

Rector's Letter for November, 2011

Dear brothers and sisters:

Where are the saints in our lives? It's worth really asking ourselves: how important are the saints to us? We are proud of our beautiful church full of Orthodox iconography, but do we know their stories? Do we ask for their help by name? Do we gather eagerly to celebrate the memory of our beloved heroes, like our fathers and mothers in the faith always did? Our Church is guided by tradition, the Apostolic Faith "handed down" from generation to generation. It means that we owe a very personal debt of gratitude to those in every generation who received the Good News of Jesus Christ, lived it out in ways big and small, and passed on the Truth they learned to others. Quite simply, those people are the saints, whether they are famous or unknown. Perhaps we have some in our own family trees!

But there are saints who take a special place in the Church, and in this Advent season, we have two particularly Christ-like heroes of the Faith to celebrate. The first, one of the most beloved in all of history, is St. Nicholas the Wonder-worker, Bishop of Myra. We may remember him from our childhood, a snowy-bearded bishop giving gifts, and we may know that people have given gifts in his honor for centuries in many parts of the world. The modern Santa Claus is just a transformation of the real saint. Our St. Nicholas

was a bolder figure, who fiercely defended the true faith against the Arians (who taught that Jesus Christ was less than the Son of God). He gave his money to rescue orphans from slavery and confronted murderers. His prayers saved sailors and turned the hearts of emperors. He is the standard by which we are asked to judge all bishops and pastors. His feast day is on December 6.

And on December 13, we commemorate our Venerable Father Herman of Alaska, who "firmly planted" the Cross in America. In many ways, he resembles St. Nicholas: a lover of children, a protector of orphans and the helpless against those who would abuse them for their own profit, a man of strength and fearlessness but also of deep prayerfulness, a wonder worker who protected many from the wrath of the sea through his bold prayers to God. He is our father in Orthodox faith in America, the first saint in America to be canonized. And we are privileged to have a shrine to St. Herman in our own church, making the remembrance of our holy Father Herman especially close and concrete.

These saints shine beyond any of us, but they have much to offer us. First of all, why *not* call upon the saints for daily help? We are still struggling to find a way through the tangles and snares of life, but the saints are champion marathon runners who have finished the race and know all its challenges. We are constantly surrounded by a "great cloud of witnesses," the Apostle Paul writes (Hebrews 12.1) who would

strengthen and encourage us, if only we would remember them. Saints Nicholas and Herman also teach us not to set our ambitions too small. Despite many trials and seeming defeats, these two brave and holy men kept the faith and in the end won the victory, through Jesus Christ. Thanks in part to St. Nicholas, Orthodoxy was not overcome by the false teachings of Arius, and thanks in part to St. Herman, the same Orthodox Church is now established in America.

This Advent, as we await the day of Christ's coming in the flesh, we need a share in the courage and perseverance of these saints. We know very well the obstacles that stand in our way. But do we know the strength of God that works through his holy ones? Do we know his saints?

Yours in Christ,



Around the Parish

Thank you to everyone who contributed to our **annual Thanksgiving deliveries** to ten neighborhood families in need.

We are in the **midst of the Nativity Fast**, which began on Nov. 15. It is the season preparing us for the celebration of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ. This is a difficult

season to honor, given the hustle and bustle of the American “holiday season,” which drives us to a frenzy of shopping, decorating and partying. By the time we come to Christmas Day and the joyous Christmas season which follows, most are completely burnt out! The Lord calls us to use our time more wisely, to fast and pray as we realize how much this world needs its Savior. Come, Lord Jesus!

We will have a two-part **Bible Study on the Life of Joseph the Patriarch** on Wednesday, Dec. 7 & 21, at 6:30 PM. His story in the Book of Genesis (37, 38-50) is second ton none in terms of family drama, but it also reveals much about how God takes our foolishness and even maliciousness and can transform them in hidden ways to work salvation. The Church has learned from the story of Joseph to understand the life of our Savior Jesus Christ. As we prepare to celebrate our Savior's birth, come learn more.

We invite everyone — and especially families with children — to join our **St. Nicholas celebration** on Dec. 11, the Sunday following his feast day. We will continue our annual custom of inviting the children to the telling of the Story of St. Nicholas and the decorating of the parish Christmas tree. For his feast day proper, we will also celebrate an akathist service on Mon, Dec. 5, at 6:30 PM. Come rejoice in this beloved saint!

Another beloved saint is our **Venerable Father Herman of Alaska**, whom we will commemorate with an akathist service on

Monday, Dec. 12, at 6:30 PM. This humble, prayerful and loving saint is the first canonized in America. As we prepare our hearts to receive our Lord Jesus Christ during the Nativity Fast, Venerable Father Herman, pray for us!

The Brotherhood is holding its **Coat Collection Drive** again this autumn. Please donate coats, hats, and gloves in good condition downstairs. Children's items are especially needed. On Saturday, Dec. 10, we will offer them to any in our neighborhood who need them. We had a wonderful response last year, and we hope to do even better this time around.

Please remember that, if severe weather conditions force **church service or event cancellations**, announcements will be posted on WFSB (channel 3) and WNBC/WVIT (channel 30), as well as on our own parish website: <www.sspeterpaul.org>.

On Dec. 14, the **Kursk-Root Icon of the Most Holy Theotokos "of the Sign"** will be brought to St. George Orthodox Church, Trumbull. This seven hundred year-old miracle-working icon was first discovered by a hunter at the foot of a tree outside Kursk, Russia. It has been a source of blessings and protection from the Mother of God and is one of the most revered icons in the Russian tradition. At 7 PM, Dec. 14, St. George Church will host an Unction Service and the veneration of the icon. All are encouraged to make pilgrimage.

Why We Fast

November 15, marks the beginning of the Nativity Fast (40 days before Christmas). The following article by Father Stephen Freeman offers some thoughts on the purpose of fasting. The original is found at <<http://fatherstephen.wordpress.com/>>.

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Fasting is not very alive or well in the Christian world. Much of that world has long lost any living connection with the historical memory of Christian fasting. Without the guidance of Tradition, many modern Christians either do not fast, or constantly seek to re-invent the practice, sometimes with unintended consequences.

There are other segments of Christendom who have tiny remnants of the traditional Christian fast, but in the face of a modern world have reduced the tradition to relatively trivial acts of self-denial.

I read recently (though I cannot remember where) that the rejection of Hesychasm was the source of all heresy. In less technical terms we can say that knowing God in truth, participating in His life, union with Him through humility, prayer, love of enemy and repentance before all and for everything, is the purpose of the Christian life.

Hesychasm (Greek *Hesychia*=Silence) is the name applied to the Orthodox tradition of ceaseless prayer and inner stillness. But

ceaseless prayer and inner stillness are incorrectly understood if they are separated from knowledge of God and participation in His life, union with Him through humility, prayer, love of enemy and repentance before all and for everything.

It is this same path of inner knowledge of God that is the proper context of fasting. If we fast but do not forgive our enemies – our fasting is of no use. If we fast and do not find it drawing us into humility—our fasting is of no use. If our fasting does not make us yet more keenly aware that we are sinful before all and responsible to all then it is of no benefit. If our fasting does not unite us with the life of God—which is meek and lowly—then it is again of no benefit.

Fasting is not dieting. Fasting is not about keeping a Christian version of kosher. Fasting is about hunger and humility (which is increased as we allow ourselves to become weak). Fasting is about allowing our heart to break.

I have seen greater good accomplished in souls through their failure in the fasting season than in the souls of those who “fasted well.” Publicans enter the kingdom of God before Pharisees pretty much every time.

Why do we fast? The more germane question is “why do we eat?” Christ quoted Scripture to the evil one and said, “Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” We eat as though our life depended on it and it does not. We fast because our life depends on the word of God.

I worked for a couple of years as a hospice chaplain. During that time, daily sitting at the side of the beds of dying patients—I learned a little about how we die. It is a medical fact that many people become “anorexic” before death; that is, they cease to want food. Many times family and even doctors become concerned and force food on a patient who will not survive. Interestingly, it was found that patients who became anorexic had less pain than those who, having become anorexic, were forced to take food. (None of this is about the psychological anorexia that afflicts many of our youth. That is a tragedy.)

It is as though at death our bodies have a wisdom we have lacked for most of our lives. It knows that what it needs is not food – but something deeper. The soul seeks and hungers for the living God. The body and its pain become a distraction. And thus in God’s mercy the distraction is reduced.

Christianity as a religion—as a theoretical system of explanations regarding heaven and hell, reward and punishment—is simply Christianity that has been distorted from its true form. Either we know the living God or we have nothing. Either we eat His flesh and drink His blood or we have no life in us. The rejection of Hesychasm is the source of all heresy.

Why do we fast? We fast so that we may live like a dying man – and that in dying we can be born to eternal life.