

Focus on the Faith

Homily on the Entrance of the Theotokos to the temple

By Archpriest Basil Rhodes

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
Glory to Jesus Christ!

Today we are celebrating the saving festival of the Entrance of the Mother of God into the Temple. I remember, back in my Seminary days, how this feast had suddenly become “controversial.” How?

It became controversial when some “Orthodox” scholars were suggesting that the feast was a “fairy tale,” not to be taken at face value as an historical event, but as a fable from which one might draw some valuable insight into their own spiritual life and struggle. I don't deny that there is much to be gleaned here. What could be a more powerful image than a three year old girl who represents our souls which need to become child-like in our love and action toward God? What could be a stronger image than the surrender of that child to the High Priest who leads her into the Holy of Holies? Is it not the image of our own surrender and desire to be lead by the Great High Priest Who is Christ Himself? And isn't the Holy of Holies a type of our own hearts, where the fathers teach us is the meeting place of God and man? Yes. All of these types and images are important. But what about the actual event itself? Should scholarly speculations to the contrary derail us from our confidence in what the church teaches us? What about similar speculations? For instance that the parting of the Red Sea was simply a very explainable combination of very low water and very high winds? If the scholars feel that the entrance of the virgin is a myth, and the parting of the Red Sea is a meteorological phenomenon, and the summoning of the Apostles on clouds for the Dormition of the Virgin is just “poetic license,” I would propose that the church's tradition is not what is

unreliable, but the faith of the scholars, the academics, the “theologians.” They simply have no faith, or, their faith is so weak that it is not in evidence.

I'd like to share with you something that Hieromonk Seraphim (Rose) wrote in his Introduction to the book “The Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God” written by St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco. (Later I'll share something that the saint himself wrote.) Fr. Seraphim writes:

“NOT TOO MANY years ago the Abbess of a convent of the Russian Orthodox Church, a woman of righteous life, was delivering a sermon in the convent church on the feast of the Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God. With tears she entreated her nuns and the pilgrims who had come for the feast to accept entirely and wholeheartedly what the Church hands down to us, taking such pains to preserve this tradition sacredly all these centuries-and not to choose for oneself what is “important” and what is “dispensable”; for by thinking oneself wiser than the tradition, one may end by losing the tradition. Thus, when the Church tells us in her hymns and icons that the Apostles were miraculously gathered from the ends of the earth in order to be present at the repose and burial of the Mother of God, we as Orthodox Christians are not free to deny this or reinterpret it, but must believe as the Church hands it down to us, with simplicity of heart.

A young Western convert who had learned Russian was present when this sermon was delivered. He himself had thought about this very subject, having seen icons in the traditional iconographic style depicting the Apostles being transported on clouds to behold the Dormition of the

Theotokos;* and he had asked himself the question: are we actually to understand this “literally,” as a miraculous event, or is it only a “poetic” way of expressing the coming together of the Apostles for this event ... or perhaps even an imaginative or “ideal” depiction of an event that never occurred in fact? (Such, indeed, are some of the questions with which “Orthodox theologians” occupy themselves in our days.) The words of the righteous Abbess therefore struck him to the heart, and he understood that there was something deeper to the reception and understanding of Orthodoxy than what our own mind and feelings tell us. In that instant the tradition was being handed down to him, not from books but from a living vessel which contained it; and it had to be received, not with mind or feelings only, but above all with the heart, which in this way began to receive its deeper training in Orthodoxy.”

This is a very important lesson for all contemporary Orthodox to learn and understand. Our Orthodox faith does not require that our minds understand it, our reason accepts it, or our “wisdom” approves it. Faith, according to St Paul, is the “substance of things hoped-for and the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). It is far better for us to rely on the church's tradition, than on “sons of men, in whom there is no salvation” (Psalm 146:3).

Concerning the present feast, St. John of Shanghai wrote: “The Orthodox Church teaches about the Mother of God that which Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture have informed concerning Her, and daily it glorifies Her in its temples, asking Her help and defense. Knowing that She is pleased only by those praises which correspond to Her actual glory, the Holy Fathers and hymn-writers have entreated Her and Her Son to teach them how to hymn Her. “Set a rampart about my mind, O my Christ, for I make bold to sing the praise of Thy pure Mother” (Ikos of the Dormition). “The Church teaches that Christ was truly born of Mary the Ever-Virgin” (St. Epiphanius, “True Word Concerning

the Faith”). “It is essential for us to confess that the Holy Ever-Virgin Mary is actually Theotokos (Birth-giver of God), so as not to fall into blasphemy. For those who deny that the Holy Virgin is actually Theotokos are no longer believers, but disciples of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (St. Ephraim the Syrian, “To John the Monk”).

From Tradition it is known that Mary was the daughter of the aged Joachim and Anna, and that Joachim descended from the royal line of David, and Anna from the priestly line. Notwithstanding such a noble origin, they were poor. However, it was not this that saddened these righteous ones, but rather the fact that they did not have children and could not hope that their descendants would see the Messiah. And behold, when once, being disdained by the Hebrews for their barrenness, they both in grief of soul were offering up prayers to God: Joachim on a mountain to which he had retired after the priest did not want to offer his sacrifice in the Temple, and Anna in her own garden weeping over her barrenness—there appeared to them an angel who informed them that they would bring forth a daughter. Overjoyed, they promised to consecrate their child to God.

In nine months a daughter was born to them, called Mary, Who from Her early childhood manifested the best qualities of soul. When She was three years old, her parents, fulfilling their promise, solemnly led the little Mary to the Temple of Jerusalem; She Herself ascended the high steps and, by revelation from God, She was led into the very Holy of Holies, by the High Priest who met Her, taking with Her the grace of God which rested upon Her into the Temple which until then had been without grace. (See the Kontakion of the Entry into the Temple. This was the newly-built Temple into which the glory of God had not descended as it had upon the Ark or upon the Temple of Solomon.) She was settled in the quarters for virgins which existed in the Temple, but She spent so much time in prayer in the Holy of Holies that one might say

that She lived in it. (Service to the Entry, second sticheron on Lord, I have cried, and the “Glory, Both Now...”) Being adorned with all virtues, She manifested an example of extraordinarily pure life. Being submissive and obedient to all, She offended no one, said no crude word to anyone, was friendly to all, and did not allow any unclean thought. (Abridged from St. Ambrose of Milan, “Concerning the Ever-Virginity of the Virgin Mary.”)

“Despite the righteousness and the immaculateness of the life which the Mother of God led, manifested their presence in Her. They could not but be manifested: Such is the precise and faithful teaching of the Orthodox Church concerning the Mother of God with relation to original sin and death.” (Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov, “Exposition of the Teaching of the Orthodox Church on the Mother of God.”) “A stranger to any fall into sin” (St. Ambrose of Milan, Commentary on the 118th Psalm), “She was not a stranger to sinful temptations.” “God alone is without sin” (St. Ambrose, same source), “while man will always have in himself something yet needing correction and perfection in order to fulfill the commandment of God; Be ye holy as I the Lord your God am Holy (Leviticus 19:2). The more pure and perfect one is, the more he notices his imperfections and considers himself all the more unworthy.

The Virgin Mary, having given Herself entirely up to God, even though She repulsed from Herself every impulse to sin, still felt the weakness of human nature more powerfully than others and ardently desired the coming of the Saviour. In Her humility She considered Herself unworthy to be even the servant-girl of the Virgin Who was to give Him birth. So that nothing might distract Her from prayer and heedfulness to Herself, Mary gave to God a vow not to become married, in order to please only Him Her whole life long. Being betrothed to the elderly Joseph when Her age no longer, allowed Her to remain in the Temple, She settled in his house in Nazareth. Here the Virgin was vouchsafed

the coming of the Archangel Gabriel, who brought Her the good tidings of the birth, from Her of the Son of the Most High.”

From the Fathers

St. Nectarios of Aegina said:

A Christian must be courteous to all. His words and deeds should breathe with the grace of the Holy Spirit, which abides in his soul, so that in this way he might glorify the name of God. He who regulates all of his speech also regulates all of his actions. He who keeps watch over the words he is about say also keeps watch over the deeds he intends to do, and he never goes out of the bounds good and benevolent conduct. The graceful speech of a Christian is characterized by delicateness and politeness. This fact, born of love, produces peace and joy. On the other hand, boorishness gives birth to hatred, enmity, affliction, competitiveness, disorder and wars. (The Path to Happiness, 7)

"Seek God daily. But seek Him in your heart, not outside it. And when you find Him, stand with fear and trembling, like the Cherubim and the Seraphim, for your heart has become a throne of God. But in order to find God, become humble as dust before the Lord, for the Lord abhors the proud, whereas He visits those that are humble in heart, wherefore He says: 'To whom will I look, but to him that is meek and humble in heart?' " Source: "Modern Orthodox Saints, St. Nectarios of Aegina", by (Dr.) Constantine Cavarnos, Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, Belmont, Massachusetts. 1981)

Lives of the Saints

November 1

The Holy and Wonderworking Unmercenaries Cosmas and Damian of Asia (3rd c.) These lived near Ephesus in Asia Minor (modern Efez in Turkey.) They were of noble birth and well-educated in all the branches of higher learning; but they turned away from worldly knowledge to practice medicine without charge for anyone who sought their help, caring for the rich as well as poor, and even for animals. They used none of the secular tools of medicine, but relied only on the Name of Christ, by which they were enabled to perform countless healings. Both reposed in peace.

November 9

Our Father among the Saints Nectarius (Nektarios), bishop of Pentapolis, Wonderworker, and founder of the Monastery of the Holy Trinity on Aegina (1920).

Saint Nectarius was born in Selyvria of Thrace on October 11, 1846. After putting himself through school in Constantinople with much hard labour, he became a monk on Chios in 1876, receiving the monastic name of Lazarus; because of his virtue, a year later he was ordained deacon, receiving the new name of Nectarius. Under the patronage of Patriarch Sophronius of Alexandria, Nectarius went to Athens to study in 1882; completing his theological studies in 1885, he went to Alexandria, where Patriarch Sophronius ordained him priest on March 23, 1886 in the Cathedral of Saint Sabbas, and in August of the same year, in the Church of Saint Nicholas in Cairo, made him Archimandrite. Archimandrite Nectarius showed much zeal both for preaching the word of God, and for the beauty of God's house. He greatly beautified the Church of Saint Nicholas in Cairo, and years later, when Nectarius was in Athens, Saint Nicholas appeared to him in a

dream, embracing him and telling him he was going to exalt him very high.

On January 15, 1889, in the same Church of Saint Nicholas, Nectarius was consecrated Metropolitan of Pentapolis in eastern Libya, which was under the jurisdiction of Alexandria. Although Nectarius' swift ascent through the degrees of ecclesiastical office did not affect his modesty and childlike innocence, it aroused the envy of lesser men, who convinced the elderly Sophronius that Nectarius had it in his heart to become Patriarch. Since the people loved Nectarius, the Patriarch was troubled by the slanders. On May 3, 1890, Sophronius relieved Metropolitan Nectarius of his duties; in July of the same year, he commanded Nectarius to leave Egypt.

Without seeking to avenge or even to defend himself, the innocent Metropolitan left for Athens, where he found that accusations of immorality had arrived before him. Because his good name had been soiled, he was unable to find a position worthy of a bishop, and in February of 1891 accepted the position of provincial preacher in Euboia; then, in 1894, he was appointed dean of the Rizarios Ecclesiastical School in Athens. Through his eloquent sermons, his unwearying labours to educate fitting men for the priesthood, his generous alms deeds despite his own poverty, and the holiness, meekness, and fatherly love that were manifest in him, he became a shining light and a spiritual guide to many. At the request of certain pious women, in 1904 he began the building of his convent of the Holy Trinity on the island of Aegina while yet dean of the Rizarios School; finding later that his presence there was needed, he took up his residence on Aegina in 1908, where he spent the last years of his life, devoting himself to the direction of his

convent and to very intense prayer; he was sometimes seen lifted above the ground while rapt in prayer. He became the protector of all Aegina, through his prayers delivering the island from drought, healing the sick, and casting out demons. Here also he endured wicked slanders with singular patience, forgiving his false accusers and not seeking to avenge himself. Although he had already worked wonders in life, an innumerable multitude of miracles have been wrought after his repose in 1920 through his holy relics, which for many years remained incorrupt. There is hardly a malady that has not been cured through his prayers; but Saint Nectarius is especially renowned for his healings of cancer for sufferers in all parts of the world.

Orthopraxis

Russian Christmas Traditions

By Archpriest Basil Rhodes

Russia has been predominantly a Christian nation since conversion of Kievan Rus to the Orthodox Church under Prince Vladimir in 988 AD. The western concept of Christmas and the decorated Christmas tree entered Russian life and took firm hold there in 1700 as part of the cultural reforms of Peter the Great.

A native Slavic folk figure, (Grandfather or Father Frost) and his granddaughter Snegrochka (Snow Maiden) play festive and gift-giving roles comparable to those of Santa Claus and his reindeer and elves. Another story of gift exchange during the holidays comes from the legend of Babushka who refused to give the Three Wise Men (Magi) any food or shelter on their journey to Bethlehem to visit the Christ-child. To atone for her sins, she travels the countryside looking for the child, giving gifts to children as she goes.

The Christmas tree (rozhdstvenskaya yolka) fell into national disfavor in Russia twice in the past hundred years, first in 1916, when the Russian Holy Synod denounced the Tannenbaum as an attribute of the invading Germans, and again in 1918, when the Soviet government banned the Christmas tree as a vestige of a despised bourgeois religiosity. The ban was widely defied, particularly in the provinces, and lifted in 1935, when the Christmas tree was reinstated as the officially secular "New Year's Tree" (novogodnaya yolka). Russia's Christmas traditions were never extinguished under the officially anti-religious Soviet regime and since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, a national rediscovery of Christmas has been a part of the general and complicated post-Soviet reckoning with religion and the Church.

In an area as large as Russia, many traditions arise. On January 7 (December 25 on the Julian calendar) the Russian Orthodox Church celebrates Christmas. Russian Christmas observances begin with a 40-day Strict Fast broken after the star, i.e., the moment the first stars appear in the evening sky on Christmas Eve. At that point the family eats a traditional porridge called kutya or schivo, which is made of boiled wheat, lentils, rice, or beans (grains symbolizing hope) mixed with honey, almonds, walnuts, and poppy seeds, (symbolizing happiness and peace). The kutya is eaten from a common dish, symbolizing unity.

In some places a Holy Supper begins at twilight with a prayer of thanksgiving for the past year and the year to come. Some use a white tablecloth sprinkled with hay to symbolize poverty and the swaddling clothes of the Christ child, a loaf of bread on the table and a candle to symbolize the bread of life (Christ) and the star of Bethlehem. Traditionally, the "Holy Supper" consists of 12 different foods, symbolic of the 12 Apostles, a representative meal might include: mushroom soup with zaprashka; or sauerkraut soup, lenten bread, pagach, grated garlic, honey, baked cod, fresh fruit (apricots, oranges,

St. Nicholas Orthodox Church, Saratoga CA
14220 Elva Avenue, Saratoga CA 95070
www.stnicholassaratoga.org

Archpriest Basil Rhodes
Office: (408) 867-0628

figs, dates), nuts, kidney beans (slow cooked) seasoned with shredded potatoes, garlic, salt and pepper, peas, parslid potatoes, Bobal'ki (small biscuits with sauerkraut or poppy seeds with honey), red wine.