rest the right to rest, the desire for friendship the right to friendship, the desire to exceed the speed limit the right to exceed the speed limit, the desire for happiness the right to happiness, the desire to publish a book the right to publish a book, the desire to shout in the street in the middle of the night the right to shout in the street.”<sup>5</sup>

5 Milan Kundera, *Immortality*, (New York, Grove, 1991), pp. 135-36.

Nearly thirty years after the publication of his novel, we see forming the mushroom cloud of Kundera's analysis. A recent article on ESPN's website describes the legal scene currently unfolding in the sphere of high school athletics in Connecticut. Three high school female athletes have filed a federal discrimination complaint against a state policy on transgendered athletes. The girls allege they have been denied a fair opportunity at success in their track competitions, due to the Constitution State's policy allowing for boys who identify as girls to participate in girls' competitions. They argue that "transgender girls have been consistently winning track and field events and the policy violates federal protections for female athletes." They contest that boys who identify as girls have an unfair advantage in a realm of female athletics that has only recently shown signs of significant growth. In response, Andraya Yearwood, one of the transgendered athletes, stated, "I have known two things for most of my life: I am a girl and I love to run."<sup>6</sup>

Yet this begs the question of Andraya and anyone on a similar line of thought: How do you *know*? By what measurement, analysis, observable phenomena, facts? It is by these criteria that we know *anything*. Without them, we can only say "we believe." As in religion, you can believe it's true, but in this country we are constitutionally prohibited from demanding others to believe as we do. Yet therein lies the rub. When our constitution guarantees our citizens' rights, yet citizens clamor for rights derived entirely from sentiment rather than any known measurement, be it biological, rational, municipal or otherwise, it starts to feel

<sup>6</sup> "Complaint Targets Transgender HS Track Athletes," ESPN, June 20, 2019, [https://www.espn.com/high-school/story/\\_/id/27015115/complaint-targets-transgender-hs-track-athletes](https://www.espn.com/high-school/story/_/id/27015115/complaint-targets-transgender-hs-track-athletes)

a little like the ship has lost its rudder. So how should we proceed when we are stripped of our capacity to judge by our measurements at the behest of even our preeminent scientists and scholars—such as when Dr. Deanna Adkins, professor at Duke University School of Medicine, stated before North Carolina’s federal district court that a person’s own perception of his or her gender identify is “the only medically supported determinant of sex,” while “it is counter to medical science to use chromosomes, hormones, internal reproductive organs, external genitalia, or secondary sex characteristics to override gender identity for purposes of classifying someone as male or female”?<sup>7</sup> One begins to wonder how we’ll ever find safe harbor in these waters.

But while boys in girls clothing are being conferred Connecticut’s annual Courage Award for racing against girls and winning all the races,<sup>8</sup> and florists and cake bakers are being rounded up for public humiliation by the digitally-mantled mob for the miscreants that they are, and buzzwords like “diversity” and “fluidity” hang constantly about the ear like infernal mosquitos, the Director of the West can barely hide his delight as sentiment continues its insidious creep onto ever more preposterous leverage. If we are to believe children as young as three can legitimately

7 Ryan T. Anderson, “Transgendered Ideology is Riddled with Contradictions. Here are the Big Ones,” *The Heritage Foundation*, Feb 9, 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/gender/commentary/transgender-ideology-riddled-contradictions-here-are-the-big-ones>

8 Jeff Jacobs, “Courage award for transgender athletes doesn’t tell the whole story,” *Gametime CT*, April 13, 2019, <https://www.gametimect.com/jeff-jacobs-courage-award-for-transgender-athletes-doesnt-tell-whole-story/>

decide their own gender identity,<sup>9</sup> how can we mock the white woman who wishes to renounce her race and present as black instead?<sup>10</sup> How can we deride the woman that spends a hundred thousand dollars on scores of plastic surgeries because she feels she just doesn't fit in?<sup>11</sup> How can we lampoon the geriatric for petitioning to have his legal age lowered by 20 years to help him get some more action on the dating apps?<sup>12</sup> How can we shake our heads in pity or disbelief when a man compels his doctor to sever his leg because he felt it "had been an 'invisible obstacle' to his happiness"?<sup>13</sup> And how can we clench our fists in disgust and outrage when (dare I say it?) adults with a penchant for children's bodies simply wish to let love win?<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ed Yong, "Young Trans Children Know Who They Are," *The Atlantic*, Jan 15, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2019/01/young-trans-children-know-who-they-are/580366/>

<sup>10</sup> Louis Staples, "White woman who 'changed race' thinks she will be able to have a black baby with a white man," *indy100* (blog), Jan 21, 2019, <https://www.indy100.com/article/white-woman-transition-race-white-husband-baby-8739161>

<sup>11</sup> Dana Lemon, "The woman who was so addicted to plastic surgery still has a hard time accepting herself," *Worldation*, July 25, 2017, <https://www.indy100.com/article/white-woman-transition-race-white-husband-baby-8739161>

<sup>12</sup> Camila Domonoske, "69-Year-Old Dutch Man Seeks to Change His Legal Age to 49," NPR, Nov 8, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/08/665592537/69-year-old-dutch-man-seeks-to-change-his-legal-age-to-49>

<sup>13</sup> Susannah Calahan, "The strange condition that has people hacking off healthy limbs," *New York Post*, <https://nypost.com/2015/09/06/this-strange-condition-makes-people-want-to-hack-off-a-healthy-limb/>.

<sup>14</sup> Rod Dreher, "Making Pedophilia Respectable," *The American Conservative*, Dec 5, 2018, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/thomas-o-carroll-mainstreaming-pedophilia/>.

“If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” Indeed, the eye of our society has become very dark, and we must be wary of just how persuasive the darkness can be. St. Paul charges us: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your *nous*, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom. 12:2). It is only by dedicating ourselves to the second injunction—cleansing the eye of our soul—that we may ever hope to accomplish the first. Solzhenitsyn knew this as well as perhaps anyone of the last 50 years after all the atrocities he witnessed and personally experienced in the gulag. In his melancholy assessment of human nature, he pondered, “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being, and who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”<sup>15</sup> As Orthodox Christians, we must be willing to examine our own hearts, parse our thoughts and “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Because for every astonishing and outlandish thought that brews today in the world, there are ten thousand boring old run-of-the-mill thoughts warping the *nous* in our own homes and churches. If anything, we who are in Christ and his Church have every tool necessary for the task of cleansing our eye, yet too often we’re content to sit idly in the stew of agitating thoughts. Instead, any thought disobedient to Christ must be halted at the door of our heart and sent back into the void. What’s more, as Orthodox Christians we must continue to affirm the

<sup>15</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 75.

humanity of those vehemently dismantling their own identity and reassembling it in the image of some incoherent fantasy driven by every capricious thought. We must strive to recognize instead the image of God within them, as indeed we strive to restore it within ourselves, beneath all the layers of delusion and the casuistries they manifest, seeking for them by prayer and warmth of heart the wholeness for which we all ultimately yearn.

But this is nothing new. “The weather shifts from cloudy to clear and then back to rain: thus it is with human nature. One must always expect clouds to hide the sun sometimes,”<sup>16</sup> writes Tito Colliander in his little classic, *Way of the Ascetics*. It’s foolish to despair in dark times, for *God is with us*. Let us instead embrace the trial in order that we might be refined. Let us emulate the Publican in accusing ourselves and avoid the temptation to think that because we are deemed worthy to receive the Holy Gifts, we are any more deserving than those suffering in the hell of their own conscience outside the church doors. This would simply be one more thought beguiling us away from the truth that the Church, like the God she serves, is like an ocean that can hold the entirety of God’s children and wash away the grime of every malformed presumption of self. Let us therefore wade in through the shallows in hopes of finding ourselves one day whole in the depths of God’s love.

<sup>16</sup> Tito Colliander, *Way of the Ascetics*, (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1985), p. 84.



# Fatherhood: On Earth as it is in Heaven

by John Super

Orthodox Christians love icons. We decorate them, venerate them, and even celebrate feast days commemorating miracles associated with them. But we always remember that icons are meant to point beyond themselves, for “the honor offered to the image passes to the archetype.”<sup>1</sup> For this reason, icons are commonly referred to as “windows to heaven.” The person or event depicted in an icon is a window through which we can connect with the reality represented. And this phenomenon reaches beyond paint and wood and stone.

When God created humankind in His own image (“icon” in Greek), He tasked us with continuing His work of ruling and filling the world (Gen. 1:26–28). As icons of God, man is meant to be a window, a means by which God Himself is made known. “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead” (Rom. 1:20). Saint John of Damascus commenting on this verse says, “For we see images in created things intimating to us dimly reflections of the divine....”<sup>2</sup> God made the world so that created things—even things like the sun or a rose, but mostly especially human beings—would be icons through which we come to know God and connect with Him.

No other place in creation are God’s attributes more vividly displayed than in human family relations. We know

<sup>1</sup> St. John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, I.35

<sup>2</sup> Treatise III.21

God as “Our Father,” Jesus is called our brother (Heb. 2:11), and the Church our mother (see Gal. 4:26). These are the ultimate realities our created human families are designed to direct us to. And our primary experience of the Fatherhood of God comes from the icons of our earthly fathers. They reveal to us the hierarchical structure of the universe, provide examples of God’s fatherly care, and will be judged according to how well they bore God’s image as fathers.

Fathers reveal that the world is inherently hierarchical. Contrary to modern notions that maleness and thus fatherhood are evil constructs derived of an oppressive patriarchy, St. Paul says that God the Father is the source of every family in heaven and on earth (see Eph. 3:14–15). God has revealed Himself as Father in the creation of Adam (see Gen. 5:1; Luke 3:38), the establishment of the people of Israel (Deut. 32:6), and ultimately through His Son, Jesus Christ (Jn. 14:7–9). Everything good in ordered existence has its genesis in the Energies of God (cf. Rom. 11:36).

When our Lord warned against calling anyone on earth your father (Matt. 23:9), He did not abolish fatherhood in general. A quick search of the term “father” will turn up references by the Apostles and even Jesus Himself (Luke 16:24; 1 Cor. 4:15; Col. 3:21) referring to “Father Abraham,” St. Paul’s spiritual fathering of the Corinthians, and instructions for fathers as head of their families. Our Lord’s prohibition is directed against giving any person, teacher, or leader the honor fitting only to God.<sup>3</sup> Leaders, especially fathers, are encouraged to look to God as their ultimate source of wisdom, and not lean on their own understanding (cf. Prov. 3:5).

<sup>3</sup> Archbishop Averky (Taushev), *The Four Gospels* (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Seminary Press, 2015), p. 183.

So, rather than diminishing the role of earthly fathers, both spiritual and familial, our Lord actually reveals their true function in our world. Fathers are meant to point us beyond themselves. They show us that God's world is orderly and in wisdom He made it all. Anarchists notwithstanding, authority is a good thing. When an earthly father bows his head before his Heavenly Father, he acknowledges his place under God's ultimate authority.

Earthly fathers are icons of God because they are living examples to their children of God's fatherly care. Our Creator God adopts us into His family, the Church, in Holy Baptism and Chrismation, providing us a holy place to grow and a home to be nurtured in. He sustains our life as His children by giving of Himself in Holy Communion and assuring us of His love in all the Divine Services and Holy Mysteries of the Church.

Even when we stray from the right path, as children inevitably do, our Father disciplines us, encouraging us that His love is too great to leave us the way we are (cf. Heb. 12:7). Likewise, every earthly father corrects his children to ensure they are building their lives on the sure foundation of the gospel of Christ. He also reflects the faithfulness of God by seeking to provide a safe place for his family to grow and learn. One wonders if today's aversion to the Christian faith in the West, along with the rise of atheism, paganism, and witchcraft, is not a direct result of fathers preaching a false gospel about God by not faithfully fulfilling their role as father.

Because fathers bear God's image to their children and the world, at the judgement they will give an account of how well they represented Him in life. Our Lord teaches, "To whom much is given, much will be required" (Luke 12:48). Indeed, the high calling of fatherhood is a formidable

endowment—to guide, nurture, and hand down to the next generation the wisdom and bounty of a God-ordered life. But with this great treasure comes great responsibility.

When everything is laid bare, standing before Him to whom all must give an account (Heb. 4:13), to the extent that we as fathers pointed faithfully to the Fatherhood of God, we will receive a reward (1 Cor. 3:14–15). But if anything is found hindering others from seeing the true character of God, teaching by our examples that God is selfish, capricious, or just plain uninterested, that will be a terrible loss.

As fathers we are presented with a colossal charge: to be icons of God's fatherly concern to those under our care. It is our duty to accurately image forth, though dimly, the beauty and order of our Creator's design. When faced with the immensity of this responsibility, we fathers must remember that not only do we have a judge to answer to, but a model to imitate, a father to depend on, and a Savior to call on.

# The Sacrament of Confession

by Father Lucas Rice

*The Sacrament of Confession (sometimes called Penance) is a vital part of the Christian experience. I hope to answer some of the more common questions about confession. This article will utilize the style of the Commonitory of St. Vincent of Lerins which involves an imaginary question-and-answer-style conversation.*

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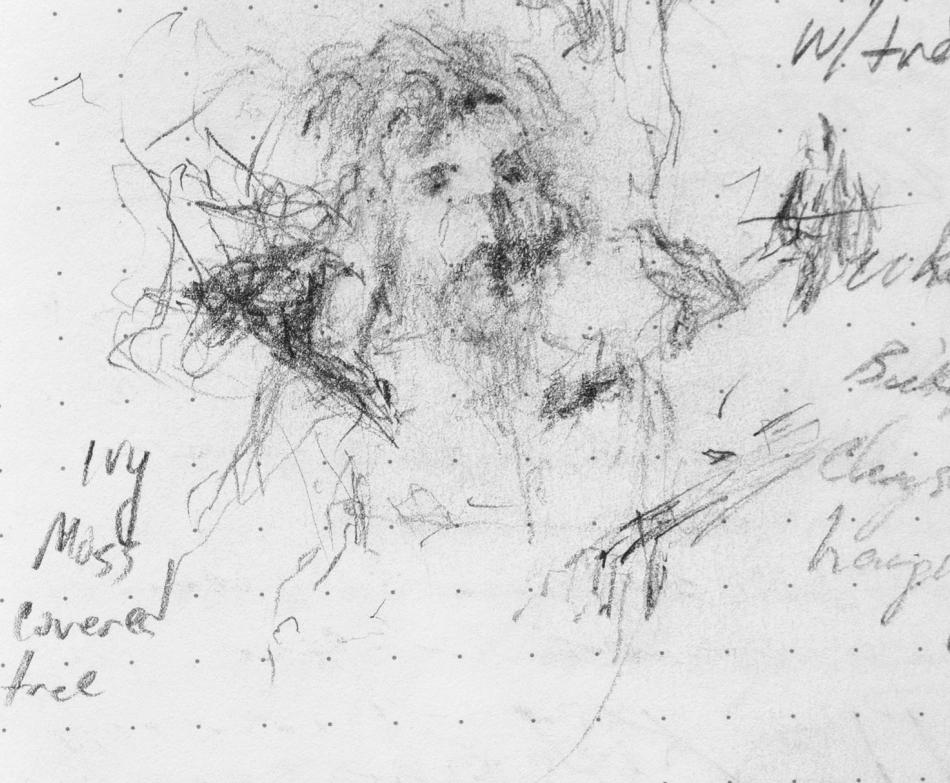
## Why can't I just confess my sins to God directly in private prayer. Why must I go to priest for Confession?

Fr. Thomas Hopko once reflected, “Some say that there is no need to confess sins openly and publicly. They say that people can confess directly to God. Such an idea is total nonsense. Confession to God in secret is no confession at all. It is simply the acknowledgment before the Lord that we know what He knows! Confession by definition is open and public. If it is not, it is simply not confession.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, to make an authentic confession, we need others. In his epistle, St. James urges the faithful to “confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5:16). We can no more confess by ourselves than we can baptize ourselves or make communion by ourselves. Our Lord promises to be present when two or more believers gather in his name (Matt 18:20). We need confession because we need other people.

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hopko, “If We Confess Our Sins.” Booklet published by the Department of Religious Education of The Orthodox Church in America.

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## **I now understand that we need to confess to other Christians but why must we confess our sins to a priest?**

Because there are some important things that only priests can do. Most importantly, only priests can offer the Prayer of Absolution. In this prayer, the priest acknowledges that all forgiveness comes from God. For members of the body of Christ, the Church is an important part of God's forgiveness. Thus, the priest, by virtue of his office, has the ability to "bind and loose" sins (cf. Matt 16:18–19). The priest is also trained to guide—both to help comfort the penitent soul and help prevent such sins in the future.

**What you are saying makes sense, Father. I can see the benefit to confessing to an older, very experienced priest. I must be honest, however. I don't think I can confess to a priest who is much younger than I am.**

It is well to remember that the healing comes from the medicine not from the doctor. It is true that older priests often have a wealth of experiences that enrich their ministry. They do not, however, have *more* of the grace of the Priesthood than any other priest. Each priest is unique and calls upon his talents, spiritual gifts, and personal experiences to help the people of God. Whether he is 25 or 95, a priest is blessed by Christ's holy Church to offer this spiritual medicine.

**Very well, Father, but I must now be honest with a concern: how can I be certain that my confession will be kept in confidence?**

A priest can and most likely will lose his job if he betrays

the confessional! Several canons of the Church call for immediate deposition for one who does not keep confession in the strictest of confidences. (In other words, priests will lose their priesthood and be returned to the ranks of the laity.) One common analogy teaches that each tassel on a priest's stole represents a secret that he must keep "around his neck." For some people confidence in a confessor comes rather easily. For others, it is very difficult to share intimate secrets with anyone. Regardless of one's comfort with the process of Confession, he or she should find some comfort that their Confessor-priest understands the imperative of secrecy.

**Thank you, Father, you have offered me some comfort.  
Please now, tell me what a proper confession should look like. What should I say?**

I see three major steps in this process: one, preparation. One must prepare herself in prayerful reflection. There are a number of guides to the sacrament of Confession that prove helpful. St. John of Kronstadt in particular has a beautiful guide that is readily available both in print and on the internet.<sup>2</sup> The pocket prayer books from the Archdiocese have a serviceable guide as well.

Two, tell your sins to the priest. Focus on your behaviors and not on your emotions. List the bad things you have done and the good things that you did not do. Be concise but try not to conceal anything. The priest may ask questions to further understand where you are coming from.

Three, be open to penance or prescription. The priest

<sup>2</sup> "A Preparation for Confession," St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, <https://www.orthodox.net/confess/confmed.html>

may simply offer the prayer of absolution: “God it was who forgave David through Nathan the Prophet when he confessed his sins . . .” More than likely he will also offer some advice or encouragement to the penitent. He might offer a specific directive such as praying a certain prayer or meditating upon a passage of scripture.

### **How often should I give a confession?**

This answer varies from person to person. Most people should offer their confessions at least four times per year perhaps during the major fasts: Lent, Apostles, Dormition, Nativity. Many people however should confess more frequently. One should ask his spiritual father how often he should confess.

### **Can any priest hear my confession?**

Not necessarily. An Orthodox Christian may give a confession to any Orthodox Christian who is blessed to hear confessions. Not all priests are blessed to hear confessions. Furthermore, some monastics are blessed to hear confessions although they are not ordained to the Holy Priesthood, however they are usually restricted to hearing confessions only from other monastics. Such confessors cannot say the Prayer of Absolution which can only be offered by ordained presbyters.

### **You spoke of a Spiritual Father within the context of Confession. Who or What is a Spiritual Father? What does he have to do with the Sacrament of Confession?**

A Spiritual Father is priest who gives regular direction





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to his spiritual child. The Sacrament of Confession is a vital part—but not the whole—of spiritual direction. The spiritual father advises his children on all aspects of spiritual growth: prayer, ascetic disciplines, works of service, relationships and so forth. Usually this office is occupied by one’s pastor (i.e. the *protos* of one’s parish). Sometimes people ask other parish priests or even monastics to serve as their spiritual fathers—this is acceptable as well.

### **Must an Orthodox Christian have a spiritual father?**

We were created free! Many choose to order their interior life on their own. Some may desire a spiritual father but find that certain life circumstances make it hard to find or maintain a spiritual father. That being said, it is certainly normal for a serious Orthodox Christian to receive spiritual direction from a father-confessor. In fact, the Sacrament of Confession originated within the Monastic tradition where confession is inseparable from the direction provided by a spiritual father.

**I have observed different traditions in relating confession and the Eucharist. Some seem take the Eucharist only after a very recent confession. Others seem to take communion frequently regardless of how often they offer confession. Which is correct?**

It is true that there are different traditions in this regard. Speaking with great generalities one may observe that some Christians take communion at nearly every liturgy or at least several times per month. These same believers may only give a confession four times per year or less. This practice is common amongst the “Byzantine” or “Greek” churches

(of which Antioch is a part). Conversely, other Orthodox take communion less frequently but nearly always shortly after giving confession to a priest. This practice is more common—but not exclusive to—our Churches in the Slavic lands: Russia, Ukraine, Serbia, etc. Which is more correct? One should follow the guidance of one's spiritual father and—more generally—the tradition common to the parish to which they belong.

**Thank you for your time Father!**

You are quite welcome. May God bless your participation in these holy things!



# The Necessity for Confrontation

by Nicholas Samaras

I heard about him from college classmates  
who played at being summer pilgrims,  
returning from Greece in the colours  
of autumn with rumours of levitation,

tales of the arcane and the modern,  
from a place where wisps of silver clouds  
touch the slanted earth. I sat intrigued  
at the breathless recounting of clairvoyance

gained from “spiritual calisthenics,”  
the theology professor who invited his class to meet  
“a man who can tell you every act you ever committed”—  
and each student pondering, then politely deferring.

I thought of those deferments. I gathered  
every first-hand witness I could hear and looked  
deep into the mirror in my room, knowing myself,  
until I bought a plane ticket for the hooked

edge of August. Propelled, I remembered the stories:  
the snakes that listen to him, obedient.  
The fact that every time he prays, a demon screams.  
Until I reached the green peninsula

and, from the boat, saw the expanse, the hive  
of the jungle, a far green that suggested silver.  
I recalled, “Every wounded ego cries out  
for Hell to soothe it”—and pushed myself

to walk into confrontation with myself.  
I thought of my songwriter mentor who composed  
only in a room with no mirrors—no beautiful view—  
to face solely the blank paper, the white canvas, and her soul.

Alone, I hiked for hours on a dirt path  
the size of my body.  
In the middle of the forest, twisting  
down thatched gullies, I slowly deciphered

a sudden white sign that spelled out,  
“This way to the cell of Father Paisios.  
Write down and leave your prayers—  
but leave him alone.”

I couldn’t listen to that.  
I thought of the legend of the saint petting  
even the wild grey wolf  
that loped to his door.

I thought of all the accounts  
of saints and demons who visited and plagued him  
in the funnel of the black night.  
I thought of Father Paisios,

reading the light in the faces of men—  
imagining that all I’d be able to see  
in the light of his face  
would be my own darkness.

I pushed on and came to his hut  
on the mountain slope, noting  
the tissues of clouds that touched  
the conifers below me. I dreaded

the answer but was determined to confront it.  
I wanted a stability, an Orthodoxy  
in which to face myself, to stand for once  
honestly before a man's honesty.

Still struggling in the posture of ascent,  
I looked up to his hut's silence.  
I waited for any sound of stirring—  
to hear birds, the rustle of trees,  
  
the ricochet of my heartbeat.  
In the longest moment, I stood there,  
wavering between shadow and light,  
reflection and turning, composition  
  
and revision. Panting with effort,  
I faced the weather-beaten hermitage  
of Father Paisios, a hut with no mirrors,  
a closed door and threshold still inviting,  
  
my hand on the gate's bell rope,  
my wavering moment there of living  
in the darkest fear and deepest hope,  
in the deepest fear and darkest hope.

# The Christian Life as Pilgrimage

by William W. Weber

The author of *The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp*, writing in the second half of the 2nd century, began his work as follows:

*The church of God sojourning at Smyrna to the church of God sojourning at Philomelium and to all those of the Holy and Catholic Church sojourning in every place: may mercy, peace, and love be multiplied from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Together, brothers and sisters, we are sojourners on a pilgrimage. As sojourners, we are strangers traveling in a foreign land without holding citizenship there. And as pilgrims, we are aliens visiting for a short while in another's land. We have embarked upon a great pilgrimage to our true homeland, God's Heaven, where our citizenship lies (Phil. 3:20).

The Bible speaks of the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—as sojourners and pilgrims (see, for example, Gen. 12:10, 35:27, and 47:9). St. Paul comments about this as follows:

*By faith he [Abraham] sojourned in the land of promise as in another's country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked for a city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth (Heb. 11:9–10, 13).*

The city he speaks of is the Heavenly City, the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1–2). Until we get there, everywhere we walk in this age has no foundation and is mere shifting sand, as it literally was for the patriarchs in the desert.

In the Law of Moses, God commanded that the Israelites make three annual pilgrimages to the place of sacrifice, His Mercy Seat, where He dwelt among His people. They traveled for the Feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Once the temple was built their journey was to the earthly Jerusalem. As they climbed upwards to Mount Zion, they would sing the Songs of Ascent (Ps. 119–133) that we sing in Great Lent during the Presanctified Liturgy. At the top they would meet their God in sacrifice and praise. So also would Moses and Elijah in their personal pilgrimages to face God on holy mountains.

These Old Testament patterns continue in the Church. The faithful take pilgrimages to all manner of holy places, but especially to Jerusalem. There our Lord made His Supreme Sacrifice on the Cross, journeyed to Hades to free the dead, and rose victorious on the third day. The Church provides us with liturgical pilgrimages to bring the Spirit to our earthly sojourn. Every week starts with “Blessed is the Kingdom.” The end of our pilgrimage is the Blessed Kingdom itself. So every week we move from the first day, the Day of Resurrection, to the next Sunday, the Eighth Day, which is a symbol of the Eternal Kingdom.

On September 1, we start a new church year. And on September 8, the eighth day, we celebrate the Nativity of the Theotokos, which is the beginning of our Salvation. Then comes the Universal Exaltation of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross, without which there is no journey. In the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple, we celebrate Her pilgrimage to the Holy of Holies to meet God and prepare to

become the Mother of God. Afterwards comes the Nativity of our Lord. The Holy Theotokos and Joseph the Betrothed take a pilgrimage to their ancestral home in Bethlehem. There Christ is born and begins His walking out His pilgrimage on earth. To get to the newborn King, the Wise Men make their pilgrimage. And because of the murderous wrath of Herod, the Holy Family take another journey, going from Bethlehem to Egypt and then back to Nazareth. Next follows His Baptism and the Theophany of the Holy Trinity, the heart and goal of our pilgrimage. Christ's journey continues with His Presentation in the Temple. Then we take a step back to celebrate His Annunciation and becoming man in the womb of the Virgin Mary, where His pilgrimage from Heaven to earth began. On Palm Sunday we begin to see where our pilgrimage will take us in this world—the reaction of self-love swiftly shifting hellward. But over Pascha, Life triumphs over death and His victorious pilgrimage opens the path of pilgrimage to us. Christ's earthly pilgrimage is completed in His Ascension and then He sends the Spirit down at Pentecost to equip us for our own pilgrimage. Finally, we celebrate His Transfiguration and our Lady's Dormition, both figures of our pilgrimage from earthly death to Divine Transformation. And all these feasts are communal, in common, experienced together in our common pilgrimage.

While this pilgrimage of ours is one of joy, let us not forget that it is also one of combat. Our situation is deadly serious. Remember Herod and the massacre of the innocents! Remember St. Polycarp, whose pilgrimage ended in martyrdom! We are in the arena and our enemy wants to kill us. We must press forward in our journey. "The present is not a life to be loved, but to be tolerated," said St. Augustine. So "as sojourners and pilgrims," we must adhere

closely to St. Peter's admonition to "abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul" (1 Pet. 2:11). We are not there yet, brothers and sisters; "nevertheless, in keeping with His promise, we expectantly await new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2 Pet. 3:13).

\* \* \*

The following story may be taken as an addendum. St. Paisios once dug a grave for himself and used to lie in it. "Someone asked him, 'Father, aren't you afraid?' 'What should I fear?' he replied. 'We must all be ready for death. Our life is like a journey; just as you stay in a hotel at night and depart in the morning, so do we merely pass through this life. The critical thing is to be prepared for our departure'"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Saint Paisios the Athonite*, (Vasilika, Thessaloniki, Greece: Holy Hesychasterion "Evangelist John the Theologian," 2018), pp. 198-199.

That's not sacrament  
Not sacrament if  
not, then what is  
it?  
Is it symbol? Is it  
not symbol?  
Is it metaphor?



# Come Visit with Saint Nektarios

*by Lindsey Weber with William Weber*

How can one begin to write about the spiritual treasures hidden in plain sight in Greece? Or even more, explain God's grace in His saints that is waiting to be found within the churches and monasteries of that blessed land?

The centennial of St. Nektarios' falling asleep in the Lord is coming up next year. He is perhaps Greece's most beloved contemporary saint. There will be great celebrations as the date of November 9, 2020 draws near. In honor of the Saint and his coming day, I want to dedicate this account of our pilgrimage to Greece as it relates to him.

First, before beginning, a brief word is in order about why he has been honored so much by God and the faithful. He was full of the virtues. Slandered by hierarchs, left homeless and hungry, "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" like our Lord (Is. 53:3), St. Nektarios humbly forgave time and again, persevering with joy and love through tortuous trials, showing the love of Christ to everyone he met, ever stooping to serve, but never lowering himself to fight back in word or deed.

St. Nektarios is especially known for the monastery he founded and nurtured on Aegina, a lovely island just an hour or so by ferry from Piraeus, the port of Athens, Greece. Visiting this island is only a day trip, some people say. But if one is to stop and experience the saints there through contemplation and prayer, a longer stay is recommended. My husband and I were able to visit this holy isle for three days this summer. Lodging at Souvala, the second ferry port on the island of Aegina, we had easy access to St.

Nektarios' monastery, Holy Trinity, as well as other inspiring monasteries.

Our taxi driver would let us off at a specific monastery and then return for us at a pre-arranged time. Having a designated time for pick-up was most helpful as cell phone reception could be difficult from remote mountain monasteries and churches. Throughout our pilgrimage we found that arriving early to holy places, 7:00 in the morning or so, gave us precious time before crowds arrived. How amazing to spend time with the Lord in the presence of his saints, with their relics and icons, without the press of others waiting to do the same. Coming early allowed us to be there for Divine Liturgy, where we were blessed to hear the beautiful angelic voices of the nuns at Holy Trinity and venerate the relics of St. Nektarios without being hurried.

Following the Liturgy, we had the delight of visiting St Nektarios' cell and striking up a conversation with four pious pilgrims from Romania. The mother expressed a beautiful prayer with her limited English—for the Lord to "put glue on our heart to God." The ladies asked us if we would like to join them at St. Nektarios' sarcophagus for a spontaneous Akathist to the Saint. As the Akathist progressed, alternating between Romanian and English, the fragrance began. Though other relics of the saints that we venerated emitted a beautiful aroma, I still struggled with skepticism. So I began sniffing the nearby flowers—perhaps they were what I was smelling? But they were artificial! And besides, our new friends were also enjoying the heavenly fragrance.

Our next holy site was the Monastery of Panagia Chrysoleontissa, the highest point on the island. The drive up was spectacular as we climbed the mountain road while looking down over the island and the sparkling Aegean

below. As happened repeatedly throughout Greece, we met inspiring monastics. A warm, endearing nun directed us to the centuries-old miraculous icon of the Mother of God from which the monastery gets its name. Before this icon, St. Nektarios himself had prayed; and he used to come many times to visit this monastery as part of his own pilgrimage. It was here he came to commune with the Lord shortly before his passing.

Returning by ferry to the Greek mainland, we visited St. Nektarios' room at the Aretaieion Hospital in Athens. There we were warmly ushered into the room where the Saint spent his final days on earth and passed on to the Lord. Today this precious space is preserved as a chapel where people come and pray and place their requests to the Saint under his pillow on his bed. It is awe-inspiring to stand in this holy room where his first posthumous miracle was performed right after his repose. As a nurse prepared the Saint's body for burial, one of his garments was set on the adjacent bed where a paralytic lay. The invalid immediately got up and walked! The testimony of the healed man may be seen on the wall as you enter. Also in connection with the Saint's passing, a heavenly fragrance filled the room. Those in the hospital smelled it for weeks. And for many years after his death, his body remained incorrupt and continued to be fragrant. Even today, people may still encounter his sacred aroma.

Before flying back to America, our final visit was to Spata, a small village near the Athens airport. We walked up to the Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God to venerate the icons and relics and pray before them. After praying for a while, we began to notice a sweet smell which we soon realized was coming from a relic of St. Nektarios! I never seem to learn, O me of little faith. I ended up asking

one of the church members, “Did someone clean the cover over these relics with something that had a perfumed smell?” “No,” they answered. It was indeed the fragrance of the Saint. To many Orthodox Greeks this would just seem normal, unlike skeptical me.

I really should have known better. On our trip we had been blessed several times to experience the heavenly scent of God’s saints. While we were venerating a saint’s relic in Thessaloniki, the priest commented that it always exuded a beautiful fragrance. A priest on the island of Corfu, Greece informed us that a particular relic which was redolent at the time we were there did not always emit a fragrance. Over the course of our pilgrimage we noticed that in some cases a lovely aroma would become delightfully noticeable as prayers were being offered. The most important thing is to entreat His grace-filled saints to pray for us and those for whom we seek God’s mercy. “Wondrous is God in His Saints!” (Ps. 67:36 LXX).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A number of resources are available on saints and pilgrimages. *Saint Nektarios, The Saint of our Century* is an outstanding biography. An excellent online resource for St. Nektarios and other saints is the Saints and Feasts section at [www.johnsanidopoulos.com](http://www.johnsanidopoulos.com). For visiting Greece, an indispensable resource is *Evolette, A Pilgrim’s Guide to Greece*. For visiting monasteries in the United States, *Atlas of American Orthodox Christian Monasteries* is very useful. The saints await your visit!

# Saint Jacob of Hamatoura

by Elijah M. Jacob

On the 13th of October in the Holy Orthodox Church we commemorate our righteous father Saint Jacob of Hamatoura. In the late thirteenth century, Saint Jacob (or James) dwelled and struggled at the Monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos on Mount Hamatoura, which is located between the promontory of Hamat and Tripoli, Lebanon. The Mamluk Dynasty of Egypt had been in control of much of the Levant, not ceasing to shamelessly destroy Orthodox churches and attempting to convert Christians to Islam. The monk Jacob, in his utter boldness in faith, rebuilt the Monastery of the Dormition after its destruction at the hands of the Mamluks. He became a popular, valiant teacher of Christians in his region, so much so that the jealous Mamluks set out to stifle and convert him. He held fast against their pressures and stubbornly refused what they had to offer. He and a group of pious fellow Christians were tortured for more than a year in Tripoli, and he was finally beheaded and burned so he could not be honorably buried by those who shared his faith. Shortly thereafter he was glorified in God and was added to a synaxarion at the Patriarchal Monastery of Balamand. Due to the sheer oppressiveness of various Muslim sultanates and the resulting plummet in Christian literacy<sup>1</sup>, Saint Jacob was lost to history.

Our merciful God, however, would not allow him to be forgotten, and Saint Jacob would bestow many miracles

<sup>1</sup> "Holy Hieromartyr Jacob of Hamatoura," *Mystagogy Resource Center*, October 13, 2015, <https://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2015/10/holy-hieromartyr-jacob-of-hamatoura.html>



upon the faithful of Lebanon, including the finding of his relics and the revelation of his life. Archimandrite Panteleimon (Farah) of the Monastery of the Dormition is responsible for the renewed veneration of Saint Jacob. It is interesting to note that Father Panteleimon's spiritual father was Elder Isaac (Atallah), the spiritual father of Father Alexander Atty and the spiritual son and biographer of Saint Paisios the Athonite.

While laboring on the Holy Mountain, Saint Jacob appeared to Archimandrite Panteleimon in a dream, revealing much about his life and adjuring him to return to Lebanon and to rebuild the Monastery of the Dormition. Not being one to trust his thoughts and dreams, Father Panteleimon revealed the dream to his spiritual father, who through spiritual insight determined the dream to be from God. So he departed the Holy Mountain and followed the saint's instructions. Hamatoura Monastery, as it is commonly referred to, was rebuilt in 1994 and remains a bastion of Antiochian Orthodoxy to this day.

Eventually, after the reconstruction of the monastery, the synaxarion was found at the Monastery of Balamand in its collection of manuscripts. Services in his honor were written by the monks of Hamatoura, including a Paraklesis service, an Akathist, a Vespers service, and a Divine Liturgy. On his feast day in 2002, hymns were sung in his honor for the first time. Father John Valadez, acquainted with the saint's life, writes of a particularly awe-some miracle in an article in *Death to the World*. "He appeared to one woman, revealing where his precious relics were, however the monks disregarded her instructions. In restoring the vandalized church of the monastery, it was only after re-working the church floor that they discovered a most sacred treasure, for

five skeletons lay there.”<sup>2</sup> Miracles surrounding these relics are many, with the oil from the vigil lamp in Saint Jacob’s reliquary often the vessel. But within the oil itself lies its own miracle. The Mamluks, in the interest of keeping the Christian population in Tripoli suppressed, beheaded Saint Jacob and cremated his body so no proper burial could take place. However, God preserved the relics of his holy servant. When they were discovered by the monks, they found within his skull a clot of blood. Today, when vials of oil are taken from the reliquary lamp and held to light, one can see a subtle presence of blood.

The ancient Patriarchate of Antioch have been given a rich inheritance in our saints. There are many families in our community who revere Saint Jacob, and he has blessed many of us with his miracles. If you wish to learn more about Saint Jacob, the websites of Death to the World magazine, the Mystagogy Resource Center, and Hamatoura Monastery itself are helpful, along with our own library at Saint Michael parish.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> “The Cedar of Lebanon: St Jacob the Martyr,” *Death to the World*, October 10, 2017, <http://deathtotheworld.com/articles/the-cedar-of-lebanon-st-jacob-the-martyr/>

<sup>3</sup> An article titled “Life of Holy Jacob the Hamatourian, Hieromartyr of Tripoli” is available in Thomas Library, Saint Michael Orthodox Church, Louisville, KY.





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