

We would like to welcome all parish visitors and invite you to join us after the Liturgy for Coffee hour.

**ORTHODOX CHURCH OF THE MOTHER OF GOD
OCA – Diocese of New York-New Jersey**

V. Rev. Dr. Matthew Searfoorce, Rector

Sub-Deacon Edward Dawson

Sub-Deacon Vlashi

Parish Council President: Andrew Romanofsky

Parish Council Vice President: Dean Inferrera



Sunday, August 20, 2017

Gospel: Matthew 18:23-35

Tone 2

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 9-2:12

11th Sunday after Pentecost: Afterfeast of the Dormition of the Mother of God

Prophet Samuel (11th c. B.C.). Hieromartyr Philip, Bishop of Heraclius, and with him Martyrs Severus, Memnon, and 37 soldiers in Thrace (3rd c.). Martyr Heliodorus (380).

Troparion – Tone 1

In giving birth you preserved your virginity, / In falling asleep you did not forsake the world, O Theotokos. / You were translated to life, O Mother of Life, / And by your prayers, you deliver our souls from death.

Kontakion – Tone 2

Neither the tomb, nor death could hold the Theotokos, / Who is constant in prayer and our firm hope in her intercessions. / For being the Mother of Life, / She was translated to life by the One who dwelt in her virginal womb.



Afterfeast of the Dormition of the Mother of God

Prayer Requests

For Health of:

Peter George Buletza, presently hospitalized; the brother of our Diocesan Treasurer, Matushka Mary Breton, offered by Archbishop Michael and the Diocese of NY/NJ.

Thomas Anderson, the husband of Barbara Anderson of our OCA Pension Office, underwent surgery on Wednesday, August 16, offered by Archbishop Michael and the Diocese of NY/NJ.

In Memory of:

Barbara Funk, who fell asleep in the Lord last night, Saturday 8/19, offered by Orthodox Church of the Mother of God, Archbishop Michael and the Diocese of NY/NJ.

Carol, our sister-in-law offered, by Linda and Richard Dantinne.

Paul Szabo, offered by Linda Jankowski.

Archpriest Leonte Simion Copacia, Jr., fell asleep in the Lord on August 16, 2017, offered by the OCA, Archbishop Michael and the Diocese of NY/NJ.

Panikhida:

Anne & Carol Dantinne, offered by the Dantinne family.

The Philokalia: Daily Readings

He who acts rightly should ascribe the grace of so doing to God, for along with our being He has given us everything else.

- St Peter of Damascus, A Treasury of Divine Knowledge

Liturgical Schedule

Sunday, August 20th

9:40 am: Hours
10:00 am: Divine Liturgy
11:30 am: Panikhida: Anne
& Carol Dantine

Saturday, August 26th

6:30 pm: Vespers

Sunday, August 27th

9:40 am: Hours
10:00 am: Divine Liturgy

Saturday, September 2nd

6:30 pm: Vespers

Sunday, September 3rd

9:40 am: Hours
9:45 am: General
Confession
10:00 am: Divine Liturgy

Saturday, September 9th

6:30 pm: Vespers

Sunday, September 10th

9:40 am: Hours
10:00 am: Divine Liturgy

Saturday, September 16th

6:30 pm: Vespers

Sunday, September 12th

9:40 am: Hours
10:00 am: Divine Liturgy

Bulletin Sponsors

*The Dantine Family;
Linda Jankowski*

Readings:

The Prokeimenon in the 2nd Tone:

The Lord is my strength and my song. / He is become my salvation.
(Psalm 117:14)

vs. The Lord has chastened me sorely, but He has not given me over to death.
(Psalm 117:18)

Another, Tone3 (Song of the Theotokos):

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. !
(Luke 1:46-47)

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 9-2:12

Brethren, you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. This is my defense to those who would examine me. Do we not have the right to our food and drink? Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a wife, as the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? Do I say this on human authority? Does not the law say the same? For it is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of a share in the crop. If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits? If others share this rightful claim upon you, do not we still more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

Alleluia in the 2nd Tone:

May the Lord hear you in the day of trouble! May the name of the God of Jacob protect thee! *(Psalm 19:2)*

vs. Save the King, O Lord, and hear us on the day we call to Thee!
(Psalm 19:10)

Another, Tone 2 (Song of the Theotokos):

Arise, O Lord, into Thy resting place, Thou and the ark of Thy holiness! .
(Psalm 131:8)

Gospel: Matthew 18:23-35

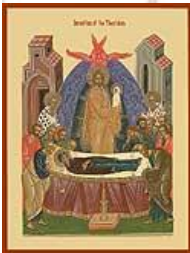
The Lord said this parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; and as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him the lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and besought him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place, Then

his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to everyone of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Orthodox Quote of the Day

Reflect concerning the most glorious miracles of God which have been performed upon His slaves from the beginning of the world, and especially of how the Lord, having humbled Himself and suffered for the sake of our salvation, has benefacted and sanctified the human race; and for all this give thanksgiving to God, the Lover of mankind.

Paisius Velichkovsky



Afterfeast of the Dormition of the Mother of God

The Church continues to honor the passage of the Most Holy Theotokos from death to life. Just as Christ once dwelt in the virginal womb of His Mother, now He takes Her “to dwell in His courts.”



Prophet Samuel

The Prophet Samuel was the fifteenth and last of the Judges of Israel, living more than 1146 years before the Birth of Christ. He was descended from the Tribe of Levi, and was the son of Elkanah from Ramathaim-Zophim of Mount Ephraim. He was born, having been besought from the Lord through the prayers of his mother Hannah (therefore he received the name Samuel, which means “besought from God”). Even before birth, he was dedicated to God. Her song, “My heart exults in the Lord,” is the Third Ode of the Old Testament (1 Sam/1 Kings 2:1-10).

When the boy reached the age of three, his mother went with him to Shiloh and in accord with her vow dedicated him to the worship of God. She gave him into the care of the High Priest Eli, who at this time was a judge over Israel. The prophet grew in the fear of God, and at twelve years of age he had a revelation that God would punish the house of the High Priest Eli, because he did not restrain the impiety of his sons. Eli’s whole family was wiped out in a single day.

The prophecy was fulfilled when the Philistines, having slain in battle 30,000 Israelites (among them were also the sons of the High Priest, Hophni and Phinees), gaining victory and capturing the Ark of the Covenant. Hearing this, the High Priest Eli fell backwards from his seat at the gate, and breaking his back, he died. The wife of Phinees, upon hearing what had happened in this very hour, gave birth to a son (Ichabod) and died with the words: “The glory has departed from Israel, for the Ark of God is taken away” (1 Sam/1 Kgs 4: 22).

Upon the death of Eli, Samuel became the judge of the nation of Israel. The Ark of God was returned by the Philistines on their own initiative. After returning to God, the Israelites returned to all the cities that the Philistines had taken. In his old age, the Prophet Samuel made his sons Joel and Abiah judges over Israel, but they did not follow the integrity and righteous judgment of their father, since they were motivated by greed.

Then the elders of Israel, wanting the nation of God to be “like other nations” (1 Sam/1 Kgs 8: 20), demanded of the Prophet Samuel that they have a king. The Prophet Samuel anointed Saul as king, but saw in this a downfall of the people, whom God Himself had governed until this time, announcing His will through His chosen saints. Resigning the position of judge, the Prophet Samuel asked the people if they consented to his continued governance, but no one stepped forward for him.

After denouncing the first king, Saul, for his disobedience to God, the Prophet Samuel anointed David as king. He had offered David asylum, saving him from the pursuit of King Saul. The Prophet Samuel died in extreme old age. His life is recorded in the Bible (1 Sam/1 Kgs; Sirach 46:13-20).

In the year 406 A.D. the relics of the Prophet Samuel were transferred from Judea to Constantinople.

"Orthodox Church of the Mother of God: Joy of all the Sorrowful" founded in 1966



Bulletin Sponsor: Use the sign-up sheet at the candle stand for the health of, eternal memory of or a Pannikhida for a loved one or friend, for a donation of \$10. Sponsors will be remembered during Divine Liturgy for the day/week that you signed up for.

Memorial Candles: Candles be purchased at the candle stand, suggested donation of \$10 for a large one.

Private Confessions: Can be heard a half hour before any service. See Father Matthew for other times.

General Confession: Will be at 9:45 am on the first Sunday of the month.

Pannikhida Service: The third Sunday of each month there will be a Pannikhida after Divine Liturgy. If you would like your loved ones to be remembered please give a list of names to Father Matthew before that Sunday for those to be remembered in the month.

Special Announcements for the bulletin can be submitted by E-Mail:

OrthodoxChurchMotherOfGod@outlook.com ; reader.charles@hotmail.com or sub-deacon.vlashi@outlook.com

The Living Clean Group of Narcotics Anonymous meets every Friday from 8-9:15 pm downstairs in the community room.

The Grey Book Step Meeting Group of Narcotics Anonymous meets every Tuesday from 7-8:00 pm downstairs in the community room.



Orthodox Church of the Mother of God: Parish News

Holy Trinity Fall Discussion Series

Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church invites you to join us for our Discussion Series to be held on the following dates this fall:

- September 20
- September 27
- October 04
- October 18

A series of topics will be led by Father George Liacopulos, Parish Priest. It is an open forum for questions and conversation. This year's topics will be announced soon. Previous topics have included Coping with Stress and Depression, Raising Children in Today's World, and Getting along with Parishioners and Co-Workers.

The discussions are open to Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike; visitors are welcome to join the Holy Trinity community. You may attend all sessions or as many as you wish.

We will meet on Wednesday evenings, from 7:00 to 8:00 p.m. in Father George's reception room. We hope to see you there. If you have any further questions or would like more information, please contact Eugenia Kramvis, Outreach Coordinator, at ekramvis@comcast.net or 609 653-8092 ext. 5 or Father George, ext. 4.

We look forward to welcoming you.

With love in Christ,

Father George Liacopulos

Wisdom of the Church Fathers

"True perfection consists in having but one fear: the fear of losing God's friendship!"

Saint Gregory of Nyssa
(335-394)

NY/NJ Diocese News



NEW BRUNSWICK NJ: A NEW ERA OF OUTREACH

Saturday, 1 July 2017, was the occasion of an historic event in the life of the Diocese of New York and New Jersey: the ordination of Sub-Deacon Samuel Davis, of Somerset NJ, to the Holy Diaconate. While diaconal ordinations are not necessarily historic, Deacon Samuel is the first African-American to be ordained to this office in the history of the Diocese, and he is leading the planting and development of Saint Simon of Cyrene Orthodox Mission in New Brunswick NJ, an inner-city mission seeking to reach out to African-Americans and Hispanics with the light of Christ’s Gospel in Holy Orthodoxy.

CONGRATULATIONS to:

Father Volodymyr Zablotsky, elevated to the rank and dignity of Archpriest by His Eminence, Archbishop Michael, on Sunday, August 13, at Saints Peter and Paul Church, Buffalo NY. *“Axios! Axios! Axios!”*

May God protect and preserve His servant, the newly-elevated Archpriest Volodymyr, for many blessed years! *“Mnogaya Lyeta!”*

Orthodox Church in America (OCA) News

Holy Synod of Bishops issues statement on recent tragic events in Charlottesville, VA



A statement on the recent tragic events in Charlottesville, VA was issued and signed by His Beatitude, Metropolitan Tikhon and the members of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America on August 16, 2017.

The complete text of the statement appears below and in PDF format
Statement of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America
August 16, 2017

For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. And He is the head of the body, the church, Who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.

— Colossians 1:16-18

August 16, 2017

To the Clergy, Monastics and Faithful of the Orthodox Church in America,

Recent tragic events in Charlottesville, Virginia, have highlighted the presence of un-Christian rhetoric and violent actions within our communities. At the same time, the response to these events by our civil leadership has unleashed a nationwide debate which has created a certain moral ambiguity, which in turn is fostering further division. Such a climate requires a clear response from the Church.

The Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America joins people of faith and good will across the United States, Canada and Mexico in unequivocally, unreservedly and unambiguously rejecting words and actions which perpetrate, support or encourage hatred, violence, racism, white supremacy, white nationalism or neo-Nazism. As Orthodox Christians, we believe that every human being is a child of God, created in His image and likeness, and therefore we are all brothers and sisters whatever our race, nationality or creed.

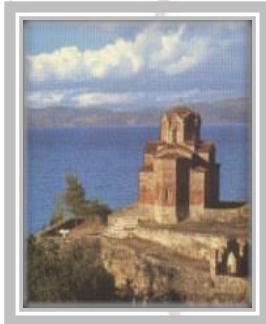
At the same time, we also reject the climate of condemnation of the individuals carrying out these heinous activities. Indeed, Jesus rebuked his disciples when they suggested that he violently retaliate against his enemies. “You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them.” (Luke 9:55-56). The Church offers to all—without exception—not condemnation but a path to forgiveness and peace in Christ.

As the Orthodox prayer of confession says: “O Lord God, the Salvation of Thy servants, gracious, bountiful and long-suffering, who forgives us concerning our evil deeds, and desires not the death of a sinner, but rather that he should turn from his way and live: Show Thy mercy upon Thy servants and grant unto them an image of repentance, forgiveness of sins, and deliverance, pardoning their every transgression, whether voluntary or involuntary...”

We reject hatred and violence, and as Orthodox Christians we are also committed to the ministry of reconciliation. We encourage our clergy and faithful to hold fast to the Christian message of healing, salvation and love offered by Christ, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. At the same time, we exhort our clergy and faithful to reject any attempts by individuals or groups to claim for themselves the name of “Orthodox Christian” in order to promote racism, hatred, white supremacy, white nationalism or neo-Nazism. This is in keeping with the Holy Gospels, the decisions of the Holy Councils and the experience of the Saints.

We remind the faithful that the Orthodox Church in America does not restrict membership to those of a particular race or nationality and has historically welcomed all, going back to the Alaskan Mission which embraced the indigenous peoples of that land and continuing to this day in the multicultural and multi-ethnic context of North America.

Brothers and sisters, Saint Justin Martyr, writing at a time when Christians were persecuted in the second century, said, “We used to hate and destroy one another and refused to associate with people of another race or country. Now, because of Christ, we live together with such people and pray for our enemies.” May that same spirit be ours today as well.



Prayers by the Laker, St. Velimirovich, XX:

Think of yourself as though you were dead, I say to myself, and you will not feel the coming of death. Blunt the barb of death during life, and when it comes it will not have the means to sting.

Think of yourself every morning as a newborn miracle, and you will not feel old age.

Do not wait for death to come, because death has indeed already come and has not left you. Its teeth are continually in your flesh. Whatever was living before your birth and whatever will survive your death--that even now is alive within you.

One night an angel unwound the tape of time, the end of which I was unable to perceive, and he showed me two dots on the tape, one next to the other. "The distance between these two dots," he said, "is the span of your lifetime."

"That means my lifetime is already over," I shouted, "and I must be prepared for the journey. I must be like a diligent hostess, who spends the present day cleaning house and making preparations for tomorrow's slava celebration."

Truly, the present day of all the sons of men is for the most part filled with concern for the next day. Yet few of those, who believe in Your promise, concern themselves with what will happen the day after death. May my death, O Lord, be my last sigh not for this world, but for that blessed and eternal tomorrow.

Among the burned out candles of my friends, my candle, too, is burning down. "Do not be foolish," I reprimand myself, "and do not regret that your candle is burning out. Do you really love your friends so little, that you are afraid to set out after them, after the many who have strolled away? Do not regret that your candle is burning low, but that it is leaving be-hind unclear and dim light."

My soul has become accustomed to leaving my body every day and every night, and to stretch herself out to the limits of the universe. When she has sprouted in this way, my soul feels as though suns and moons are swimming over her even as the swans swim over my lake. She shines through suns and supports life on earthly planets. She supports mountains and seas; she controls thunder and winds. She completely fills Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow. And she returns to shelter in a cramped and dilapidated habitation on one of those earthly planets. She returns to the body that she still, for another minute or two, calls her own, and which sways like her shadow among mounds of graves, among lairs of beasts, among howls of false hopes.

I do not complain about death, O Living God, it does not seem to me to be anything sad. It is a terror that man has created for himself. More strongly than anything on earth, death is pushing me to meet You.

I had a walnut tree in front of my house, and death took it from me. I was angry at death and cursed it saying: "Why did it not take me, an insatiable animal, instead of something sinless?"

But now I think of myself as though I were dead, and near my walnut tree.

O my Immortal God, look mercifully upon a candle that is burning out, and purify its flame. For only a pure flame rises toward Your face, and enters Your eye, with which you watch the whole world.

300 Sayings of the Ascetics of the Orthodox Church, CXX:

III. Us and Our Neighbors

Rancor

If you are remembering evil against someone, then pray for him; and as you remove through prayer the pain of the remembrance of the evil he has done, you will stop the advance of the passion. And when you have attained brotherly love and love for mankind, you will completely cast this passion out of your soul. Then when someone else does evil to you, be affectionate and humble toward him, and treat him kindly, and you will deliver him from this passion.

St. Maximus the Confessor, Chapters on Love, 3.90



The Morning Offering – Daily Inspiration by Abbott Tryphon

Stand Against Racism

The black man and the Jew, are my brothers

The un-Christian rhetoric and violent actions demonstrated in Charlottesville, Virginia, have demonstrated clearly the tragic climate of moral decay that has overtaken our country. The ultra-left and the ultra-right committed horrendous violence against one another, a scene that is being replayed throughout the land. The Church, in all her God given authority, stands firmly in opposition to the racial hatred that is at the core of the “white supremacy and white nationalism” that has spewed out hatred of blacks and Jews. As Orthodox Christians, we believe that every human being is a child of God, created in His image and likeness, and therefore we are all brothers and sisters whatever our race, nationality or creed.

Jesus Christ rebuked his disciples when they suggested that he violently retaliate against his enemies. “You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives but to save them.” (Luke 9:55-56). The Church offers to all, without exception or condemnation, the path to forgiveness and peace in Christ. All the while rejecting the hatred and violence that has appeared on all sides of the political spectrum.

The Orthodox Church is committed to a ministry of reconciliation, insisting that all her clergy and faithful hold fast to the Christian message of healing, salvation and love offered by Christ, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. She exhorts our clergy and faithful to reject any attempts by individuals or groups to claim for themselves the name of “Orthodox Christian” in order to promote racism, hatred, white supremacy, white nationalism or neo-Nazism. This is in keeping with the Holy Gospels, the decisions of the Holy Councils and the experience of the Saints.

Membership in the Church is not, nor has it ever been, restricted to those of a particular race or nationality. Quite the contrary, the Church has historically, and continues to this day, to welcome all in the multicultural and multi-ethnic context of North America. Saint Justin Martyr, writing at a time when Christians were persecuted in the second century, said, “We used to hate and destroy one another and refused to associate with people of another race or country. Now, because of Christ, we live together with such people and pray for our enemies.”

May that same spirit be ours today as well, that we, as Orthodox Christians, embrace our neighbors, be they black, Asian, Native American, Islamic, or whatever, as our brothers and sisters. As Christians, we must recognize that black lives matter, just as all lives matter, and commit to reaching out to everyone in the love of Christ, ever recalling the words, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28)”.



Daily Reflection

Patience, the Forgotten Virtue

“In your patience possess/acquire (κτήσασθε) your souls.” (Lk 21: 19)



I know I’ve reflected on this passage before, about “patience” (“ὑπομονή” in Greek, meaning, literally, “a remaining behind”). But this morning I came across it again, and realized how, once again, I’d forgotten all about this vital, central virtue of “remaining behind” and, essentially, waiting. Sometimes, “you just have to wait, you gotta trust, give it time...,” as Phil Collins put it. It is trust, or more

specifically faith, which makes patience, which has been called “the power to wait,” possible. In patience, we “wait” for what God sends us next, for example, the wisdom of what we should or should not do in a given situation.

Today let me have patience, both in the small and big things. In the “small” things, like slight annoyances with things (when the computer stalls), or with people (when Uncle Joe makes those comments at dinner), I can take pause for a few moments, before saying or doing anything. As far as the “big” things go, in our personal lives they can, in some cases, remain unresolved and ambivalent for months or even years. The same is true of our communal and political situations, in which some glaring “problems” persist, often driving us crazy.

But maybe, I’m thinking today, the Lord is saying to me, these very ambivalences and persistent “problems” are the place I put you, so you can “acquire” your “soul.” What does that mean? It means coming alive to God, in faith and trust in Him, through the ups and downs of the cross-carrying journey. It means “acquiring” a sensitivity for the bigger picture, the invisible one, of God’s undying, Self-offering, and com-passionate faith in us. It also means taking down a notch my sensitivity for the deadening divisiveness of the merely-human. Lord, help me take up Your cross today, and follow You, in faithful, prayerful patience.

Holy Orthodox Quotes

“We used to hate and destroy one another and refused to associate with people of another race or country. Now, because of Christ, we live with familiarly with such people and pray for our enemies.”

- St. Justin Martyr

Ancient Christian Wisdom

If someone offends you, don’t tell anyone about it except your elder, and you will be peaceful. Bow to everyone, paying no attention whether they respond to your bow or not. You must humble yourself before everyone and consider yourself the worst of all. If we have not committed the sins that others have, perhaps this is because we did not have the opportunity – the situation and circumstances were different. In each person there is something good and something bad; we usually see only the vices in people and we see nothing that is good.

+ St. Ambrose of Optina

Through the Grace of God – Orthodox Christianity

St John Maximovitch: Mother of God

“Merciful and full of love, She [Mother of God] manifests Her love towards Her Son and God in love for the human race. She intercedes for it before the Merciful One, and going about the earth, She helps men. Having experienced all the difficulties of earthly life, the Intercessor of the Christian race sees every tear, hears every groan and entreaty directed to Her. Especially near to Her are those who labour in the battle with the passions and are zealous for a God-pleasing life. But even in worldly cares She is an irreplaceable helper.”

Reflections in Christ On Unexpected Death

By His Grace, Bishop David of Sitka and Alaska

When we lose someone that is very near and dear to us, we are troubled by a solitary, perplexing question that we cannot answer, and it seems that no one else can give us a satisfactory response for it either. We all have the question, “WHY why did our loved one die?” It is a very natural question. Does it need to be this way? Does it need to be an unanswerable inquiry? I think not, and offer this reflection coming out of my own difficult experience facing the death of my Matushka ten years ago.

We all relate to God in three equivalent and identical ways. Some may call them by other names, but for the purpose this essay I will use the three that are the most logical to me. They are 1) the Wisdom of God, 2) the Love of God, and 3) the Mystery of God. Let us look at these three more deeply and see if it will be helpful in answering our “Why” question.

Before I continue, I understand that what I am saying does not bring back our loved one. It does not take away the pain of loss or the emptiness we feel because of it. I only write this because it helped me — and might help

others—to understand what has happened and in some small way come to grips with the agony that comes with the loss of a loved one.

In a general way, we are always participating in these three modes of His being, even if we are unaware of it. They continue to exist and operate whether we acknowledge them or not. It is just that when we are talking about death, they are all the more acute, punctuated by the act of loss that has no equal in our world.

First, we are part of the Wisdom of God – not just knowledge, even if that is a principle part of Wisdom. By itself, knowledge is simply being able to remember certain natural laws, or forms of math, or historical memory; by themselves they are little more than a memory chip of the brain that we can call on when we need a given area to take action or respond to a situation. But Wisdom is much more than this. It is the collective use of all that knowledge to use in a beneficial way. Sometimes it is the result of our own years of experience in a given area, other times it is when we call upon others who we know to be wise and seek their guidance. You cannot find Wisdom on your iPhone. And Wisdom seeks to answer bigger questions about life rather than simply knowing a fact, like water boils at 212 degrees. Wisdom seeks to answer questions like, why do we exist in the first place? Deep in our being we begin with a longing for answers that we do not have. We have a yearning that says we are certain we can find the answers, but first we need to know how to go about looking for the answers, discovering where they are. And they are in God. Our relation to God sets us on the right path to discover and become more aware of our own existence and what it means to be in the world. Only by looking to the Wisdom of God can we find those authentic answers that fill our need to know about the life we are living. That is why it is the first stage in our relation to God, for we are always becoming what He intends us to be, the ones made in His Image and after His Likeness. How wonderful this is!

Secondly, this Wisdom leads us to the love of God, to appreciate what God has done for us and with us. It makes us want to love Him for the life he has given us that makes us even the envy of angels. “For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honor.” [Psalm 8:5]. Not only this, but God became man and dwelt among us. “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father) full of grace and truth” [John 1:14]. This occurred because God wanted to express His love for us and seek our response to love Him in return. “We love Him because He first loved us” [1 John 4:19]. This would not be possible without having Wisdom about God. But it also creates a problem for us. God is so Infinite, so all-encompassing, so full of mercy, grace and truth, we are scarcely able to understand His love or able to embrace it at all.

And this leads us to our third relation of being to God, His Divine Mystery. All things from God are shrouded in this Mystery. It is why we in Orthodoxy refer to the salvific acts of Baptism, Chrismation, Confession, Communion, Marriage, Priestly Orders and Holy Unction not as Sacraments, but as Mysteries. Indeed, our ability to comprehend them and how they function on and in us is very much a mystery to us, yet our Faith allows us to accept them and repeatedly use them as needed. We may understand their usefulness for us, and why they are important for our Salvation, but we are not God and therefore cannot comprehend the depths of their functions and abilities. The words of Saint Paul are appropriate here: “But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory....” [1 Corinthians 2:7]. This “wisdom of God in a mystery” means exactly what it says—that we can talk of the wisdom of God, but only insofar as the mystery allows us to do so. We can see that these Mysteries of God were from the beginning and were specifically created for us and for our glory. This means a day will come when we will receive their meaning in glory in the mysteries of God when all things shall be revealed. Again, Saint Paul writes, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” [Romans 8:18].

So far I have been talking in a general way about God’s wisdom, love and mystery in order to now answer our “Why” of death within the understanding of God’s design and His relation to us. That is, if we can have a right knowledge of the three modes of our relationship to God, then we can better understand the “Why” of death.

Wisdom – When a person falls asleep in the Lord, three things happen. First, their body stops working and doing the functions that allowed it to be animated in the first place; the heart, brain and nervous system all cease to function. Medicine can tell us this has happened and our knowledge of medical facts tells us this is so. Secondly, there is the separation of that which is directly connected to our being like God in the first place, our soul leaves the body. And thirdly, our spirit no longer animates us. No matter how much we may desire to remain in that body and with those we love, we cannot do it. Perhaps this is why some people pass away with a slight smile or a frown?

Love – I believe the single most important thing to remember about the love of God has much to do with death. People in anguish ask, “Why did God take him from me?” as if God wanted him or her to die. Others become troubled when some catastrophe occurs and ask a similar question, “Why did God let that happen?” In both cases it is as if to say our God is so cruel that He randomly takes people from us that we love without so much as a “I’m sorry I had to do that to you.” If you want proof that God does not work that way just look at Christ in the

Gospels. The widow of Nain [Luke 7], the daughter of Jairus [Mark 5], and especially Lazarus, Jesus’ friend [John 11]. In fact, the account of the raising of Lazarus contains the most direct evidence for God’s reaction to our deaths; it contains the shortest verse in Scripture, verse 35, “Jesus wept.” Does that sound like a vicious God, eager to bring down punishment on we wretched sinners? I think not. In fact, I am willing to say that God did not intend for us to die. Period.

Mystery – Perhaps the most difficult duty of a Christian is to account for the Mystery of God where death is concerned. Calling death a mystery does not give God a free pass out of our dilemma. To say “we can’t understand it, so we must wait for the answer in the Kingdom of God” will not suffice when one is completely torn apart in their being due to the loss of a loved one.

Our experience of death is rooted in what I would call “The Adam Factor.” If we look at the beginning of creation, how God created the universe and everything in it, at each step of the formation of each part, He saw that it was good [Genesis 1:10,12,18, 21, 25, and 31, where He says, “it was very good”]. It was only when Adam and Eve disobeyed God that their life changed the course of humanity forever.

In Genesis 2, God sees that Adam and Eve now have knowledge of good and evil. He knows they will not be able to balance their life well with this knowledge and so He had to banish them from Paradise. The Church Fathers use this act to say that by allowing man to taste of death, he ceases to commit sin. It is an act of love and mercy as much as it seems to us as a punishment.

And what was their first experience with death? God had to kill animals to make skins to cover their bodies. And the second experience of death was even worse, as they saw the loss of one of their children at the hands of the other, when Cain murdered Abel. And the world has descended into one tragic deed after another ever since.

Thus, the Mystery of God contained in our understanding here is found in two important facts. It is in our inability to grasp the true purpose of death and our lack of comprehension of time and eternity. Saint Paul reminds us that we lack the ability to fully comprehend this mystery when he says in Corinthians, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love Him...” [I Corinthians 2:9]. This is to say that the source of our struggle with Mystery is our own limited understanding, not God’s commands or directives. Said another way, how can we expect a reasonable response to an unreasonable act? If God did not intend for us to die, if God created us to be in Communion with Him, if God gave us a way to avoid death in the first place and we did not heed it, if He then sent His only-begotten Son to die for us and give us a path to life, it seems to me He has done all He can for us in our current state. And He did all of this because He loves us despite our disobedience and our human frailties.

Thus we come to perhaps the most beautiful statement by an Apostle concerning our topic. Saint Paul wrote the Romans, “for I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” [Romans 8:38-39]. You see, with the relationship we now have with God thanks to His Son, there is nothing that can separate us from His love, and therefore nothing that can take away the love we have for our loved ones who are temporarily separated from us. Yes, our time now is temporary, painful but temporary, for the day comes when we can never, ever be separated from them again.

In conclusion, when I lost my Matushka to cancer ten years ago, I had the following verse inscribed on our tombstone from the Book of Revelation: “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” [Revelation 21:4]. This world and all its suffering shall pass away and all life shall be renewed. This is the hope I keep for my future. I hope you can keep it for yourself as well.

May God comfort us and ease our pain and suffering through His love and mercy.