



CHURCH of the LIFE-GIVING FOUNTAIN
“ZODOCHOS PEGHE”
GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHDIOCESE OF AMERICA
ΙΕΡΑ ΑΡΧΙΕΠΙΣΚΟΠΗ ΑΜΕΡΙΚΗΣ
314 North Fifth Street Martins Ferry, OH 43935
Telephone: (740) 633-3707

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ, Christ is among us,

“Where two or three are gathered in My Name ...”

The Church of Christ is not a building, nor is it a denomination, a name. It is a community “called out” from the larger mass of humanity. That is the literal meaning of the Greek word: *ek – klessia*. The Church is distinct from society: in-but-not-of the world (John 17:16). It is the body of Christ, and in a body each member supports the well-being of every other member and of the whole. Our parish church community needs to be identifiable, and mutually supportive.

Of course God is everywhere and with us at every time. So what is the excuse for not coming together to worship Him? Of course we can each pray in private. So what is the excuse for not praying together? “Where two or three are gathered in My Name, there I am” (Matt. 18:20).

When I first came to Martins Ferry two years ago, we were usually perhaps forty gathered together on Sunday morning to share the Divine Liturgy. Now only half that number may gather on Sunday. That change is not because of funerals. I’m not quite sure why it is. I don’t even quite understand who is missing. A marriage, a family, does not prosper if the members do not spend quality time together.

Come back to Christ, or Bridegroom. Come to the Divine Liturgy on Sunday mornings. Come and be with the family. The Lord’s invitation is always open. It might change your life.

In Christ,

Fr. Michael



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God is Glorious in His Saints

On **November 8th** the Church commemorates the **Holy Archangels** Michael and Gabriel and all the Heavenly Hosts. There is no record in the Bible of the creation of the angels. As St. John of Damascus says in His Exposition of the Orthodox faith, they were created “in silence” before the material creation. The angels are ministers doing god’s work and conveying His messages, which is the literal meaning of the word angel. (Evangelical is literally the “of the good news”.) The Angels of God have been honored since earliest times. Not only each person has a guardian angel but also nations have angels. (Daniel Chapters 9-10) The prayers of the Divine Liturgy are full of the angels. At the Entrance of the Gospel: “Master and Lord our God, You have established in heaven the orders and hosts of angels and archangels to minister to Your glory. Grant that the holy angels may enter with us that together we may serve and glorify Your goodness.” We sing as the seraphim do around the throne, “Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal” (Isaiah 6). And at the Great Entrance the choir sings and the priest prays, “Let us who mystically represent the Cherubim and sing the thrice holy hymn to the life-giving Trinity set aside all cares of this life that we may receive the King of all invisibly escorted by angelic host. Alleluia.”

On **November 9th** the Church commemorates **St. Nectarios**. St. Nectarios lived in the early 20th century, ending his life on the island of Aegina where he established a convent of nuns. He is well known as a helper for those suffering from cancer.

On **November 14th** the Church commemorates the **Apostle Philip** and **St. Gregory Palamas**. St. Gregory was a great defender of Orthodoxy and a teacher on inner prayer. He insisted that each of us has the potential to directly experience God in our lives. A small men’s monastery established by Bishop Maximos in Ashland County, Ohio, is dedicated to him.

On **November 15th** the **Advent Fast** begins. Like the spring Lenten fast of the **Forty Days** before Pascha this is a forty day period leading up to the Nativity of the Lord on December 25th. It is not as strict as the Paschal Fast and fish is routinely permitted until St. Spyridon on December 12th.

On **November 21st** the Church commemorates the **Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple**. The story of this feast is recorded not in the Bible but in the Gospel of James. The canonical

Scriptures do not tell us anything about the life of the Mother of God prior to the Annunciation in Nazareth, other than that she was betrothed to Joseph. The Gospel according to James is among the large number of texts that are not specifically among the Scriptures ordinarily read at the Liturgy but which contain the Tradition of the Church. It relates the Conception and Birth of Mary (which of course did happen even though there is not record in the canonical Scriptures). It tells us the names of Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna; that they were childless to advanced age and promised to dedicate their child to God. When Mary was three years old her parents took her to the temple in Jerusalem and the Priest Zacharius, the father of John the Baptist, received her. She then spent twelve years living in the Temple, praying and serving God.

On **November 25th** the Church commemorates **St. Katherine**. St. Katherine was a wealthy, beautiful, highly intelligent and well-educated young woman in Alexandria in the 3rd century. She had a vision in which Christ appeared to her, calling her His bride and giving her a ring. For her steadfast loyalty to Christ she was tortured and beheaded. Her body disappeared and nobody heard anything about her for several hundred years, until a monk on Mount Sinai was directed to bring her relics from the mountain behind Mt. Sinai where the angels had deposited her. Since then her relics are kept beside the altar in the main church of the Monastery beside the Burning Bush at the foot of the mountain and the Monastery is commonly called St. Katherine's. It is the oldest continually occupied monastery in the world.

On **November 30** the church commemorates the **Apostle Andrew the First-called**. The brother of St. Peter, Andrew was first a disciple of John the Forerunner but when John pointed out the Lord saying: *Behold the Lamb of God* (John 1:36) Andrew began to follow Christ. Andrew founded the church in Byzantium establishing Stachys as the first bishop there. Thus he is considered the patron of the Patriarchate of Constantinople. Andrew was martyred in Patras at the west end of the Gulf of Corinth.





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Holy Communion

Years ago I was walking along a trail when I unexpectedly came upon a hermit in his tiny hut. In conversation he asked me a question. “Down there where you are staying (he knew where without me telling him), what do they tell you about why you do what you do? He wasn’t concerned about the details of the “what”; he assumed the correctness of the “what”. He was interested in the “why”.

There are many reasons why we come to the Divine Liturgy. But the fundamental, the core, is God. The Liturgy may seem long and wearisome, unless we meet God there. If we do not come for God, and if we do not find God, then we might as well not come. There are many forms of prayer services in the Orthodox Church. There are Matins and Vespers. There are Akathists such as we do during Lent. There is the Paraklesis at which we pray for our community each Wednesday in our parish. But the Divine Liturgy, the Eucharist, is the memorial of the meal that Christ celebrated with His Disciples. It is a meal in which Christ shares Himself with us. “Take, eat, this is My Body...” “Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My Blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” (John 6:54)

The whole point of the Divine Liturgy is the dynamic of the mystical meal in which we eat and drink Eternal Life. The central sacrament of the Church is Holy Communion. All the other sacraments relate to this great sacrament. During the sacrament the priest asks the Father to send the Holy Spirit to make a change, in the bread and the wine and in us.

As Orthodox Christians we must commune frequently. Without eating of the Lord’s “Mystical Supper” we gradually become spiritually malnourish and starve. That is the traditional phrase in Greek, Μυστικός δείπνος, for what is ordinary English usage is called the Last Supper or Lord’s Supper. There is a curious custom in Orthodox Churches. It is often expected that children receive communion at every Liturgy, with very little concern for preparation. Then at some point as we approach adulthood we tend to receive less and less frequently. Sometimes this is linked to concerns regarding preparation, but often it seems to be that we just don’t consider regular communion important. We sort of “grow out of it”. This is strange. When giving communion, the priest says, “The servant of God (Name) receives the Body and Blood of Christ for forgiveness of sins and eternal life”. The older I become the greater my need for forgiveness of sins and eternal life!

How frequently we commune depends on the spiritual condition of each person. This means that preparation is needed, which consists of repentance, confession, healing and prayer. Fasting and forgiveness of offense, perhaps almsgiving, are normal in preparation. Not just fasting from this or that food, but fasting from various bad habits. As St. John Chrysostom writes somewhere, “It profits little to abstain from eating meat, and then devour our neighbor with gossip.” And yet nobody is ever truly worthy.

How one prepares depends very much on the circumstances of each person. It is impractical to give one-size-fits-all regulations. And in our culture among Orthodox, sadly any written published standard will raise controversy from somebody whose expectations are not satisfied. Yet it is not just a matter of personal, individual preference. That sort of individualism is really a rather protestant attitude. The Orthodox Church provides for the priest who can give guidance in each person’s circumstance, if the person will allow him or herself to hear God in the priest. Fasting in preparation for communion is normal. Some believe that they must fast for three days before communion. Some believe a week, or forty days. Some will be satisfied with the standard Wednesday and Friday that are ordinary fasting days for Orthodox Christians. And how strictly is such a fast to be observed? The basic assumption is that we do not eat or drink from the night before; we do not eat our ordinary morning breakfast and then come for communion. That is rather simple. “But I have to take my medicine and therefore cannot receive communion.” This is a common enough excuse. The basic response is that if there is a real medical reason, then following the doctor’s instruction is not an impediment to receiving communion. If there is a question, we ask our priest.

But the key issue is that it is important to receive Christ into our lives. There is the prayer near the end of the Liturgy after Communion: “Having partaken of the divine, holy, pure, immortal, heavenly, life-creating and awesome Mysteries of Christ, let us worthily give thanks to the Lord.” We can only give thanks if we have partaken. The prayer assumes that everybody present has partaken. The priest must partake every time he celebrates the Liturgy. The priest is no more worthy than anybody else. We all need forgiveness and healing. We all need to be nourished by the Holy Spirit.

There are times when we cannot receive communion physically for some reason. But even then we can receive Christ in our hearts if we truly have the intent and desire. Indeed, it is in the heart that each of us receive communion, not on the tongue or in the stomach. All of the forms of preparation are nothing but helps to form that desire and intent. One Kyrie Eleison, one Lord have mercy, one Praise God – with our whole heart – and the whole of heaven can come pouring into our lives. But it takes a lot of practice to get it right that once.

Taste and see that the Lord is Good.

Seed and soil and harvest and pledges

There is this mysterious parable of Christ which is only recorded in Mark's Gospel and is not included anywhere in the standard lectionary of daily reading for the Liturgy.

And the Lord said, "So the kingdom of God is as if a man should cast seed into the ground, and should sleep and rise day and night. And the seed springs up and grows, he knows not how. The earth brings forth fruit of itself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full grain in the ear." (Mark 4:26-28)

For many years our parish has been on a "dues system" that sets a minimum financial requirement to qualify as a member-in-good-standing. For years it has been set at \$300 per adult or \$600 per family. We all know that this does not cover the expenses of maintaining our parish. And yet, somehow, at least the last two years we have met our expenses. Not much left over, but enough.

Obviously, some of us voluntarily contribute over-and-beyond the dues. Some of us struggle to meet the minimum. Some who used to be members have ceased to attend church at all, sometimes citing the excuse of the dues.

At one time somebody said that in order to participate one must first be in financial good standing. The idea has got around that one can't receive communion unless one's dues are paid. There has even been discussion over whether an Orthodox Christian can be buried from the church as an Orthodox Christian if their "dues" are not up-to-date. This will bury the church. This attitude will ensure the eventual closure of the parish. Not today, not this year or next year, but eventually. But this fear that somebody will get something without paying is not from Christ.

"And Abraham gave a tenth part of all" (Genesis 14, Hebrews 7). But the Christ valued more the two mites, the two pennies, of the widow than all the rich donations of all the good and generous people at the temple. The scriptural standard is significant, indeed sacrificial giving. The Lord says that "where your treasure is, there your heart will be". That is true. People do tend to value what they have to invest in. And sometimes we do not value what comes to easily. Yet I also believe that "where your heart is, there your treasure will be also." We invest in what we care about. If we care about that ball game, we find time for it. If we care about someone, or about our family, we allocate our priorities accordingly.

Each month we see the financial income and expense of our parish. If we want the parish, we can see what is needed. I suggest that we will be much better off as a community if we let go of the dues mentality. I suggest that our pledge cards drop the line specifying dues amounts. Leave the line to write in how much we will commit to for year, perhaps by month. And entrust the accounting to the Lord. Let nobody be turned away. Let nobody be judged. Let everybody be welcomed and give gladly what they each feel is right. And let everybody accept God's thanks as we thank Him for all His blessings to us.

From the Thanksgiving Akathist "Glory to God for all things"

It is the Holy Spirit who makes us find joy in each flower, the exquisite scent, the delicate colour, the beauty of the Most High in the tiniest of things. Glory and honour to the Spirit, the Giver of Life, who covers the fields with their carpet of flowers, crowns the harvest with gold, and gives to us the joy of gazing at it with our eyes. O be joyful and sing to Him: Alleluia!

How glorious art Thou in the springtime, when every creature awakes to new life and joyfully sings Thy praises with a thousand tongues. Thou art the Source of Life, the Destroyer of Death. By the light of the moon, nightingales sing, and the valleys and hills lie like wedding garments, white as snow. All the earth is Thy promised bride awaiting her spotless husband. If the grass of the field is like this, how gloriously shall we be transfigured in the Second Coming after the Resurrection! How splendid our bodies, how spotless our souls!

Glory to Thee, bringing from the depth of the earth an endless variety of colours, tastes and scents

Glory to Thee for the warmth and tenderness of the world of nature

Glory to Thee for the numberless creatures around us

Glory to Thee for the depths of Thy wisdom, the whole world a living sign of it

Glory to Thee; on my knees, I kiss the traces of Thine unseen hand

Glory to Thee, enlightening us with the clearness of eternal life

Glory to Thee for the hope of the unutterable, imperishable beauty of immortality

Glory to Thee, O God, from age to age

How filled with sweetness are those whose thoughts dwell on Thee; how life-giving Thy holy Word. To speak with Thee is more soothing than anointing with oil; sweeter than the honeycomb. To pray to Thee lifts the spirit, refreshes the soul. Where Thou art not, there is only emptiness; hearts are smitten with sadness; nature, and life itself, become sorrowful; where Thou art, the soul is filled with abundance, and its song resounds like a torrent of life: Alleluia!

When the sun is setting, when quietness falls like the peace of eternal sleep, and the silence of the spent day reigns, then in the splendour of its declining rays, filtering through the clouds, I see Thy dwelling-place: fiery and purple, gold and blue, they speak prophet-like of the ineffable beauty of Thy presence, and call to us in their majesty. We turn to the Father.

Glory to Thee at the hushed hour of nightfall

Glory to Thee, covering the earth with peace

Glory to Thee for the last ray of the sun as it sets

Glory to Thee for sleep's repose that restores us

Glory to Thee for Thy goodness even in the time of darkness

When all the world is hidden from our eyes

Glory to Thee for the prayers offered by a trembling soul

Glory to Thee for the pledge of our reawakening

On that glorious last day, that day which has no evening

Glory to Thee, O God, from age to age