

# Rector's Letter for May, 2010

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Christ is risen! Indeed, he is risen!

His Grace, Bishop Melchisedek—pronounced “Mell-KEE-seh-deck,” but better known to us as “Father Thomas Pleska”—will be visiting us very soon: Saturday and Sunday, May 15–16. Many have struggled over Bishop Melchisedek's monastic name and have wondered how he came by it. I thought it would be worthwhile to give a bit of explanation this month, in advance of his arrival.

First of all, our former Father Tom was tonsured a monk in Greece. When someone becomes a monk, he leaves behind his previous life — his possessions, his business, his home, and even his name — in order to be dedicated wholly as an offering to the Lord. It is a challenging way of life, where the person must choose to submit freely in every detail of life to obey the will of an elder. So the new monk does not choose his name but humbly accepts one as a part of his new vocation.

The name Melchisedek is not common, but it is ancient, honorable and highly significant to our Faith. The priest-king Melchisedek appears in the Book of Genesis. Abram, whom the Lord later names Abraham, has won a great victory to rescue his brother Lot, and his allies offer him thanks. One of them is Melchisedek:

Then Melchisedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said: “Blessed be Abram of God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand.” And he gave him a tithe of all (Gen. 14:18–20).

This is all we have of the story of Melchisedek, king of Salem and priest of God Most High, but it is worth pointing out that this blessing is given just before the Lord establishes his covenant with Abram, promising that he will be the father of many nations and through him will come a Child who will be the blessing of all people. It is as a sign of that covenant that God gives him the new name Abraham.

The next we hear of Melchisedek is in Psalm 109/110: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchisedek.’” You might recognize those words, which are spoken of the Messiah, the Christ, which are now proclaimed at the feast of the Theophany, the Baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ.

These two passages of Scripture are then interpreted by the Apostle in the Epistle to the Hebrews to point to the saving work of Jesus Christ (Heb. 5–7). What is so special about Melchisedek is that he is both king and priest, and that his priesthood is not that of the Law given to Moses. Those same truths apply to the Christ himself, who unlike the priests under the Law has no sin for which to seek forgiveness but is of a different order altogether. Though as the Son of God he is not subject to anything, he freely subjects himself to all our weakness so that he can become our High Priest, offering on our behalf a pure and perfectly acceptable sacrifice to restore us all to God. At the same time, Christ is the King of Peace (“Salem” means “peace”) whose kingdom shall never end. The Apostle sees Melchisedek as a sign of Jesus Christ: “without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, [he] remains a priest continually” (Heb. 7:3).

Melchisedek is so significant to our understanding that we hear of him on both the Third Sunday (the Cross) and Fourth Sunday (St. John of *The Ladder*) of Great Lent. The first reading goes right to the heart of our Faith, Christ's freely making himself into a

perfect offering on the Cross for our salvation. When we in turn make our own prayer offering, our great High Priest always stands with us, making our offering acceptable to God.

The second reading speaks of the surety of God's promises to us through our forefather Abraham, that we would be blessed as his heirs. The Apostle explains that we know that our hope of eternal blessing is secure because one has already gone before us into the Presence of God to make us secure: "even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchisedek" (Heb. 6:20).

The mystery of Melchisedek reminds us of our own high calling. We are not ordinary; we are children of Abraham and heirs of the promise God made to him. The Lord has also made us "a royal priesthood, a holy nation, his own special people." With our High Priest Jesus Christ, we have the responsibility to offer a sacrifice of praise. We say so every Divine Liturgy, when the priest or deacon says "Let us stand aright ... that we may offer the Holy Oblation in peace": "A mercy of peace! A sacrifice of praise." As followers of the great High Priest, we need to make that true not just for the Divine Liturgy, but for our whole life. Everything — easy and hard, happy and sad, public and private — needs to be offered with praise and thanksgiving to God Most High. In return, we receive the blessing: mercy, grace, and life in abundance.

So mindful of Melchisedek as a sign of the blessing of God Most High, we can welcome our well-named former pastor, His Grace, Bishop Melchisedek.

Christ is risen!

Yours in Christ,



## Around the Parish

**The blessing of graves at SS. Peter & Paul Cemetery** took place on St. Thomas Sunday, April 11, on a beautiful day. Thanks to the efforts of our coordinator Margaret Zahariadis and everyone who contributed, we were able to host a generous luncheon for all those who came back to church from the cemetery. It was a blessed day for all of us.

Thanks to the research of Joseph Ulias, Jr., we also went two Sundays later, April 25, to **bless the graves of several early members of our parish in East Cemetery** in Meriden. These were buried before the establishment of our church cemetery.

Please be sure to join us to welcome **His Grace, Bishop Melchisedek — formerly our pastor Fr. Thomas Pleska — who will be visiting Saturday and Sunday, May 15–16.** We are holding a dinner after the Liturgy on Sunday, and tickets are available.

**Then on Saturday and Sunday, June 12–13, we welcome our Bishop Nikon for his annual visitation.** He was to be with us for Meatfare Sunday, but had to postpone due to illness.

On Wednesday, May 12, at 6 PM, we celebrate the eve of the **Ascension of Our Lord with Vespers and Liturgy.** For forty days following his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ showed his risen body to his disciples and taught them how to understand all the Scriptures. Then, having completed his work, he told them to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit, and then ascended from their midst. This is what we affirm each time we recite the Creed: "He rose on the third day, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father...." Come and rejoice in this great feast.

Then on the fiftieth day, **the Holy Pentecost**, Sunday, May 23, we celebrate the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples. From that

time, the Church has directly experienced the activity of God in Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each one of us has a little Pentecost in our Baptism, through Chrismation, when we receive “the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.”


Following the Divine Liturgy of Pentecost, we will conclude the feast with a highly abbreviated **Vespers Service with the Kneeling Prayers**. These prayers ask for the mercy of God to descend on us in every aspect of life. We will kneel for the first time since Pascha.

That same day of Pentecost, May 23, we also will return to celebrate **the wedding of Theodora Datzko and Peter Boris**, at 3 PM. May God grant them many years!

## The Cloud of Witnesses

or

“Who is that on the wall?”

<p>Saints Cyril and Methodius, Equals—to—the— Apostles and Enlighteners of the Slavs commemorated on May 11</p>	 An icon depicting two saints, Cyril and Methodius, standing side-by-side. They are dressed in ornate, patterned robes. The saint on the left (Cyril) has a beard and is holding a book. The saint on the right (Methodius) is also holding a book. Both have halos around their heads.
---	---

*This month continues the series on the lives of the Saints who are represented in the iconography of our church. The Apostle Paul describes this glorious company as “so great a cloud of witnesses” (Hebrews 12:1), who are cheering us on to complete the race set before us. But for many of us, the cloud is a little too foggy, and we are left wondering, “Who is that on the wall?” Each month, we hope to answer that question with a brief account of one or more of the icons we encounter when we enter the church.*

*This month, we consider the Life of Saints Cyril and Methodius. Their icons are found on the south side of the church, on the right as we face the altar, beside our shrine to St. Herman of Alaska. Saint Methodius is vested as a bishop, holding the Gospel he translated into Slavonic, while St. Cyril (behind the shrine of St. Herman) wears monastic garb he took on, and bears the Cyrillic alphabet he created.*

Saints Cyril and Methodius came from an illustrious and pious family living in the Greek city of Thessalonica. St. Methodius was the oldest of seven brothers, while St. Constantine [Cyril was his monastic name] was the youngest. For a time St. Methodius was governor of one of the Slavic principalities dependent on the Byzantine Empire, probably Bulgaria, which made it possible for him to learn the Slavic language. After about ten years, he received monastic tonsure at a monastery on Mount Olympus (Asia Minor). St. Constantine eventually joined his brother, spending his time in unceasing prayer and reading the works of the holy Fathers.

The emperor soon summoned both of the holy brothers from the monastery and sent them to preach the Gospel to the Khazars. Along the way they stayed in the city of Kherson, in Crimea, making preparations for their missionary activity. There the holy brothers miraculously discovered the relics of the hieromartyr Clement, Pope of Rome. After this, the holy brothers went to the Khazars, where they won a debate with Jews and Moslems by preaching the Gospel. The brothers again visited Kherson, then returned to Constantinople with the relics of St. Clement.

St. Constantine remained in the capital, but St. Methodius was made igumen (abbot) of the small Polychronion monastery.

The Moravian prince Rostislav, who was under pressure from German bishops, asked the emperor to send teachers to Moravia (one of the Czech lands) who could preach in the Slavic tongue. The emperor appointed St. Constantine to lead this mission.

In 863, St. Constantine prepared for the new task with fasting and prayer. With the help of his brother St. Methodius and the disciples Gorazd, Clement, Sava, Naum and Angelyar, he devised a Slavonic alphabet and translated the books which were necessary for the celebration of the divine services into the Slavic tongue.

After this, the holy brothers went to Moravia, where they were received with great honor, and they began to teach the services in the Slavic language. This aroused the ire of the German bishops, who celebrated divine services in the Moravian churches in Latin. They rose up against the holy brothers, convinced that divine services must be done only in Hebrew, Greek or Latin.

St. Constantine said, "You only recognize three languages in which God may be glorified. But David sang, 'Praise the Lord, all nations, praise the Lord all peoples [Ps. 116/117:1]'. And the Gospel of St. Matthew [28:18] says, 'Go and teach all nations....'" The German bishops were humiliated, but complained to Rome.

The holy brothers were summoned to Rome for a decision on this matter. Taking with them the relics of St. Clement, Saints Constantine and Methodius set off to Rome. Knowing that the holy brothers were bringing these relics with them, Pope Adrian met them along the way with his clergy. The holy brothers were greeted with honor, the Pope gave permission to have divine services in the Slavonic language, and he ordered the books translated by the brothers to be placed in the Latin churches.

At Rome St. Constantine fell ill, and the Lord revealed to him his approaching death. He was tonsured into the monastic schema with the name of Cyril, by which he is known everywhere. On

February 14, 869, fifty days after receiving the schema, St. Cyril died at the age of forty-two.

St. Cyril commanded his brother St. Methodius to continue enlightening the Slavic peoples with the true Faith. St. Methodius entreated the Pope to send the body of his brother for burial in their native land, but the Pope ordered the relics of St. Cyril to be placed in the church of St. Clement, and there miracles began to occur.

After the death of St. Cyril, the Pope sent St. Methodius to Pannonia, after consecrating him as Archbishop of Moravia and Pannonia. In Pannonia St. Methodius and his disciples continued to distribute services books written in the Slavonic language. For this, the German bishops arrested and tried St. Methodius, who was sent in chains to Swabia, where he suffered for two and a half years.

After being set free by order of Pope John VIII of Rome, and restored to his archdiocese, St. Methodius continued to preach the Gospel among the Slavs. He baptized the Czech prince Borivoi and his wife Ludmilla, and also one of the Polish princes. The German bishops began to persecute the saint for a third time, because he did not accept the erroneous teaching about the procession of the Holy Spirit from both the Father and the Son. St. Methodius was summoned to Rome, but he justified himself before the Pope, and preserved the Orthodox teaching in its purity, and was sent again to the capital of Moravia, Velehrad.

Here in the remaining years of his life St. Methodius, assisted by two of his former pupils, translated the entire Old Testament into Slavonic, except for the Book of Maccabees, and even handbooks on Canon Law and the Fathers of the Church.

Sensing the nearness of death, St. Methodius designated one of his students, Gorazd, as a worthy successor to himself. The holy bishop predicted the day of his death and died on April 6, 885, when he was about sixty years old. The saint's burial service was chanted in three languages, Slavonic, Greek, and Latin. He was buried in the cathedral church of Velehrad.