

Free Indeed!

St. Joseph the All-Comely Orthodox Texas Prison Ministry Newsletter

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Dormition and Transfiguration

Contact Info..... 2

Questions about Dormition 2

Questions about Transfiguration 3

Questions about Scripture Read on the Feast of the Transfiguration..... 3

Prison Ministry News 3

NB:Gleanings for the Holy Fathers..... 3

Always do the things you CAN do 4

Dormition and our pursuit of holiness. Pursuing holiness is a reliable “rule of thumb” for life..... 5

Dormition hymns: The Furnace and the Theotokos 6

Read the Gospels with Purpose!..... 6

The One Thing Needful. 7

THEOTOKOS - empathically stating the dogma of the incarnation 7

Intercession of the Saints..... 7

Despondency..... 7

Feasts of the Theotokos. Dormition, After Liturgy Short Talk, 2010-08-28..... 7

The Transfiguration. We have seen our future, and we should live according to it in the present. 9

Transfiguration Human Nature in the Midst of the Divine 10

Spiritual Psalter of St. Ephrem the Syrian "Psalm 27." Do NOT LOSE HEART. There is hope AND IT IS CHRIST. 10

Questions and Answers..... 11

 According to Orthodox theology what does it mean to be “perfect” or a “sinner”? 11

 Is the “Vaccine” a sealing or the mark of the beast?..... 11

 What should an Orthodox Christian do if he or she has been vaccinated?..... 11

 Does one need to repent from having received a Covid vaccine? 11

 How does one repent of willingly receiving the Covid vaccine?..... 12

 Can one be healed of the vaccine? 12

Is being depressed a sin? Is homosexuality a sin? An honest assessment. 12

 Would you say Jesus was depressed when He wept for Lazarus ? At what point is depression a sin? When it turns into despondency? 13

 Is brain chemistry considered a sin? 13

The former atheist Frenchwoman and Saint Porphyrios. The Gift of Tongues is still in use!..... 13

Prophecy of the Blessed Elder Justin Parvu (who reposed in 2013):..... 13

St Dimitry, a priest who worked with Mother Maria to save Jews from the Nazis. 14

Answers to: Questions about Dormition 14

Answers to Questions about Transfiguration 16

http://www.orthodox.net/prison-ministry/newsletter-018_2021-08-16+dormition+transfiguration.doc
http://www.orthodox.net/prison-ministry/newsletter-018_2021-08-16+dormition+transfiguration.pdf http://www.orthodox.net/prison-ministry/newsletter-018_2021-08-16+dormition+transfiguration.html

Note: With God helping us, we will send many newsletters to those we minister to in prison. We aim to send a newsletter at least twice each month. This is the 17th sent to 85 souls. Those who wish to contribute to our material needs in our ministry to Orthodox Christians may help us with donations at <http://www.orthodox.net/ministries/orthodox-prison-ministry.html>

Contact Info

Patriarch Joseph the All-Comely Texas ORTHODOX Prison Ministry

<http://www.orthodox.net/ministries/orthodox-prison-ministry.html>

Priest Seraphim Holland seraphim@orthodox.net, St. Nicholas Russian Orthodox Church, PO Box 37, McKinney, TX 75070

Priest David Companik davidcompanik@gmail.com, St. Jonah Orthodox Church, PO Box 1427, Spring, TX 77383. **NOTE: Fr. David manages our ministry's distribution of Orthodox books, church calendars, icons, and service texts. Contact him if you need anything.**

Priest Cassian Sibley frcassian@yahoo.com, Theotokos of the Life-Giving Spring Russian Orthodox Mission, 1009 Winter Street, Bryan, TX 77803

Questions about Dormition

QUESTION 1. What does the word “Dormition” mean? Why do you think we use this word?

QUESTION 2. What is commemorated in the feast of the “Dormition?” Tell the story briefly.

QUESTION 3. There are many feasts of the Lord and the Theotokos (“Mother of God,” Mary) during the year, and some of them are clearly described in the Scriptures, and others are described by our Holy Tradition. Here is a list of the 12 great feasts of the Lord and the Theotokos, plus Pascha, which is such a great feast that it is not numbered with any other feast of the Lord. Please put them in “chronological” order, that is, the order in which the commemorated event occurred in human history and indicate which feasts are described in Scripture and which are described only by Holy Tradition.

For some converts to the Orthodox Christian faith (the church), it takes some getting used to that the Orthodox Christians believe things from Holy Tradition that are not specified in the Scriptures. The Scriptures are part of Holy Tradition and not the *only* source of it! We know things are true if they’ve always been in the mind and the practice of the church. Even the canon of Scripture which we accept so easily today came out of Holy Tradition, and the Scripture was not actually finalized until the fourth century.

Don’t be afraid to believe Holy Tradition, and also don’t be afraid when you see embellishments. There’s no doubt that there are embellishments in our Holy Tradition; however, the core meaning of the events and the holy ones described is absolutely true.

In our benighted age, there are actual Orthodox Christians who fancy themselves theologians who say that things like: “the Dormition of the Theotokos and her Entrance, or her ever-virginity are mere fables.” If they are fables, then we have been saying lies in our services for hundreds upon hundreds of years and in some cases from the beginning!

Our services do not lie, and our Holy Tradition helps to teach us the way of life. Obviously, the Scriptures by themselves, without the help of an interpreter, can be misunderstood, as there are hundreds of sects that purport to believe in only the Bible. Don’t fall into this trap! Learn to read the text of the services and the homilies of the Holy Fathers and be like a child and believe!

Great Feasts (in Alphabetical Order)

- Annunciation
- Ascension of Jesus Christ
- Baptism of Christ (Theophany, Epiphany)
- Dormition of the Theotokos
- Entry into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday)
- Exaltation of the Cross
- Nativity of Christ (Christmas)
- Nativity of the Theotokos
- Pascha – the Resurrection of Jesus Christ
- Pentecost
- Presentation of Jesus Christ in the Temple

Presentation of the Theotokos
Transfiguration of Jesus Christ

QUESTION 4. What is the date of the commemoration of the Dormition of the Theotokos? And why do you think it is commemorated at this time? You need to think a little, and know something about the church calendar and the order in which the actual event that a feast commemorates occurred. If you get this, you will be considered a candidate for Mensa! You will understand patterns a little bit.

QUESTION 5. How does the Orthodox commemoration of the Dormition of the Mother of God differ from the Latin feast called the “Assumption of the Theotokos?” This difference is significant theologically.

QUESTION 6. What is the preparation period for the feast of the Dormition? Why do you think the Orthodox Church has this preparation period? There is no analogous preparation for any other saints other than the Apostles Peter and Paul.

QUESTION 7. Just for fun. How many people in heaven have bodies?

QUESTION 8. Why do we often address Mary as “full of grace?”

QUESTION 9. [Genesis 28:10-17] Jacob went forth from the well of the oath, and departed unto Haran. And came to a certain place and slept there, for the sun had gone down; and he took one of the stones of the place, and put it at his head, and lay down to sleep in that place, and dreamed, and beheld a ladder fixed on the earth, whose top reached to heaven, and the angels of God ascended and descended on it. And the Lord stood upon it, and said: ‘I am the God of thy father Abraham, and the God of Isaac. Fear not; the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed. And thy seed shall be like the sand of the earth; and it shall spread abroad to the sea, and the south, and the north, and the east; and in thee and in thy seed shall all tribes of the earth be blessed. And behold I am with thee to preserve thee continually in all the way wherein thou shalt go; and I will bring thee back to this land; for I will not desert thee, until I have done all that I have said to thee.’ And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and said: ‘The Lord is in this place, and I knew it not.’ And he was afraid, and said: ‘How fearful is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!’

When we serve Vespers for a great feast, we always have at least three Old Testament readings (in the case of the Apostles, New Testament readings). The reading above is the 1st one we read when we commemorate the feast of the Theotokos. What is it teaching? Concentrate on the last sentence.

QUESTION 10. [Ezekiel 43:27-44:4a] Thus saith the Lord: ‘It shall come to pass from the eighth day and onward, that the priests shall offer your wholeburnt-offerings on the altar, and your peace-offerings; and I will accept you,’ saith the Lord. Then He brought me back by way of the outer gate of the sanctuary that faceth eastward; and it was shut. And the Lord said to me: ‘This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall pass through it; for the Lord God of Israel shall enter by it, and it shall be shut. For the Prince, He shall sit in it, to eat bread before the Lord; He shall go in by the way of the porch of the gate, and shall go forth by the way of

the same.' And He brought me in by the way of the gate that faceth northward, in front of the house: and I looked, and, behold! the house was full of the glory of the Lord.

The reading, above, is the 2nd one we read during a feast for the Theotokos. What is it teaching?

Questions about Transfiguration

QUESTION 1 Tell the transfiguration story, paying attention to the point in Jesus' ministry that it occurred. Which gospels report the Transfiguration?

QUESTION 2 What other event in our Lord's life has obvious similarities to the Transfiguration? Explain

QUESTION 3 How did Jesus' transfiguration prepare the apostles for his subsequent crucifixion?

QUESTION 4 Our Lord's transfiguration contains an implicit but significant promise upon which the whole of Orthodox ascetic theology is built. Comment on this. This emphasis is peculiar to Orthodoxy and is missing from the religions of the West. Speculate why.

QUESTION 5 What virulent relatively early heresy does the Transfiguration emphatically contradict? How?

QUESTION 6 When is the Transfiguration celebrated?

QUESTION 7 What is the fasting typicon on the Transfiguration?

QUESTION 8 Why were Moses and Elijah present on Mount Tabor?

QUESTION 9 Comment on how the dual nature of Christ was revealed on Mount Tabor and the implications for our nature.

QUESTION 10 Comment on the implications of the Transfiguration and the theology of St. Gregory Palamas.

Questions about Scripture Read on the Feast of the Transfiguration.

QUESTION 1 "And it came to pass about an eight days after these sayings, he took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray." (LUKE 9:28) What sayings?

QUESTION 2 "And it came to pass about an eight days after these sayings, he took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray." (Luke 9:28) Why did Jesus take these three of His disciples?

QUESTION 3 "And it came to pass about an eight days after these sayings, he took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray." (LUKE 9:28) What were the practical considerations and spiritual meaning of Jesus ascending a mountain to pray?

QUESTION 4 "And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistening." (Luke 9:29) What made His raiment white and glistening? What occurrence in the OT proves it is possible for our "countenance to be altered"?

QUESTION 5 "And, behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias: {31} Who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem." (Luke 9:20-31)

Moses and Elias conversation about events after their death proves an essential truth about the dead, which a good part of those who profess to be Christians seem not to be aware. What?

QUESTION 6 "And, behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias: {31} Who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem." (Luke 9:20-31)

Why did Moses and Elias appear? What does each represent?

QUESTION 7 "And, behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias: {31} Who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem." (Luke 9:20-31)

Why did Moses and Elias speak of Jesus' upcoming passion? It would not be out of order to make an educated guess.

QUESTION 8 How did Jesus' Transfiguration prepare the apostles for His subsequent crucifixion?

QUESTION 9 "But Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep: " (vs. 32) Why were they heavy with sleep?

QUESTION 10 "And when the voice was past, Jesus was found alone. And they kept it close, and told no man in those days any of those things which they had seen." (Luke 9:36) Why did the Apostles tell nobody about this startling event?

Prison Ministry News

A man from our parish in McKinney is living in the house in Marshall now, and we are beginning the great adventure. We are calling at least weekly to find out when our first parolee will be released. This may surprise you, but we can call three different people on the same day and get three different answers! However, it appears that the release will occur in September. We are ready and waiting!

Father Seraphim has not yet gone down to Marshall, but this should occur in August, and he plans to go to Marshall twice a month. It is hoped that everyone in Marshall will come up to McKinney at least once a month. Of course, that will depend on the good will of the parole officer.

Father David continues to visit where you can and is encountering roadblocks where he can't. The Michael Unit, which Fr Seraphim went to frequently, seems to have stonewalled, and is not allowing any services from "secondary faith groups." How does it feel to be a "secondary faith group!" I've always thought of ourselves as **extremely** primary! TDCJ disagrees! You can always help matters by sending I-60s asking for Orthodox services. If you want this hard enough, you can treat TDCJ as the "unjust judge." That might be a *stretch* for you (just kidding!); look it up in Scripture.

NB:Gleanings for the Holy Fathers

"NB" is an abbreviation for fancy Latin phrase: "note well." It is undoubtedly important to "note well" holy things. This abbreviation is used in a lot of social media.

If her Fruit, Whom none may comprehend, on Whose account she was called a heaven, submitted of His own will to burial as a mortal, how should she, who gave Him birth without knowing a man, refuse it?

O pure Virgin, sprung from mortal loins, thine end was conformable to nature: but because thou hast borne the true Life, thou hast departed to dwell with the divine Life Himself. Verses from the Canon of the Dormition of the Mother of God, quoted in The Life of the Virgin Mary

The Dormition icon is based not on Scriptural accounts, for there are none, but on sacred tradition. It is in accord with the hymnography of the Church, particularly with the exostilarion that is chanted on August 15 and the fourteen days that precede it. This Hymn says, O ye Apostles from afar, being now gathered together here in the vale of Gethsemane, give burial to my body; and Thou, my Son and my God, receive Thou my spirit.

Although nothing is said about the death of the All-holy Virgin in the New Testament, the term that is used in the icon to denote her death; Koimesis, does appear in it. Also, verb forms of this word appear in it a good number of times to refer to the event of dying and the state of death in the case of the righteous. The noun koimesis is used in the Gospel according to St. John in speaking of the death of Lazarus. Constantine Cavarnos, A Guide to Byzantine Iconography, V. 1

"The Apostles took up her body on a bier and placed it in a tomb; and they guarded it, expecting the Lord to come. And behold, again the Lord stood by them; and the holy body having been received, He commanded that it be taken in a cloud into paradise: where now, rejoined to the soul, Mary rejoices with the Lord's chosen ones..." St Gregory of Tours, Eight Books of Miracles, 6th century

"As the most glorious Mother of Christ, our Saviour and God and the giver of life and immortality, has been endowed with life by him, she has received an eternal incorruptibility of the body together with him who has raised her up from the tomb and has taken her up to himself in a way known only to him." St Modestos of Jerusalem, Homily on the Dormition (c.630AD)

"It was fitting that the most holy-body of Mary, God-bearing body, receptacle of God, divinised, incorruptible, illuminated by divine grace and full glory, should be entrusted to the earth for a little while and raised up to heaven in glory, with her soul pleasing to God." Theoteknos of Livias, Homily on the Assumption (c. 650AD)

"You are she who, as it is written, appears in beauty, and your virginal body is all holy, all chaste, entirely the dwelling place of God, so that it is henceforth completely exempt from dissolution into dust. Though still human, it is changed into the heavenly life of incorruptibility, truly living and glorious, undamaged and sharing in perfect life." St. Germanus of Constantinople (733AD) Fr Seraphim Rose, "Letters"

"It was fitting that the she, who had kept her virginity intact in childbirth, should keep her own body free from all corruption even after death. It was fitting that she, who had carried the Creator as a child at her breast, should dwell in the divine tabernacles. It was fitting that the spouse, whom the Father had taken to himself, should live in the divine mansions. It was fitting that she, who had seen her Son upon the cross and who had thereby received into her heart the sword of sorrow which she had escaped when giving birth to him, should look upon him as he sits with the Father, It was fitting that God's Mother should possess what belongs to her Son, and

Always do the things you CAN do

"Always do the things you CAN do, so you can learn to do the things you CANNOT do"; This sums up the Christian life - we should always be learning and improving.

We cannot do many things - control our thoughts, pray with attention, love everyone with a pure heart, etc. In each individual, sins, passions, and habits are very hard to eradicate - these are things we CANNOT do consistently. In every individual, some things are easier to do, which are also important in the Christian life. For me, fasting is one of those things. I hope it will also be so for you.

that she should be honored by every creature as the Mother and as the handmaid of God" St John of Damascene (c.749AD)

"St. Juvenal, Bishop of Jerusalem, when he was speaking at the Council of Chalcedon (451AD), made known to the Emperor Marcian and Pulcheria, who wished to possess the body of the Mother of God, that Mary died in the presence of all the Apostles, but that her tomb, when opened, upon the request of St. Thomas, was found empty; wherefrom the Apostles concluded that the body was taken up to heaven." St John of Damascene (c.749AD)

What we gain by fasting is not so great as the damage done by anger; nor is the profit from spiritual reading as great as the harm done when we scorn or grieve a brother. - St. John Cassian

Prayer and reading are excellent; they stop the aimless wandering of thoughts, shackle the thought which turns on useless things and keep it close by them with profit, occupied without distraction by this excellent doing.' St. Nilus of Sinai

Do not say to me that I fasted for so many days, that I did not eat this or that, that I did not drink wine, that I endured want; but show me if thou from an angry man hast become gentle, if thou from a cruel man hast become benevolent. If thou art filled with anger, why oppress thy flesh? If hatred and avarice are within thee, of what benefit is it that thou drinkest water? Do not show forth a useless fast: for fasting alone does not ascend to heaven. - St. John Chrysostom

As a flame of fire in dry wood, so too is a body with a full belly. - St. Isaac the Syrian

Whosoever rejects the fasts, deprives himself and others of weapons against his own much-suffering flesh and against the devil, who have power over us especially as the result of our intemperance. St. John of Kronstadt

O brethren, as ye take up the spiritual fast, speak no deceit with your tongue, neither put a stumbling block in the way of your brother as an occasion for him to fall: but by repentance let us trim the lamp of our soul, that with tears we may cry unto Christ Forgive us our transgressions, since Thou art the Friend of man. Vespers of Wednesday of the Second Week of Great Lent

Let us love that fasting of the soul which, by the cooperation of the Spirit, doth wither the grievous passions and doth strengthen us to do godly deeds, and doth uplift our mind towards Heaven, and doth obtain our sins' forgiveness, grant unto us by the compassionate God. Triodion, Monday Vespers of the Third Week

There are other things that a particular individual CAN do - perhaps you are consistent in reading the Scriptures, or attending the services, going to confession regularly, having communion, or saying your morning prayers, or praying for others. If this is the case, you will make great progress in EVERYTHING if you obediently do the things you are capable of doing.

THIS WORKS! One of my most important goals as a pastor is to get people to believe it and "sign on" to the idea. I hope you "sign on" and seek the wisdom of God to know which things you CAN consistently do, even if they take a little effort.

In my pastoral experience, the person who makes the most significant progress in the spiritual life is the one who is consistent in *something*. The one who makes very little progress is consistent in nothing or almost nothing. Each person must find the things they CAN do and do them. Nothing is too small if you can be consistent in doing it. Even something as small as always taking out the garbage each morning or doing the dishes even if you have not dirtied them, if you do it consistently, and without complaining, and offer it to God as a sacrifice, will help you in EVERYTHING.

Other reasons to fast are that consistent fasting helps us remember God and our purpose. We are born to be spiritual beings, to think in spiritual ways. When speaking with Nicodemus, Jesus told him:

"Verily, verily, I say unto thee, We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen, and ye receive not our witness. (12) If I have told you earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you of heavenly things?" (John 3:11-12).

We are earthly in our ways and habits. It takes work and practice to be "heavenly." Fasting helps focus us on heavenly things. Fasting is in no way a repudiation of pleasure. Food is pleasurable, and it is good to enjoy it, but it is still earthly. Abstinence from certain foods teaches us self-control and to think spiritually. Self-control gained from fasting will extend to self-control in everything in life, especially in the most critical area - our thoughts.

If we think rightly, everything is right with us. All sin starts with thought, and controlling thoughts is one of the greatest accomplishments of a Christian. We learn to control our thoughts from self-control in easier things (like fasting - no matter how hard it is for someone to fast, controlling what we eat is infinitely easier than controlling our thoughts, which is often like trying to catch the wind).

Fasting also helps greatly with the really difficult thoughts, those "hot" thoughts which are very hard to control, such as lust, anger, the judgment of others, jealousy, etc.

Jesus taught that fasting is needed to get rid of "this kind" of thoughts when He said: "... This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting." (Mark 9:29)

He answered the disciple's question about why they could not cast a demon out of a boy. He first answered that it was because of their lack of faith and then told them about fasting. The juxtaposition of those things (faith and fasting) is important! The church knows that fasting will increase our faith.

We also understand the Lord's words about "this kind" to also refer mystically to the passions that "possess" all of us. All of us are slaves to passions because the nature of sin is that it always enslaves us. We were born to be free from sin, and it is apparent to those who fast with effort, diligence, and expectation that fasting helps immensely.

We all have bad days and sometimes bad weeks or months. We get lazy or depressed or out of sorts. I have found that fasting is a kind of "anchor" for me. I may have a terrible day - I may not have prayed as I should - I may have had trouble controlling my thoughts - but I have at least fasted and offered God something! This is not anything to be proud of, like the Pharisee, who boasted that he "fasted twice in the week," but it is something that keeps me "attached" in some way to God.

I have fasted according to the church's teaching for over 40 years, and I am glad for it. I would not want to know myself if I had never fasted. I am not a continent man and do not always control my thoughts or have attentive prayer, but things have gotten much better over the years, and fasting is like an old friend now, who supports me and helps me get through things when things are tough.

My experience as a pastor is that those who fast consistently have much more self-control and a more "even" spiritual life instead of the "ups and downs" that most people experience. I want you all to have this stability and comfort, which is why I encourage you to fast.

Dormition and our pursuit of holiness. Pursuing holiness is a reliable "rule of thumb" for life.

SYNOPSIS: During two prison visits on the 2nd day of the Dormition Fast, I sang the Small Paraklesis and preached on the Gospel from Luke appointed for it about the Theotokos and holiness. Christians should pursue holiness. It is the entire goal of our life because God is Holy. We discuss the difference in the understanding of what salvation is for an Orthodox Christian vs. other Christian faiths, and the pursuit of holiness and how the Theotokos is an example of holiness, and why we talk so much about her. Since our goal is to become holy, we develop a "rule of thumb" to evaluate everything we do in life. Luke 1:39-49,56 2019-08-16

http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/theotokos_2019+dormition+holiness-definition-of-salvation_luke1-39-49,56.pdf

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AUDIO:

http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/theotokos_2019+dormition+holiness-definition-of-salvation_luke1-39-49,56.mp3

Today is the first day of the Dormition fast, and I sang the Small Paraklesis twice in the two different prisons that I visited today and preached on the Gospel, that beautiful gospel from Saint Luke about Mary going out to the hill country and visiting her kinswoman Elisabeth and Saint John the Baptist leaping in her womb for joy. It's a very beautiful gospel, and I read it every single day during the Dormition fast because we serve the Small Paraklesis every single day. It impresses me how vital holiness is.

In Orthodoxy, we stress holiness above everything. God is holy. God made us to become holy, not just to save us. When I was Protestant, it was about being saved; it was about a contract with God. Now, it was a benevolent contract; God wants to save us, and He saves us because of this thing that we do, where we ask Jesus to come into our heart, and therefore

we are saved from being judged for our sin. In Orthodoxy, that's not how we describe salvation. We describe salvation as the perfection of the soul in union with God, and how can you have those things without holiness? Therefore, Orthodoxy has this beautiful emphasis on holiness.

That's why our hymns speak so much about the Theotokos, who is holy. She became holy by the Grace of God, by bearing God in her womb, and God enlightening her in her earthly life, and then bringing her to heaven body and soul. Because she was - in a way, you could say - the beginning of the resurrection. She bore the One Who would be resurrected, and so He honored her role in our salvation by bringing her to the heavens in body and soul - that is what we celebrate in the Dormition. We talk about the Mother of God's holiness all the time, and we even call her "Panagia," which means "all-holy," and that freaks people out - they think, "how can we say she's 'all holy'?" Literally, that wouldn't be true - the only Holy Being in the entire universe is God, but we are to become holy like God and approach His holiness.

It's essential to meditate on holy things, and when you read this Gospel from Saint Luke about Mary going in the hill country, and the whole narrative about the Annunciation and the birth of Christ, there's so much holiness there. Imagine a 14 or 15-year-old girl who is told that she will bear a child. She knew that she would be a virgin; somehow, she had a vow that she had made and knew God would honor, and yet, she was told she would bear a child! So, she's curious and says, "How shall this be?" And yet she didn't say, "How am I going to make it? How will I escape being stoned? What will I tell Joseph?" She just wanted to know "how shall this be," and she was told it would be through the Holy Spirit. What a brave woman, and what a holy woman! - to submit herself to God like that - to make herself possibly an object of scorn and even of stones. And from that point on, she

had Christ in her womb for nine months, and many changes must have happened in her soul. When you have a baby, your body changes; it's amazing; you get 25 percent more blood circulation, more veins and arteries, so imagine what happens to the soul when the God-man Jesus Christ abides in it.

So, she became a very holy woman, not perfect by any means: you can tell the Gospel she made some mistakes in judgment, but after the resurrection, she was the mentor and the conscience of the apostles and helped them in many ways. She knew them all personally very well, and she inculcated in them this love of holiness, and the church has this. We treat things with reverence: relics of saints, the Holy Mysteries, the vessels we use, the altar table. We treat things with reverence because they are holy. It is not because of superstition or anything but because they are holy, and we should recognize holy things.

I was recently reading something about Archbishop Anthony of blessed memory, of San Francisco, and many stories about him are just beautiful; he was a holy man, humble. He was a little eccentric. He would not sleep much, and he'd be excited about something, and he would call of his priests about something at 3 or 4 in the morning. Then he would say, "O father, forgive me I forgot - you know it's late, and you must've been sleeping," but the very fact that he called his priests personally so often is an amazing thing anyway. There were some Gospels that were in a box, and somebody was moving the box with their foot, and he said, "Oh no, that won't do - pick it up you should never move the gospels with your foot.," because a

foot on this is not considered to be a nice way to do things. He was saying you must go to the extra effort and pick it up and move it because the Gospels are holy.

So, we have to emphasize all these things and the entire Dormition fast, we're emphasizing holy things.

You can have a rule of thumb that will work pretty well in life: if you can do something and it is holy, then do it - if you can't, then don't. Now, I'm not talking about whether or not you get yourself dirty or whether you are involved in a conflict or anything else. We have to do things - life is messy - but if your disposition is one of peace and love and patience - all these things are aspects of holiness - then you can go ahead and do it, if you can't do it with this sort of disposition, then you're sinning. It's pretty easy! We should always aim for what is holy, and the Mother of God teaches us that. May God help us to become holy. Amen.

Priest Seraphim Holland [St Joseph the All-Comely Orthodox Texas Prison Ministry](http://www.orthodox.net/ministries/orthodox-prison-ministry.html)
<http://www.orthodox.net/ministries/orthodox-prison-ministry.html>

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http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/theotokos_2019+dormition+holiness-definition-of-salvation_luke1-39-49,56.pdf

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Dormition hymns: The Furnace and the Theotokos

The almighty Angel of God showed forth for the youths a flame which bedewed the venerable and utterly consumed the ungodly, and He made the Theotokos a life-creating well-spring pouring forth destruction for death and life for them that chant: O ye who have been delivered, let us hymn and exalt the one Creator for all ages! (Dormition matins, Canon, Irmos, Ode VIII)

I am amazed at how often the hymns at the end of vigil seem so much more profound and beautiful than those at the beginning. I do not think they are of substantially higher quality, although it could be argued that the "Canon" is the masterpiece of all Orthodox hymnology. Still, I do believe that WE are of higher quality! Standing (sitting, pacing, having an itch, having your mind wander, thinking about how your feet hurt, getting hungry, etc., etc.) during the vigil prepares us for holy moments when something being chanted seems to permeate to the very depths of our soul.

We are not "quiet" at the beginning of the vigil. Our souls are coarse, noisy. It takes some seasoning for us to be prepared to "sit at the feet" of our Lord and contemplate the one thing needful. Towards the end of the vigil, we have quieted down somewhat and are prepared for something fantastic, although ineffable and invisible, and perhaps even barely discernable, to happen in our soul.

If you have not experienced this type of "Theophany" during the evening service, then come to vigil - all of it, as often as can. It will happen for you, but I warn you that you will have many attacks that make you want to leave if you are not accustomed to long vigils. You cannot feel anything until you are made ready; This will take consistency and TIME. Don't expect the first or even the thirtieth vigil in a row that you attend to bring you great consolation, but it will come if you are patient.

Here before us, we have a holy metaphor. The Theotokos, amidst her many other names ("jar of manna, "gate that remained shut," "ever-virgin," "rod that budded," etc.), is now likened to a furnace.

The furnace in which the three youths were cast contained flame, and then was visited by the divine flame, the "Angel of the Lord," who is none other than Jesus Christ, in an appearance before His bodily incarnation (when you see "Angel of the Lord" in the OT, translate this to "Jesus Christ").

The Theotokos is the furnace that also contained the Divine Flame, Jesus Christ, however in her case, He is fully incarnate, God and man. In both furnaces, the flame burns the ungodly and refreshes those who love God.

God is the same, to the righteous and unrighteous. The action of the fire in the furnace demonstrates this truth. The flames slew the Chaldeans who were feeding the furnace, but the three holy youths considered them to be a "moist dew." It is the same with the Divine flame, Jesus Christ. The ungodly are burned, and the righteous are refreshed.

The recent feast of the Transfiguration should teach us that becoming righteous is a process of long duration and great difficulty; we are not immediately ready to be in the presence of God after our baptism because we have not changed enough yet. The three apostles were terrified and confused in the presence of the uncreated Divine Light. They eventually were ready, but not until great trials, difficulties, falls, and repentance. How can it be any different for us poor ones?

Priest Seraphim Holland 2009. http://www.orthodox.net/journal/2009-08-26_dormition-hymns+three-holy-children-in-the-furnace.doc and

<http://orthodox.net/redeemingthetime/2009/08/26/dormition-hymns-the-furnace-and-the-theotokos/>

Read the Gospels with Purpose!

For those new to my letters, the men I see are reading Matthew chapter by chapter right now. I am trying to send a commentary on a

chapter of Matthew weekly. The next one I send will be for Chapter 4. This is not an attempt to be scholarly or comprehensive, although I may explain

a few things I have learned. Mostly, I want to write from my heart, where the scripture touches me. I want you to write to me from your heart, where the scripture touches you. You could mail these letters, or give them to me when I visit if you need to save money.

We must always read Scripture to be touched in the heart. Its greatest benefit to us is that it teaches us how to live. Everything is there, on every

page - the purpose of life, how to fulfill this purpose, how to live, how not to live, encouragement, rebuke, consolation. **Read the Scripture daily**, and be like Martha, who sat at the feet of Jesus, in order to learn the "one thing needful."

The One Thing Needful.

Do you know what that "*one thing needful*" is? I have shared this with most of you many times. It is to fulfill our purpose, union with God, in perfection and peace and love. It is not about forgiveness (only); it is about perfection! You were born to know God in perfection; This is what Jesus means when He states the purpose of life and what salvation is, in His high priestly prayer: "And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, and Jesus Christ Whom Thou hast sent" (John 17:3)

Never forget this! There is no meaning in life outside of Christ. He created us and became man to give us a great gift - the way to perfection and union with Him. If you live with this sure knowledge, this great hope in you will guard you and help you and console you. A person who lives with this knowledge can see God's mercy and plan in everything that happens to him, both good and bad things.

We must always be changed by the *inner meaning of everything we encounter*, in life in general, and especially in everything the church does and teaches. The church has the mind of Christ, and we are trying to acquire this mind. The things God values, the church values.

The primary thing we must learn from the Theotokos is that *personal holiness in a human being is possible*. She teaches us how to live, how to pray, and the kind of person we should be. We are amazed at her holiness, which we understand to be because of her submission to God and her radiant humility and obedience. God did not make her holy, like some kind of robot. She is no different in her "human stuff" from us. The way she differs from us is that she willingly gave herself entirely over to God's will, and she became holy, even in this imperfect life. We can learn much from her.

THEOTOKOS - empathically stating the dogma of the incarnation

The word "**Theotokos**" means "Mother of God," and is our **emphatic** way of stating the DOGMA that the uncreated Creator of the universe, Jesus Christ, became a man just like us for our salvation, so that we could be like Him.

He acquired *all of His humanity* from the Mother of God since there was no man's seed involved. Since we cannot separate in the person of Jesus Christ either His Divinity or His humanity, which are always present, as two distinct natures in one person, we can refer to the person who came out of Mary as God and Man. She did not create God, but also, the person she bore is both God and man, so to emphasize that God became man (the greatest miracle in the world), we call her the Mother of God.

"Theotokos" is an ancient word, confirmed by all the councils of the church. These councils were long before there were any splits and controversies about "faith and works," or the Eucharist, or baptism, or the priesthood, or the intercession of the saints, or any of the things that currently divide people who profess to believe in Christ and also, lamentably, disagree on fundamental doctrines and dogmas, which the church believed, taught and practiced from the beginning.

Since the whole purpose of our life is to become HOLY, the Mother of God, who became holy, commands our attention. She has "fought the good fight, and finished the course," and she can teach us.

Intercession of the Saints

The DOGMA that the saints can help us after their deaths in Christ is a beautiful doctrine that the church has always understood, but unfortunately, many do not know because, for historical reasons, and because of human pride, anger and blindness, this truth was rejected. One of the most terrible results of the "Reformation" of the late Middle Ages was the loss of this truth. Our sacred history knows of many times when the Saints have, according to the will of God, intervened in human affairs. We all know of events where angels intervened, and some of these events are in the Scriptures, and all who profess Christianity believe these events

are true, but many things have happened since the Scriptures were written that the church knows. For us, the reality that "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16b) is always present. Holy souls have many times seen saints, angels, and the Mother of God. There is a spiritual reality that is invisible to most of us because of our sins, but we know it exists because the church knows. We speak to the Saints and the Mother of God with intimacy and expectation, knowing that their prayers for us and actions to help us are more powerful than our own.

Despondency

I have one more thing to tell you today. Some of you suffer from despondency. You want to do better, but you are not progressing as you think you should. Take heart; the Holy Paul had the same problem!

For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. Romans 7:15

Despondency over our sins and shame regarding our past deeds and our present weaknesses is a common affliction of man. It is a demonic attack. We will speak more of this, but for now, I offer to you two things I

have read recently. Do not give up! You will get better! All you need do is struggle to get better, and God will help you.

"Do not grow despondent from a fall, but fight; and do not grieve much, lest the enemy, having wounded you much already, should cut your head off - that is, bring you into despair..." Elder Hilarion of Optina

Feasts of the Theotokos. Dormition, After Liturgy Short Talk, 2010-08-28

I want to tell you a little bit about the Dormition of the Theotokos. "Dormition" means "falling asleep." It's important that we have a balanced understanding of the Theotokos. She is truly the greatest among all mortals who have been born, but she's still a mortal. She needs and needed a Savior as much as you and I do. In order to conquer death. So she did die—"dormition" means "falling asleep"—and when we say "falling asleep," it's sort of a way of saying that the body died but that the body will rise. So it's as if it is sleeping. Of course, the soul remains alive.

In the Theotokos' case, it's an exception in that after she died and was buried, at some point in time, our Lord Jesus Christ came and brought her, body and soul, to heaven. We know this because of revelation. I'll tell you a bit of the story. After the Resurrection, the Theotokos lived with St. John according to our Savior's instructions on the cross, when He said, "Son, behold thy mother, and, Mother, behold thy son." So she lived with St. John, and she even accompanied him to Ephesus. St. John did much of his apostolic work in Ephesus.

She lived in Jerusalem for quite some time after the Resurrection, and most of the apostles lived in Jerusalem for at least ten years. She was a mentor to all of them. She told them many things that are part of our Tradition to this day, and she was a bulwark for the apostles, sort of in the background but very holy and the apostles depended upon her as their mother.

When her time of death drew near, she understood that she would die by revelation. The Archangel Gabriel, I believe, came to her and revealed to her that her repose was imminent. She desired very much to have all the apostles gathered around her. Now, they were spread all over. Thomas was in India. St. John was in Ephesus. St. Mark would have been in Alexandria. They were all over the place. She prayed that the Lord would bring the apostles to her before she died. St. John arrived, and the rest of the apostles arrived miraculously.

This is not so exceptional. We've seen it before in the Acts when the Spirit took Philip to another place. He talked to the Queen Candace's eunuch, and then he was taken away. It happened with Habakkuk. It happened with Mary of Egypt. If you recall her story, when she had seen Abba Zosimas, the second and the last time that she saw him in the flesh alive, she said to come back the next year to the place she had seen him the first time. When he came back the next year, he saw that she had written on the ground to bury the body of humble Mary and gave the date and the time in which she reposed, which was the very same day that she had received the Holy Mysteries from Zosimas. That was a 20 days' journey in the wilderness. So she was taken by the Spirit to where she reposed. So the apostles were, too. These things are not exceptional to Christians. Things like this happen all the time. We don't have the eyes to see.

All the apostles were gathered, save one, and we can guess who that might be, right? Thomas was late. Just as he was late to see the Lord resurrected, he was late to see the Theotokos buried. He came three days later after she had been buried, and he lamented that he could not see her and caress her and kiss her one more time. So they opened up the tomb, and she was gone. Then it was revealed to them that the Lord had taken her. This is what we celebrate.

The Dormition is also a prophecy of things to come because we will also be taken to the heavens—but not the same way she was. We're going to die. Our bodies are going to decay, but then we're going to be re-formed.

There are many heresies about the Theotokos that I think you should be aware of and be on your guard against. As I said, we should have a balanced view of the Theotokos. We ask her for intercessions because she is very close to her Son. It makes sense that she should be close to her Son. A mother should be close to her son. And the effective prayer, the effectual and fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much; so says James. So,

since she is very righteous, her prayers must be very effective, and that is why we ask her to intercede for us to her Son.

If you look carefully at the hymnology about her, you'll see that it is clear that the Church considers her to be a mortal, a human in need of a Savior, who became holy. And we venerate her for her obedience to Christ and therefore ask her prayers. We do not believe that she is, as the Latins would say, Co-Mediatrix. We don't consider her to be so high as to be on a par with God. She needs God as we need God. She needed God for every breath she drew, for the very life that she had, just as we need God for every breath that we draw. We don't consider her to be some in-between [for] man and God. She's a human.

Also, we do not believe in this so-called "Immaculate Conception." That is another Latin invention, and that is because they misunderstood the sin of Adam, and they think that everyone was born guilty. They called it "original sin." The proper term Orthodox would generally use is called "ancestral sin" because there was a sin of our ancestors that did cause sin to be brought into the world and us to be of a sinful nature. But the Latins wanted to put her on a pedestal, and they wanted to consider her to be holy from birth since they already thought that everyone was unholy from birth, was born guilty before God—we do not believe this. Babies are not guilty before God. In time they'll become guilty. Anyone who has a two-year-old knows children can be very guilty, but an infant, no. An infant is not guilty before God for the sin of Adam. An infant, instead, is inclined towards sin. So we do not believe that the Theotokos was immaculately conceived, that is, conceived without original sin, because there is no original sin!

I want to tell you something about this idea that the Theotokos would be something different than us. If, as the Latins believe, she was conceived without original sin and everyone else had it, then the Theotokos, on some level, was not completely human. Our Lord gained all of His humanity from the Theotokos. Our Lord saved humanity because He became man and deified humanity by living as a man. He made humanity capable of attaining to God. If the Theotokos is not completely human, is something other than human because she didn't have original sin, then the Lord would not save us. Perhaps that's a little technical, but that's a critical point for those who study theology to understand.

Also, there is this idea that the Theotokos had children because of a Scripture that says, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are here." St. Joseph had children from a previous marriage, and so these children were considered the Theotokos' children because they were cousins. Here's all we need to know about the Theotokos being Ever-Virgin. The Church has always believed it; the Church has always prayed it. The Dormition Troparion proclaims it: "In giving birth, *thou didst preserve thy virginity.*" We believe that the Theotokos was a virgin before, during, and after childbirth. Please don't ask me to explain how that happened, because I don't know. And even if I were there, I would be so struck with awe that I wouldn't remember anything. God knows, and the Theotokos is Ever-Virgin, so the Church teaches it.

But I'll give you another reason to know that the Theotokos is Ever-Virgin. Encounters with God change people. The Theotokos bore God in her womb. He who created the heavens was contained in a human womb for nine months, and then she raised this Boy, this God-man, Jesus Christ, who was obedient to her in all things as a child. Do you think that that would change a human being? Do you think that would give you a different perspective about life and the gossip of the marketplace would not be so important anymore and all the other things of life, all the other minutiae of life would not be so important anymore? Her experience of bearing Jesus Christ changed her, so she didn't want anything earthly or mundane.

Now, as I said, we have a balanced view of the Theotokos. We also have a balanced view of marriage. Marriage is to be esteemed, but not

above holiness. One can become holy being married—there's no doubt about it—but we venerate the Theotokos as having no interest in earthly things whatsoever because of bearing Christ. So that's another reason to know in your hearts: the Theotokos is Ever-Virgin.

I believe so many people who call themselves Christian believe that the Theotokos had children because the idea that somebody could be entirely changed by an encounter with Jesus Christ is unknown to them. The Resurrection completely changes a person, and to think that the Theotokos was just another Jewish woman, having children, going to the marketplace and gossiping at the well, is really an amazing idea. That's really why I

The Transfiguration. We have seen our future, and we should live according to it in the present.

2 Peter 1:10-19 Aug 6/19, 2019

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen.

S prazdnikom!¹ This word means “on the feast,” and it is such a beautiful feast. It is the “Pascha” in the summertime. It is one of my favorite feasts because it is our future.

There's a lot of light in this world, but there is also a lot of darkness - much darkness. We are constantly surrounded by darkness. Even in our church right now, in the daylight, there is light, and yet there are shadows all over the room because we are surrounded by darkness in this world. But in the next world, there will be no darkness; there were only be light.

This feast is the feast of light, where God showed He is light. He showed His light to three of His apostles to strengthen them before the ordeal that they would go through in only 40 more days, precisely 40 days, when the Lord would be crucified². And they would have much darkness during that time, much confusion, much fear, but they would remember the light.

At the end of his days, Peter remembered that light. When he experienced it that first time, he was overwhelmed by it. He was confused by it. He was frightened by it. The icon shows them falling down the mountain, sort of falling away from the light, and Peter was saying nonsense: “Let's build tabernacles, let's stay up here forever”³, because he was so confused by this light, but that's because he wasn't ready for it yet. We are not prepared for it either. That's why we do not see it right now. The Divine light is present right now. It's blindingly bright, but we don't see it. The Lord God guards us from it because we don't have the capacity to see it yet.

I would like to give you **one rule of life**; This is the way I have tried to live my life. I have not always lived it well because I'm a sinner, but there's been this thread throughout it, and you can find many passages of Scripture that contain this thread, but particularly, the Transfiguration is very indicative of this thread.

This world is going away. What we are right now is not what we will be. All the darkness in this world, all the sadness in this world, all the sin in this world - will be gone. There will not be confusion, there will not be pain, there will only be life everlasting in the light, where God illuminates us with His light, and the light will no longer confuse us or make us ashamed. We will be in the light in eternity, and God will be showing us evermore of Himself eternally.

This is something worth living for. In the midst of the darkest times you have in your life, this is something worth living for. And I would submit to you that if you are a Christian, you feel the darkness every day, and you rail against it, and you pray against it. That's really what prayer of the heart is, at least a component of it. There must be sadness in your life for there to be gladness. There must be a recognition that this world is not as it should be, and you are not as you should be, nor your loved ones, nor anyone you meet. None of us are as we should be, as we were born to be, because we were born to be creatures entirely of the light with no darkness and no shadow.

believe that this idea that the Theotokos had children is so prevalent because people don't think supernaturally enough anymore.

I don't want this to go on too long. I had a few things about Old Testament types of the Theotokos, but maybe that'll be another time. The Theotokos is known by many, many names, just as our Lord is known by many names. The basic principle is that if someone is known by many names, they're very important. We have many names for our Lord and many names for the Theotokos.

http://www.orthodox.net/catechism/feasts-of-the-theotokos_2010-08-28+dormition+after-liturgy-short-talk.mp3

There was no darkness and no shadow on Mount Tabor, and that is our future. And as I said before, it is worth living for this. If you are a Christian, this will energize you.

Peter speaks about it. He is at the end of his life. He knows that he will be killed soon, probably in a very painful way (it turns out that he was crucified). And as he knew that he was going to put off his tabernacle, he was concerned for those who were still going to be in the partial light and the partial darkness. He was going to where there was only light, but they, the ones he loved, were still in darkness, or at least partial darkness. He told them how much he cared for them, and how much he even would after his decease care for them. If you read what he says carefully, and if you read it with eyes that are opened and understand what happened on Mount Tabor, then it is apparent that Peter is saying that even after his death, he will take care of them⁴. When I read his words, I wonder – what his state of mind is? It's something that I really can't comprehend. I can kind of understand it in a way, but this is a man who saw Jesus Christ showing him who He was. And it stuck with Peter for the rest of his life. And it was the power behind everything he did. So, he said this:

“For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For he received from God the Father honor and glory, when there came such a voice to Him from the excellent glory, this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount.”⁵

Then he goes on to apply this experience; This is why he lives; This is what he cares about; This is all that matters to him - nothing else. All he cares about is this! He has dedicated his entire life since knowing Jesus Christ, and especially since knowing Him on the mountain, even though there were some big mistakes before the resurrection. He has dedicated his entire life to this, and so should we. This is all we should care about. He says, because he saw Jesus in light, because he saw what his future would be, what the future of his loved ones would be, that with there would no longer be darkness, no longer be sadness, no longer be confusion, or sin, or passion, but only light, illuminating him from within. He saw this, and believed it. And so, as he reminisces to his flock, he tells them:

“We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts”⁶.

This is what Transfiguration is. Our future. We should live for our future now. God bless you.

Priest Seraphim Holland

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Transfiguration Human Nature in the Midst of the Divine

Luke 9:28-36 (The Gospel for Matins) 2008

Transfiguration is celebrated Aug 6/19 every year
In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today, brothers and sisters, we say that humanity can meet Divinity;
Humanity can see Divinity; Humanity can be part of Divinity.

In the Old Testament, Moses saw the back parts of God; he was hidden in the cleft of a rock; he didn't see that much⁷. But now, face to face, man is with God. Jesus Christ showing He is fully God, shining as the light.

Did you notice something in this historic and prophetic event? Moses and Elias were conversing with Him, speaking of His decease: That was for the disciples to remember so that they would not be overwhelmed by the upcoming passion of our Lord.

What were Apostles doing? They were sleeping because it was late at night, and they were tired. Man was in the midst of Divinity, Jesus was white as the light, shining as the sun, and they were asleep. This indicates how easily we "sleep," even when God is among us! We are sleepy because of our passions – O Lord, what are we missing? Divinity is right with us right now. We partake of the Holy Mysteries, and Divinity is present. Wherever we go, God is with us, and yet we don't see Him.

They woke up, and then the cloud came, signifying the Holy Spirit and the Father's voice from the cloud. So this is like a Theophany, just like the baptism of the Lord, declaring the Trinity, declaring God.

But then Moses and Elias saw Him and spoke with Him, and they were not frightened by the light, sound, or the cloud. This tells us that we will eventually, even though at this moment our flesh is filled with sins and weakness and foolishness, we will be able to be with Divinity and not be afraid.

But the Apostles were not ready to be fully in the presence of Divinity. They still needed more seasoning, more training. So they were in the midst of Divinity, and for some time, they were asleep. So it is with us. We are in the midst of Divinity, and we're sleeping. We're more troubled about what will happen today and tomorrow and the next day than we are about God being with us.

And of course, the Transfiguration shows us the future for us, not the future for God, because all things are as one for God, the past, the future, the present. Jesus was always God; This was nothing new for Him.

This was the first time in history that man was to be face-to-face with the Uncreated Light of God. They were afraid. They were not like Moses and Elias. It was too much for them. So it will take time for you and me to be in the presence of Divinity and not be afraid.

And how is this? We know: **to follow Christ, to become like Him.**
Moses and Elias were like Him, and they were comfortable around Him and at peace and not afraid.

We are trying to become like Him. And if our Lord Jesus Christ were to come to us now and shine in His Divinity, His Uncreated Light, we would be terrified because we are not ready yet. So the time of this life is getting ready, getting ready to see Christ as He is, not with the covering of humanity, but to see Him, His humanity shining with Divinity because, after all, He is God as well as Man.

So, brothers and sisters, when you look at this story, let it give you some hope. Yes, it is a promise that we will see God.

But just see that they were frail men there on the mountain. First, they were asleep and then were also afraid. Does it remind you of anybody? This reminds me of me. It should remind you of you.

But after a time, what happened to those men? Their sound went forth over all the world. So it will be with us. We will be changed. But we have to live in the flesh a little bit and struggle a little bit to become able to see Divinity.

We see what happens when impure men see Divinity; they're afraid. But later on, Peter spoke of this event with great affection, great longing, because he knew that he was soon going to, as he said, put off this tabernacle and be with the Lord. He was looking forward with great expectation to seeing the Uncreated Light again, this time without fear⁸.

Here is the blueprint for our lives. Yes, the promise is there. But the promise only becomes a reality for us if we live as Christians, and then we will see Divinity and not be afraid. Amen.

Luke 9:28-36 28 And it came to pass about an eight days after these sayings, he took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray. 29 And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistering. 30 And, behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias: 31 Who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem. 32 But Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep: and when they were awake, they saw his glory, and the two men that stood with him. 33 And it came to pass, as they departed from him, Peter said unto Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias: not knowing what he said. 34 While he thus spake, there came a cloud, and overshadowed them: and they feared as they entered into the cloud. 35 And there came a voice out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear him. 36 And when the voice was past, Jesus was found alone. And they kept it close, and told no man in those days any of those things which they had seen.

This homily is at:

http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/feasts-of-the-savior-transfiguration_2008-08-19.html

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Spiritual Psalter of St. Ephrem the Syrian "Psalm 27." Do NOT LOSE HEART. There is hope AND IT IS CHRIST.

"Do not lose heart O soul, do not grieve; pronounce not over thyself a final judgment for the multitude of thy sins; do not commit thyself to fire: do not say: The Lord has cast me from His face. Such words are not pleasing to God.

"Can it be that he who has fallen cannot get up? Can it be that he who has turned away cannot turn back again? Dost thou not hear how kind the Father is to a Prodigal? Do be ashamed to turn back and say boldly: I will arise and go to my Father. Arise and go! He will accept thee and will not reproach thee, but rather rejoice at thy return. He awaits thee; just do not be ashamed and do not hide from the face of God as did Adam.

"It was for thy sake that Christ was crucified, so will He cast thee aside? He knows who oppresses us. He knows that we have no other help but Him alone.

"Christ knows that man is miserable. Do not give thyself up to despair and apathy, assuming that thou hast been prepared for the fire. Christ derives no consolation from thrusting us into the fire; He gains nothing if He sends us into the abyss to be tormented.

"Imitate the prodigal son: leave the city that starves thee. Come and beseech Him and thou shalt behold the glory of God. Thy face shall be enlightened and thou wilt rejoice in the sweetness of paradise! Glory to the

Lord and Lover of mankind Who saves us!" From the Spiritual Psalter of St. Ephrem the Syrian.

For all sinners to read, especially those who are prone to despair. I think that pretty much covers all of us!

http://www.orthodox.net/full-voice/full-voice_2014-10-11+letter-to-prisoners-the-one-thing-needful-theotokos-empathically-stating-incarnation-protection-of-the-mother-of-god.html

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Questions and Answers

According to Orthodox theology what does it mean to be "perfect" or a "sinner"?

God made man in His own image to obtain His likeness. When we attain the likeness of God, we are perfect. Another way to say this is that we have obtained "Theosis," union with God, the knowledge of God.

Knowledge in Christianity is not something that is only known but also practiced. We cannot know virtue without being virtuous. We cannot know perfection without being perfect, and perfection is when the soul is wholly filled with God, and there is no shadow in it, no darkness, no hardness, no sinful passions or weaknesses of any kind.

It is absolute freedom of the soul. We were born to be free, and Adam and Eve were free until they sinned. They lost their freedom after sin, not because God took it away from them, but because they became incapable of becoming perfect.

The incarnation gives us back this ability to become perfect.

Anything short of the perfection of the soul is sin. In the West, sin is thought of as an affront to God, something that offends him and angers him, and more as a discrete action than a state of being. For us, sin is when a man has shadows in his heart. It is when we have weaknesses and passions and when we know all too well the words of the apostle Paul when he says:

"For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but *how* to perform that which is good I find not. (19) For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. (20) Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. (21) I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. (22) For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: (23) But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. (24) O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Romans 7:18-24

Is the "Vaccine" a sealing or the mark of the beast?

On page 4 of the 7-26-21 newsletter, St Paisios of Mount Athos is quoted. He speaks a prophecy stating: "They will find a disease for which they will make a vaccine, which will be mandatory and which will be read the beginning of the sealing". Revelation states that anyone who receives the "mark of the beast" will be eternally damned.

Is this "sealing" part of the mark of the beast?

If a baptized Orthodox Christian has received the Covid vaccine, what does that mean for him/her spiritually?

How does one repent of willingly receiving a Covid vaccine?

Does one need to repent for getting vaccinated?

Can one be "healed" of the vaccine?

These are all very difficult questions, and I will answer them with trepidation.

We must live with courage. Courage means that we do what is right, even if we are afraid. These times call for great courage. My personal belief is that the vaccine is teaching compliance and dependence on secular

things. It is teaching Christians to make secular dogma higher than Christian dogma.

I do not believe for one moment that everyone who has received the vaccine is damned or is sealed with the mark of the Antichrist, however, I believe that the mindset of some, and too many, even in the Orthodox Church, including bishops, is that scientific dogma and the pronouncements of secular authorities guide their life more than prayer and belief in holy things.

In our country, "following the science" has been like doing zigzags. The Christian life is the straight and narrow way and is not changing. If people are changing the way that they worship in the way they think about church, then they are thinking in a secular way.

Things are constantly changing. People are becoming accustomed to accepting exactly what the secular authorities say. This summer, I reread "1984" and was frightened again because our society has significant similarities to that great novel. Society is commanded to believe whatever the latest secular dogma is, which may be different than the one proclaimed only a month ago, and there are ever-increasing shrill voices which want to punish those who dare to be "heretics" and not order their lives according to these secular dogmas.

I think society is being conditioned to accept almost anything that becomes a "secular dogma." When the secular dogmas are those of the antichrist, those who have been conditioned, including many of those in the church, will accept them.

What should an Orthodox Christian do if he or she has been vaccinated?

The same thing that you should do if you are not vaccinated. You should pray with fervor and with consistency; you should do prostrations; you should beg the Lord to deliver us from all calamities; you should be repenting of all of your sins.

One of the "heresies" that the secular world tries to cancel is that there is a substantial possibility that the vaccine will cause more death. There are very fine scientific minds that believe this, and the way in which the vaccine is promoted and the penalties that are given for those who will not take it should increase our concerns about the vaccine. Whether or not these predictions will come true, they are not the rantings of fools. Therefore we should take them seriously, and we should pray!

Whether a person is vaccinated or unvaccinated, the world is becoming a more dangerous place especially for those whose Christian religion is not secularized. In our parish, we are praying to St. Nicephoros the leper once a week as well as doing prostrations to him in our homes because he promised that he would help anyone who contracted Covid. He didn't say anything about anyone who got vaccinated, but I think it's all related. When I get a chance I'll tell you about the visions of the saint, and perhaps send you some prayers that you can say to him.

Does one need to repent from having received a Covid vaccine?

That depends! Anything that we do without faith is a sin. There are many reasons that a person may get vaccinated. Perhaps they were given wrong information, or perhaps they did it because of fear and lack of faith. Perhaps they did it because a relative begged them to do it. There are

many reasons, and if a person has done something in good faith, not because of fear or some sinful reason, they have not sinned even though they might've made a mistake. It remains to be seen whether or not mass vaccination will be a calamity or helpful for the world. We may not know for several years. I personally am not sure what the outcome will be, however, I am positive that the secular rhetoric and the ever-increasing control will cause calamities.

Everyone has to decide on their own by evaluating their own conscience if they did anything because of lack of faith or another reason. In and of itself, vaccination is not necessarily a sin. But these things do not happen in a vacuum. We have our reasons why we do things, and sometimes they are good reasons, and sometimes they are bad reasons.

How does one repent of willingly receiving the Covid vaccine?

I think that there are three states of mind that people may have after being vaccinated. One is of course, that they are happy they are vaccinated because they thought it was the right thing to do. Another is that they feel it was a sin. Another is that they regret it because they have learned more information, and they are fearful that the vaccine may cause them to get sick and even die.

If a person has done something in good faith, they do not need to repent. If a person thinks that the vaccine was good for them, may God bless them! If a person thinks that this vaccine may be harmful and they have taken it, then they should pray, and they should increase their spiritual life. If a person actually thinks they have sinned, they should actively repent. I would recommend that the best way to repent in this case

Is being depressed a sin? Is homosexuality a sin? An honest assessment.

My argument is simple and is based on the Orthodox understanding of what sin is. We have generation upon generation of teaching that sin is merely a legal condition, and what we do or, even for the more enlightened, what we think. It is not just what we do or even what we think; it is who we are. It is what we are capable of.

"Sin" does not exclusively refer to intentional decisions or acts. We pray about sins voluntary and involuntary, in knowledge and ignorance. "Amartia" is *failure.* In Christian use, it is falling short of the glory of God. All our imperfections are included in that meaning, including ones we have not intentionally chosen and which may remain present even though we repent from specific acts or thoughts.(1)

It's possible to repent from a choice, including the choice to entertain a thought, but it's not possible by an act of will to repent from a passion of soul (any more than to repent from an illness of body.) Yet God can heal both -- and, unlike the body which is destined for the grave and resurrection, God's plan for the soul is always healing, purification, and illumination.(1)

Jesus Christ is our example of what a perfect human being is. Do you think of Him as being capable of being depressed? Because He was not subject to the blameworthy passions, He was perfectly able to never be depressed. Depression can happen for all kinds of things; however, it is a departure from perfect humanity. Of course, when I speak of perfect humanity, I am referring to the passions that can lead to sin, and not the blameless passions.

Jesus Christ was not perfect in regards to the blameless passions as when He was cut, He bled, and when He was tired, He slept, and when He was crucified, He died. Of course, now after His resurrection, He is perfect in regards to the blameless passions also.

Our culture conditions us to respond as if calling my passions "sin" is an attack rather than a diagnosis leading to hope. We live in an age when any criticism of someone's conduct is taken as a criticism of that person. It is

would be to do a significant number of prostrations for everyone who has been affected by the pandemic. This includes the vaccinated, the unvaccinated, those who have gotten sick, and those who have lost work or have had some personal calamities such as depression or more drug addiction or something like that. In this way, our repentance is not just about ourselves and hoping to save our skin, but for the entire world and because of love. You must increase your spiritual life.

Can one be healed of the vaccine?

God can heal anything! If you are afraid for yourself or others, whether vaccinated or not, pray!

The one answer that applies to any question about the pandemic is that we need to pray more and with more zeal. We need to be doing prostrations, and we need to be begging God for mercy. It is very clear that governments will be exercising more control over their citizens. We do not know how far this control will go.

We do not know how unvaccinated people will be treated or if they will be able to travel or even hold jobs. There's a lot to be concerned about whether a person is in favor of vaccination or against it. Therefore we should pray!

If you have sins that you are addicted to, and you are not struggling against them, you should be more concerned about these sins than you are about being vaccinated or unvaccinated or Covid.

thought of as the only unpardonable sin in society. This has even influenced modern "Christianity". It is even taken as being unloving or even hateful. True Christians are very self-critical and honest about their feelings. That is all I'm trying to do.

Regardless of how depression is treated, a component of it is always sin. If a person struggles and prays, no matter their condition, there is grace, and they will improve. They might need other things to improve completely, but repentance is always part of their improvement. A very great danger of saying that being depressed in itself is not a sin is that a person does not recognize when the results of that depression lead to sin. It is very rare for a person to be depressed and not have ancillary sins, such as irritability or laziness or distracted prayer, or a thousand other things.

My experience as a priest is that people find excuses for their sins. My personal experience as a human being is that people (that is, me) find excuses for their sins. Finding excuses for our sins weakens us and makes us less capable of fighting our sins.

Regarding homosexuality which I have also discussed many times as something that people make excuses for: Of course, having an orientation that if expressed, would be a sin, is in itself a sin. This is not groundbreaking or revolutionary; it is just simple Christian teaching, which is completely incompatible with secular teaching.

I am no way was trying to equate depression and homosexuality as sins that are in any kind of symbiosis with one another.

Of course, my arguments will work more for a person who wants to be completely honest about their sins and is capable of doing this. That's two different things. Not everybody is capable of this because of the false teachings they have absorbed. Also, people who are not spiritually general would not benefit from this teaching. That would include many people who walk through the doors of the church. A priest tailors his message personally to people based on who they are, but we should not water down our public teaching.

Our ascetical literature, and our services, very much backup the thesis that I'm giving here.

Would you say Jesus was depressed when He wept for Lazarus ? At what point is depression a sin? When it turns into despondency?

That is a very good question. He was sad. Sadness is a human emotion. When our sadness is not reacted to with spiritual vigor, it can become other sins.

Depression and despondency are similar but they are not at all identical. We think of despondency as having feelings of depression. Actually, despondency is living our life without faith or hope in God. There are despondent people that are not depressed one iota. Of course, the person who has had faith in God, and wants to keep it, but has lost it, will be despondent and most likely depressed. I think the take home from the story is this, no matter what we are suffering from, we should add repentance to our struggle. Even if we just have a broken leg, which is not a sin, we should add repentance to our struggle.

Is brain chemistry considered a sin?

Feeling sleepy, unless it is because of sin such as drug use or staying up all night partying, certainly is not sinful because our Lord got sleepy and went to sleep.

The former atheist Frenchwoman and Saint Porphyrios. The Gift of Tongues is still in use!

A French historian, atheist, and nihilist visited Elder Porphyrios at his Hermitage in Miliesi, Attica. She did not expect, being a University Professor to learn anything great from a 2nd Grade graduate, but for the sake of her friends she agreed to go.

The Elder asked that the two of them would talk without the presence of others or an interpreter, which caused the question of her friends who knew that the Frenchwoman did not speak Greek at all, nor did the Elder speak French.

The theological and existential discussion finally took place with the two of them alone, for quite some time.

The door opened and the atheist woman came out in tears, tears of repentance. When her friends asked her how she got along with the Elder, she replied:

"But he speaks fluent French."

The same happened with a German Doctor, with a Serb, with a Romanian, with an Irishman.

When his spiritual children asked him how he knew foreign languages while he was never taught them, he replied:

"I speak to them in Greek and the Holy Spirit interprets them in their minds and hearts"

Prophecy of the Blessed Elder Justin Parvu (who reposed in 2013):

We must prepare for martyrdom and beyond this, I would not have to speak if people were not powerless in spirit and mind to understand. It's not easy to live these days. But if the Lord has so pleased that we should suffer these times, then we must obey and receive with joy all that comes upon us, as from the hand of God, and not from the enemy...

Therefore, please stop looking for solutions. Human solutions are nonexistent, my dears! The solution is to die for Christ. Fathers will give up their sons, mothers, their daughters, unto death. Behold, we witness the

Hyperventilating is a physiological response to stress. I think the question is, what caused the stress? If you are hyperventilating because you're being chased by a lion, that anxiety is not a sin. It is a human response to danger. I am not trying to be funny here, but certainly hyperventilating may be because of sin or not because of sin.

Our Lord mourned. Mourning is not a sin. Sometimes we do things that are sinful because of our mourning, or we mourn beyond measure. Also, sometimes people mourn it in a way that is not Christian at all. They mourn with despair, or anger, or a desire for revenge. We Christians do not despair. We are always looking for the resurrection, but that does not mean we do not miss our loved ones.

I know a little something about mourning since my son +Daniel died 6/11/2017. I miss him every day, and my mourning for him is not sinful insofar as I make it into action. Because of my mourning for him, I pray for him and for many others daily (I have this giant list called +Daniel's list, which began after his death). But sometimes, perhaps my mourning for him has me frozen for a little bit. That would be sin.

Intrusive thoughts might be sin, or perhaps they are not sin. It really depends on what we do with these intrusive thoughts. Possibly these intrusive thoughts could be attacks of the evil one. How we respond determines very much.

Priest Seraphim Holland

I wrote the original essay and added (1) parts written in comments by Fr Silouan Philip Thompson

This is the New Language of the Holy Spirit that Christ promised to His Disciples, the language of Paradise which was confused by pride in the Tower of Babel and from Pentecost returned by the Holy Spirit through the Church to All Saints of times.

With Saint Paisios too we have many such examples and with Russian Saints too.

The Holy Spirit, the Heavenly Fire with which the Fire of the Altar once lit on the Day of Pentecost, is always in the Church and has been burning for twenty centuries now. It was never erased by human weaknesses and mistakes.

"And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever ."

Every other "new fire of spirit" which is advertised nowadays with characteristic conceit and arrogance as being authentic, genuine and unique on earth by heretics is foreign "Alien Fire and not Divine."

In the photo is the atheist French historian, Monk Magdalene in the Sinai desert, where she practiced asceticism afterwards, alone for 18 years in very difficult conditions, having renounced wealth, career, fame and useless philosophies of life.

She slept there in the Lord on 12 Dec 2013.

fulfillment of this prophecy. If the mother will let the child be vaccinated, it's as if giving him over to die...

Therefore I say to you, trust that the Lord will give you power to confess Him. We live in an anarchic world, the entire political class is an enemy of Christ and a servant of evil, that is why even living our simple life without abdicating our Christian principles is a daily confession and martyrdom.

So do not receive this vaccine or anything that the new political powers bring you today. The Zionists rule the world and the Americans work for

them and they think they have come to own it because they have no shyness. Everything is in sight and they are aware that they have no opponent to fear and they fight to depopulate the world, with the few who will remain to worship them.

Now they're studying and sorting, and the way they're going to distinguish people from each other is the chips. Do you or do you not have a chip? For what is the chip after all? A weapon against Man. And we have no weapons; our youth is weary, that even if they want to rise from the spell in which they live, they have no power.

Our only weapons are spiritual ones: prayer, humility, love, but also confession [of Faith]. You can't love without confession [of Faith]. Love is sacrificial, and if we fear to confess the truth, what sacrifice do we have? Or

St Dimitry, a priest who worked with Mother Maria to save Jews from the Nazis.

St. Dimitry signed many false baptismal certificates in order to save people from the Nazis, while also baptizing many who also sought to convert. But he never baptized anyone who didn't want it. He told Mother Maria why he signed the false certificates saying, "I think the good Christ would give me that paper if I were in their place. So I must do it." Eventually, a German officer named Hoffman collected a large amount of evidence on how Jews had been helped by Mother Maria and Fr. Dimitry. He was prepared to question the priest for a long time, and was astonished when Fr. Dimitry told him frankly about everything he had done. Hoffman said curtly, "And if we release you, will you promise never again to aid Jews?"

if we do not care about our neighbour who is unaware and we do not inform him and we let him fall prey to this system, what love do we have?

Those who still struggle today to awaken their brother, who have not remained indifferent to the future of a nation and a church, those are the children of the love of God, who lay their lives down for their brethren...

It is important to oppose all antichrists and die with dignity; not to have a cowardly position."

(Source: Excerpted from an interview as found in Atitudini magazine no. 8, October 2009)

Dimitry answered, "I can say no such thing. I am a Christian, and must act as I must."

Hoffman stared at him in disbelief for a moment, and then struck Dimitry across his face. "Jew lover!" he screamed. "How dare you talk of those pigs as being a Christian duty!"

The frail Dimitry recovered his balance. Staying calm, he raised the Cross from his cassock and faced Hoffman with it.

"Do you know this Jew?" he said quietly.

The blow he received knocked him to the floor.

Shortly thereafter, Fr. Dimitry was taken to a concentration camp where he died.

Answers to: Questions about Dormition

ANSWER 1 The word "Dormition" means "falling asleep."; This is our way of referring to the physical death in this world. We call it "falling asleep" because we know that in the resurrection, when the Lord comes for the second and final time, all who are "asleep" will rise and be united with perfect bodies. Then all those who are awake that is still alive in the body, will follow them and meet Jesus Christ as He comes in the clouds.

This is described in St. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians: It is worthwhile to quote the entire passage and for you to read it because our experiential belief in the resurrection energizes everything we do in life:

"But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. (14) For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. (15) For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive *and* remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. (16) For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: (17) Then we which are alive *and* remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. (18) Wherefore comfort one another with these words." 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Technically we can use this word for the death of any Orthodox Christian. We specifically call the commemoration of the death of the Theotokos her "Dormition" because the events after her death prove the truth of the resurrection decisively. Certainly, the soul and body of the Theotokos, the Mother of God, was treated exceptionally by her son, Jesus Christ, but only in that what will happen for all of us at the final judgment happened for her almost immediately after her physical death.

ANSWER 2 The feast of the "Dormition" of the Mother of God commemorates her physical death and subsequent burial (actually the placing of her body in a tomb), and the revelation to the holy apostles and subsequently to the entire world that after her death she was taken, soul and body intact, by her Lord and Savior and son, Jesus Christ into the

heavens. The prophecy of the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, in which He rose, body and soul into the heavens, and which promises that we will be with God with perfected bodies and souls in eternity, was fulfilled for the Theotokos almost immediately after her death.

After the resurrection, the Theotokos lived with the apostle John in obedience to our Lord's command. In her later years, she was living in Jerusalem in St. John's home. She would frequent Jerusalem, and would visit the various places that had significance to our Lord's life such as the Mount of Olives, where the Lord ascended. It was there that an angel appeared to her and told her of her impending repose.

The Theotokos desired to see all of the apostles before her death. They were scattered all over the world, preaching and teaching. In answer to her prayer, all the apostles, except for the apostle Thomas in India, were transported via clouds to see her before her death. After her death, which was without travail or pain or fear, just as was her birth-giving of her son, she was put in the tomb, and Thomas arrived on the third day, also by our cloud.

The apostle Thomas was delayed in order for the resurrection and translation of the Theotokos to become known. Upon arriving, he saw the Theotokos being translated, and cried out to her, and she gave her him his belt, a holy relic which is still preserved in a monastery in Mount Athos. Later, he lamented that he was not able to see the Theotokos in the flesh before her death and asked for the tomb to be opened so he could venerate her body. He obviously had not understood what he had just seen.

Therefore the tomb was opened, revealing that her body was gone, but the coverings remained, sitting in the same slab of stone where her body had been placed and still in the shape of her body. The apostles and many others who loved the Theotokos then realized what had happened. The Lord had taken his mother, body, and soul, into the heavens.

"It was right, therefore, that the body which brought forth the Son should be glorified with Him in divine glory, and that the ark of Christ's holiness should arise with Him who rose on the third day, as the prophet

sang (cf. Ps. 132:8 Lxx). The linen cloths and winding sheets left behind in the tomb, which were all that those who came to look for her found there, proved to the disciples that she too had risen from the dead, just as was earlier the case with her Son and Lord (cf. Luke 24:12, John 20:5-7). It was not, however, necessary for her, as it was for her Son and God, to stay for a while longer on earth, so she was taken up directly from the grave to the heavenly realm, whence she sends bright shafts of holy light and grace down to earth, illuminating all the space around the world, and is venerated, admired, and hymned by all the faithful." (Saint Gregory Palamas, "On the Dormition of the Mother of God, Homily 37, paragraph 9, page 293" St Gregory Palamas, the homilies," Mount Thabor publishing 2009)

These are the broad strokes of the story. There were others present at the funeral of the Theotokos, such as the Apostle Timothy and several others, and it would be instructive for you to find the story of the Dormition and read it in full.

ANSWER 3 Great Feasts in the order in which the event commemorated occurred in human history.

Nativity of the Theotokos, 8 September [O.S. 21 September]
Presentation of the Theotokos, 21 November [O.S. 4 December]
Annunciation, 25 March [O.S. 7 April]
Nativity of Christ (Christmas), 25 December [O.S. 7 January]
Presentation of Jesus at the Temple, 2 February [O.S. 15 February]
Baptism of Christ (Theophany, Epiphany), 6 January [O.S. 19 January]
Transfiguration of Jesus Christ, 6 August [O.S. 19 August]
Entry into Jerusalem (Palm Sunday), Sunday before Pascha
Exaltation of the Cross, (The Crucifixion occurred on Good Friday) 14 September [O.S. 27 September]
Pascha - Resurrection of Jesus Christ (date varies)
Ascension of Jesus Christ, forty Days after Pascha
Pentecost, fifty Days after Pascha
Dormition of the Theotokos, 15 August [O.S. 28 August]

The Following feasts are described in our Holy Tradition, and are not explicitly in the Scriptures:

Nativity of the Theotokos, Presentation of the Theotokos, Dormition of the Theotokos.

All the other feasts occur in Scripture, and our understanding of them is greatly enhanced by our Holy Tradition.

ANSWER 4 The Dormition of the Theotokos is celebrated according to the church calendar on August 15, and according to the civil calendar ("Joe's garage calendar") on August 28. This is the last great feast of the Christian year since our calendar begins on September 1.

It is entirely fitting that the last feast which occurred chronologically (see question 3), would be the last feast celebrated in the church year. It is also fitting that this feast recapitulates and summarizes the teaching of the resurrection. It, like the Ascension, is a prophecy for us of things to come.

ANSWER 5 The Latin feast of the "Assumption of Mary" presents the teaching that Mary never died in the flesh but was taken to heaven directly by Jesus Christ. This is plainly ridiculous. Our Lord Jesus Christ died. He died so that he might give us life. His flesh actually died, and the Mother of God needed Jesus Christ to have eternal life is much as we do. Therefore, we reject this heretical interpretation of the Dormition of the Theotokos. She indeed did die in the flesh. And after her death, the Lord, since He can do anything He wishes, made an exception for her and brought her bodily into heaven with him even before the general resurrection. All of the saints await this resurrection and the reuniting of their souls with a perfected body.

"It was necessary that that which was composed of earth should return to earth and only then pass to heaven, having embraced on earth a most pure life through the subjection of the flesh. It was necessary that the body should be purified through death, as gold through fire, from every darkness and coarse burden of filth, and should rise from the grave incorrupt, pure and illumined by the light of immortality." (St John of Damascus, "The Dormition of the Most Holy Mother of God," Orthodox Word 2, No. 3(9), (July-August 1966): 102.

"O pure Virgin, sprung from mortal loins, thine end was conformable to nature: but because thou hast borne the true Life, thou hast departed to dwell with the divine Life Himself." (August 15th, Orthros Canon, Ode Three, Mode Four, by Saint John of Damascus.)

Both of the quotes above are taken from "The Dormition of the Theotokos," page 467," The Great Synaxaristes of the Orthodox Church," August, published by Holy Apostles Convent, Buena Vista Colorado

ANSWER 6 The is the preparation period for the feast of the Dormition is a two week fast which begins on August 1 and ends on the Dormition, August 15. The civil calendar dates for this period are August 13-28.

It makes perfect sense to have a fasting period of the two most influential saints of the church, the Apostles and the Mother of God!

When something is very important, Orthodox Christians prepare for it with diligence. This fast is the strictest of the year outside of Great Lent. For the entire fast, we don't eat any animal products, including meat, milk, and eggs, or fish, and only on Saturday and Sunday may we have olive oil and wine.

ANSWER 7 How many people in heaven have bodies? Certainly, our Lord Jesus Christ, Who ascended into the heavens, with a perfected human body, which was and is united but not mixed with His divinity, and His all pure mother, whom he translated after her Dormition.

It appears likely that Elias and Enoch, who were translated before they died, also have bodies in heaven. We don't know their exact state, but we do know that they will come back before the end and be killed. This means that the only human beings that can escape physical death are those that are living at the time of the second coming.

If you do not know the story concerning the translation of Enoch and Elias, finding in the Scriptures and read it! You only get as much out of this newsletter as you put into it.

ANSWER 8 We address Mary as "full of grace" because this is an allusion to the description of the Annunciation and the Gospel of Luke. It begins this way: "And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, (27) To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. (28) And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, *thou that art highly favored*, the Lord is with thee: blessed *art* thou among women. (Luke 1:26-28)

The phrase "highly favored" comes from the word "charitoo" (the Greek word, meaning "to grace"). We have always made the jump to calling Mary "full of grace" because, after all, she bore Jesus Christ, the source of all grace, in her womb.

We venerate the Theotokos because she said yes to God and then God filter with himself. She is only "full of grace" because of her obedience and God's sovereign decision.

ANSWER 9 "And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and said: 'The Lord is in this place, and I knew it not.' And he was afraid, and said: 'How fearful is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven!'"

The church has always understood the vision of the ladder, which Jacob saw, to refer to the Theotokos. She is the ladder by which God came down

from heaven. We also call her the house of God since she bore the God-man Jesus Christ, and therefore we call her the Mother of God.

ANSWER 10 "Then He brought me back by way of the outer gate of the sanctuary that faceth eastward; and it was shut. And the Lord said to me: 'This gate shall be shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall pass

through it; for the Lord God of Israel shall enter by it, and it shall be shut."

The church has always understood this prophecy of Ezekiel to refer to the ever virginity of the Theotokos. We believe that she was a virgin when she conceived, and a virgin when she gave birth, and remained a virgin all of her life. There are dozens of hymns that teach this dogma.

Answers to Questions about Transfiguration

ANSWER 1 The gospels very laconically report the Transfiguration. Jesus took Peter, James, and John up to a high mountain, which was Mount Tabor. It was late, and the disciples were overcome with sleep. They awoke to see Him transfigured before them.

He did not change in form, remaining a man in all respects, but his face and garments shone with a light brighter than the sun. This is the "uncreated light," which a man can only see when God reveals Himself to him, and this is only given to the pure of heart, save for some special circumstances, such as the one we are concerned with here. With Christ were Moses and Elias, who spoke with him "things concerning His decease." Peter, in confusion, offered to build three tabernacles for the two Saints and the Lord. After this, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice was heard from heaven, which said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, Hear ye Him." After this, the cloud disappeared, and Christ appeared as He usually was. He strictly charged them to tell of the vision to nobody else, until He was risen from the dead, and they descended the mountain.

The Transfiguration is reported in Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-9 and Luke 9:28-36

ANSWER 2 The church understands the Transfiguration to be a "Theophany," that is a revelation of the Holy Trinity, just as occurred also at the baptism of the Lord. The services are quite explicit about this.

"Dwelling bodily on earth, /
Christ, the Light from before the sun, /
Who before His crucifixion fulfilled all things of His awesome dispensation in godly manner, /
today hath mystically shown forth on Mount Tabor the image of the Trinity; /
for, taking His three excellent disciples, Peter, James and John, /
He led them up to it together. /
And having hidden His guise of flesh for a little while, /
He was transfigured before them, /
revealing the majesty of His original beauty, though not completely. /
And while making it known to them, /
He also took pity upon them, lest they in anywise cease to live because of what they saw: /
yet were they able to grasp with their bodily eyes, holding fast. /
And Thou didst summon Moses and Elijah, the foremost of the prophets, /
who bore witness reliably concerning Thy divinity, /
and that it is the true effulgence of the essence of the Father, /
O Thou Who hast dominion over the living and the dead. /
Wherefore, the cloud enfolded them like a tabernacle, /
and the voice of the Father testified, /
speaking forth from the cloud like thunder, saying: /
"This is My beloved Son, /
Whom I begat incorruptibly from within Me before the morning star, /
and Whom I have sent to save /
those who are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, /

and who confess with faith that the one dominion of the Godhead is indivisible! /

Hear ye Him!" /

And do Thou Thyself, O Christ God Who lovest mankind, /
illumine us with the light of Thine unapproachable glory, /
and show us forth as worthy heirs of Thy kingdom which is without end, //

in that Thou art all good. (Litya for the Feast, Tone 2)

"The pillar of fire plainly showed to Moses Christ transfigured, and the cloud pointed clearly to the grace of the Spirit that overshadowed Mount Tabor" (matins, second canon, Ode 6, 3rd troparion)

ANSWER 3 Much of the meaning of a particular event is revealed in the holy services, especially Vespers and Matins. This is why it is essential for a Christian to attend the Vigil service zealously. The services, and the commentaries of the holy fathers, which have entered into the mind of the church, explain that the apostles were prepared for the crucifixion by witnessing the Transfiguration and the "splendor of the resurrection" that it prefigured. They would soon be subjected to terrible temptations and fears, and our Savior wanted to put the knowledge of His divinity indelibly in their minds, to help them in the terrible days of his trial and death.

Kontakion of the Feast, Tone 7

On the mountain wast Thou transfigured, /
and Thy disciples beheld Thy glory as far as they could bear it, O Christ God; /
that when they would see Thee crucified, /
they would comprehend that Thy suffering was voluntary, /
and proclaim to the world that Thou art of a truth //
the Effulgence of the Father.

Before Thy crucifixion, O Lord, /
the mountain emulated the heavens, /
and the cloud spread itself out like a tabernacle /
when Thou wast transfigured and borne witness to by the Father. /
There were Peter, James and John, /
for they were to be with Thee also at the time of Thy betrayal, /
that, beholding Thy wonders, /
they might not be afraid of Thy sufferings, /
which do Thou vouchsafe that we may venerate in peace, //
for the sake of Thy great mercy. (First sticheron of the Feast for Lord I have cried, Tone 4)

Taking the disciples up upon the lofty mountain /
before Thy crucifixion, O Lord, /
Thou wast transfigured before them, /
illumining them with effulgence of power, /
desiring both in Thy love for mankind and in Thine authority /
to show them the splendor of the resurrection, /
which do thou vouchsafe unto us in peace, //

in that Thou art merciful and lovest man-kind. (Third sticheron of the Feast for Lord I have cried, Tone 4)

ANSWER 4 The light that shone from Christ is the "uncreated light." It is, as the fathers teach, the "uncreated energies" of God, which all worthy ones will partake of in the last day. God is absolutely transcendent and unknowable, except as He chooses to reveal Himself. Through the God-man, Jesus Christ, He has made Himself knowable, built in his energies only, and not his essence. "God is the Lord and hath appeared unto us; Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord."

St. Basil the Great expresses the mind of the church on this matter: "We know God through His energies, and we cannot presume to approach His essence. Because His energies reach us, but His essence remains inaccessible." The one who was an "eye witness of His majesty" (2 Peter 1: 16) knew well the implications of the transfiguration of the HUMAN flesh of the God-man:

"According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: {4} Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust." (2 Pet 1:3-4)

The knowledge of this "partaking" of divine nature is ever-present in the theology of the Orthodox church. God became man precisely to make our flesh capable of apprehending the divinity. No one can become God, but we have been promised that we will be "partakers of His divine nature." All of our life is appointed towards this end.

St. Gregory Palamas teaches about this important reality quite often: "So, when the saints contemplate this divine light within themselves, seeing it by the divinising communion of the Spirit, through the mysterious visitations of perfecting illuminations - then they behold the garment of their deification, their mind being glorified and filled by the grace of the Word, beautiful beyond measure in His splendor; just as the divinity of the Word on the mountain glorified with divine light the body conjoined to it. For 'the glory which the Father gave Him,' He Himself has given to those obedient to Him, as the Gospel says, and 'He willed that they should be with Him and contemplate His glory..'" (St. Gregory Palamas, The Triads)

"David, the ancestor of God, foreseeing in the Spirit /
the coming of Thine only-begotten Son in the flesh unto men, /
summoneth creation from afar to gladness, /
and crieth out prophetically: /
"Tabor and Hermon shall rejoice in Thy name!" /
For, having ascended that mountain with Thy disciples, O Savior, /
Thou wast transfigured, /
and didst cause the darkened nature of Adam to shine again, /
imparting to it the glory and splendor of Thy divinity. /
Wherefore, we cry unto Thee: //
O Lord, Creator of all things, glory be to Thee!"
(Great Vespers for the feast, Aposticha, Tone 1)

In the West, the idea of the transfiguration of human nature was not emphasized. Relatively early, it fell captive to a legalistic view of salvation. What a man believes and who he submits to in the organization of the church (ie, the Pope of Rome) became more important than anything else, and the ascetical practices of Christianity, such as fasting, were lost to a great degree. Their understanding of salvation was almost like a contract, whereas in the East, it was always understood that the incarnation of the Son of God, and His revelation of the uncreated light, while in the flesh, to men in the flesh, implies that man can become holy and share in the

energies of God. We are not just "saved," in the sense of not being punished, but we are made able to be partakers of divine nature.

ANSWER 5 The heresy of "Arianism" states that Jesus Christ is a created being, greater in glory and honor than all other creatures, but created nonetheless, and therefore inferior to God the Father and the Holy Spirit. The uncreated light that came forth from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the bright cloud and voice of the Father in the cloud emphatically contradicts such blasphemous conjectures.

ANSWER 6 The feast of the Transfiguration of the Savior is celebrated on Aug 6, and is the last feast of the Lord in the year, which begins on September 1st.

The service is found in the "Festal Menaion." This book contains the service texts and rubrics (instructions) for 9 of the "twelve great feasts of the Lord and the Theotokos." These commemorations all occur on the same date every year, and are not dependent on when Pascha occurs, which is always on a Sunday, but a different date, each year.

The "movable" feasts of the Lord are, preeminently, Pascha, and also Palm Sunday, Ascension, and Pentecost. All these services are found in the Pentecostarion, with the exception of Palm Sunday, which is found in the Lenten Triodion.

The services in the Festal Menaion, in "chronological" (according to their celebration in the church year) order, are

1. The Nativity of the Theotokos (8 Sept)
2. The Universal Exaltation of Precious and Life-giving Cross (14 Sept)
3. The Entry of the Most Holy Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary into the Temple (21 Nov)
4. The Nativity of Christ (25 Dec)
5. Holy Theophany (the baptism of the Lord) (6 Jan)
6. The Meeting of the Savior (2 Feb)
7. The Annunciation of the Most Holy Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary (25 Mar)
8. The Transfiguration (6 Aug)
9. The Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary (15 Aug)

The Service for Transfiguration, like all great feasts of the Lord, totally supplants the normal Sunday or daily services, and is served the same way, regardless of what day it falls on.

The Eve of the feast, a vigil, consisting of Great Vespers, Litya, matins and the first hour, is served. In the morning, the Divine Liturgy is served, with special festal antiphons. After the liturgy, grapes are blessed, with a prayer given in the texts for the feast.

This feast should never be compressed into the "fast food" mentality inherent in the so-called "Vespral Divine liturgy" which is a recent innovation, along with so many other innovations which cater to convenience, and making things "easier." The theology present in the holy services is so essential that excluding the hymns of matins, or the greater part of vespers, to make the feast a 1-day celebration, so "more people can come" and people can "have communion" (without the preparation and teaching that is inherent in the Holy services that precede Divine Liturgy) since most cannot or will not come to church the morning on a weekday, is extremely misguided. There is no "Vespral Divine Liturgy" prescribed in any typicon for any of the great feasts, as this service is ALWAYS served as part of the "lead in" to a feast, and at that, only four times a year (The day before the Nativity of the Savior and Theophany, and Holy Thursday and Holy Saturday) .

ANSWER 7 The Transfiguration of the Lord occurs during the fast for the Dormition of the Theotokos. On this day, fish may be eaten, as well as wine and olive oil, all of which are not eaten on strict fast days, but all meat, cheese and eggs (all animal products) are not eaten.

ANSWER 8 Moses represented the law, and Elijah the prophets. Both the law and the prophets spoke of and pointed to Christ, and were in complete agreement with Him, as their conversation on Mount Tabor shows. Their presence, together with the apostles, also underscored that God is the God of the "living and the dead."

"Transfigured on the high mountain, /
the Savior, having with Him His pre-eminent disciples, /
shone forth most wondrously, /
showing them forth as illumined by the loftiness of the virtues /
and as ones vouchsafed divine glory. /
Moses and Elijah, who spake with Christ, /
showed that He hath authority over the living and the dead, /
and that He is the God Who of old spake through the law and the prophets. /
Of Him was the voice of the Father heard saying from the cloud of light: /
"Him do ye obey, /
Who through the Cross made hell captive //
and granteth life everlasting to the dead!" (Lord I have cried, Tone 4)

"Moses the God-beholder and Elijah of the fiery chariot, /
who traversed the heavens without being consumed, /
beholding Thee, O Christ, in the cloud at Thy transfiguration, /
bore witness to Thee /
as the Creator and Fulfiller of the law and the prophets. /
With them vouchsafe Thine enlightenment also unto us, O Master, //
that we may hymn Thee forever." (Sticheron for "Now and Ever," Aposticha)

The Vespers OT readings provide further mystical illumination concerning the presence of Moses and Elijah. The former asked to see God face to face, and the latter heard Him in the "still small voice." Both intimately experienced the energies of God. Their experiences were a harbinger of things to come.

ANSWER 9 When Christ was transfigured on Mount Tabor, He remained a man. His human flesh shown with the uncreated light, and His divinity and humanity were readily apparent at the same time. This is a promise for those who love Him and follow his commandments. Our flesh has been made capable of apprehending the divine energies.

Revealing the human form /
of Thy second and awesome coming with Thy glory, O Savior, /
Thou wast transfigured on Mount Tabor. /
Elijah and Moses conversed with Thee, /
and Thy three disciples were summoned to behold Thy glory, O Master, /
and marveled at Thy radiance. //
O Thou Who then shone forth Thy light upon them, illumine our souls! (Matins, First sessional Hymn, Tone 4)

ANSWER 10 St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359), was an Athonite ascetic who became Archbishop of Thessalonica. The second Sunday of Great Lent is dedicated to him.

St. Gregory successfully fought against a prevailing heresy of his day, which denied the possibility of ever experiencing or knowing God - in a way

surpassing the knowledge of the mind. Adherents of this heresy claimed that in this life, one could only know about God.

St. Gregory made a distinction between the divine essence of God, which remains inaccessible to men, and the divine energies, such as the light of transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, which are uncreated but accessible to human vision. [also manifested in the countenance of the Prophet Moses after descending the mountain, and by Saint Seraphim during his conversation with Motovilov, etc...]. From his own mystical experience, St. Gregory defended the possibility of attaining true union with God, which is, in fact, the aim of all Christian endeavor: "The kingdom of God lies within" (Luke 17:21). This is the essence of the teaching called hesychasm which advocates the constant repetition of the Jesus Prayer and quieting of both soul and body in order that the prayer might act to warm the heart with unceasing remembrance and burning love for God.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

In the very name of Jesus, great and graceful power is present. Many holy and righteous people advise repeating the Jesus Prayer (also known as the Prayer of the Heart) as frequently as possible. The Hesychasts, who practiced the Jesus Prayer unceasingly, were defended by St. Gregory Palamas in two Councils that met in Constantinople in 1341 and 1347.

St. Gregory Palamas upheld a doctrine of man which allowed for the use of bodily exercises in prayer. He also argued, against the heretic Barlaam, that it was possible for man to experience God's energies as Uncreated Light - identical with the Divine and Uncreated Light of Tabor which the three disciples saw surrounding Jesus at His Transfiguration.

St. Gregory said, "If in the age to come the body will share with the soul in unspeakable blessings, it is certain that it must share in them, so far as possible, even now." Indeed, even in this present life, some saints have experienced the first fruits of this visible and bodily glorification. Saint Seraphim of Sarov is perhaps the best known but by no means the only instance of this.

"When God is said to have made man according to His image, the word man means neither the soul by itself nor the body by itself, but the two together."

The fact that man has a body, Gregory said, makes him not lower but higher than the bodiless angels. The Orthodox belief is that the body is sanctified and transfigured together with the soul. This is the reason we have such an immense reverence for the relics of saints.

To overcome the passions which enslave us, we need to transform our hearts which are darkened by sin. The Church gives us what we need to perform this task. During the Great Fast, we follow the Church's lenten prescription. This prepares us to receive the spiritual instruction offered each week.

St. Gregory Palamas shows us clearly by his whole life that the Christian life - Orthodox life - always begins in our heart and only then expresses itself externally in feats of asceticism. St. Gregory helps us to understand the importance of prayer. Prayer is what we need more than anything - true, fervent, real prayer - heartfelt prayer.

The triumph of Orthodoxy always starts in a person's heart, and only afterwards is it expressed externally. True, sometimes there are cases when the external attracts the heart, as if waking it up. But for this to happen, there must be something in the heart which makes such an awakening possible. God demands our heart. To serve God without heart, Orthodoxy without heart, this is the same as a man without heart.

Thanks to +Fr Mark Gilstrap. All of the preceding is from a post written by him, to the Orthodox "Indiana" mailing list, on 16 Mar 1995. The text has been slightly rearranged.

Answers to Questions about Scripture read on the Feast of the Transfiguration.

ANSWER 1 Jesus had just finished discoursing with the Apostles about His upcoming passion, and had finished with the enigmatic words:

"Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom. "

(Matthew 17:28)

Jesus' Transfiguration was the fulfillment of this prophecy. "Some those standing here" would soon see Jesus as He really is, and will be, in His kingdom.

ANSWER 2 "Wherefore doth He take with Him these only? Because these were superior to the rest. And Peter indeed showed his superiority by exceedingly loving Him; but John by being exceedingly loved of Him; and James again by his answer which he answered with his brother, saying, "We are able to drink the cup; nor yet by his answer only, but also by his works; both by the rest of them, and by fulfilling, what he said. For so earnest was he, and grievous to the Jews, that Herod himself supposed that he had bestowed herein a very great favor on the Jews, I mean in slaying him." (St John Chrysostom, Homily LVI on Matthew)

ANSWER 3 Jesus wanted to be alone with his three chosen disciples, in a remote place, so that no other person would see His Transfiguration. The top of a mountain was a safe place to go.

A mountain has symbolized the elevation of our thoughts to spiritual things. It is also a remote place, away from worldly cares. We must ascend in our prayers and our way of life.

"He brings them unto a high mountain, showing that unless a man is raised on high, he does not become worthy of such divine visions." (Blessed Theophylact, commentary on Matthew 17)

ANSWER 4 Jesus Christ was illuminated by the "uncreated light," or energies of God, which proceeded from Himself.

Moses' face was also bright after he saw the "back parts" of God. When he descended the mountain, no one among the Israelites could bear to look upon his face. He had encountered the uncreated light, and even as a mortal, was changed.

"And Moses said unto the LORD, See, thou sayest unto me, Bring up this people: and thou hast not let me know whom thou wilt send with me. Yet thou hast said, I know thee by name, and thou hast also found grace in my sight. {13} Now therefore, I pray thee, if I have found grace in thy sight, show me now thy way, that I may know thee, that I may find grace in thy sight: and consider that this nation is thy people. {14} And he said, My presence shall go with thee, and I will give thee rest. {15} And he said unto him, If thy presence go not with me, carry us not up hence. {16} For wherein shall it be known here that I and thy people have found grace in thy sight? is it not in that thou goest with us? so shall we be separated, I and thy people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth.

{17} And the LORD said unto Moses, I will do this thing also that thou hast spoken: for thou hast found grace in my sight, and I know thee by name. {18} And he said, I beseech thee, show me thy glory. {19} And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. {20} And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live. {21} And the LORD said, Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock: {22} And it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cliff of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand while I pass by: {23} And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen.

{34:1} And the LORD said unto Moses, Hew thee two tables of stone like unto the first: and I will write upon these tables the words that were in the first tables, which thou brakest. {2} And be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning unto mount Sinai, and present thyself there to me in the top of the mount. {3} And no man shall come up with thee, neither let any man be seen throughout all the mount; neither let the flocks nor herds feed before that mount. {4} And he hewed two tables of stone like unto the first; and Moses rose up early in the morning, and went up unto mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tables of stone. {5} And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. {6} And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, {7} Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin ...

{28} And he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the ten commandments. {29} And it came to pass, when Moses came down from mount Sinai with the two tables of testimony in Moses' hand, when he came down from the mount, that Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone while he talked with him. {30} And when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come nigh him. {31} And Moses called unto them; and Aaron and all the rulers of the congregation returned unto him: and Moses talked with them. {32} And afterward all the children of Israel came nigh: and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him in mount Sinai. {33} And till Moses had done speaking with them, he put a veil on his face. " (Exodus 33:12-23,34:1-7,28-33)

ANSWER 5 God is the God of the living, not the dead. The dead in Christ are still aware and can pray to God and know of things in the material world. We ask their intercessions precisely because they can hear us, and their intercessions on our behalf are bold.

ANSWER 6 Moses represented the law and Elijah the prophets. Both the law and the prophets spoke of and pointed to Christ, and were in complete

agreement with Him, as their conversation on Mount Tabor shows. Their presence, together with the apostles also underscored that God is the God of the "living and the dead."

"Transfigured on the high mountain, / the Savior, having with Him His Elias-eminent disciples, / shone forth most wondrously, / showing them forth as illumined by the loftiness of the virtues / and as ones vouchsafed divine glory. / Moses and Elijah, who spake with Christ, / showed that He hath authority over the living and the dead, / and that He is the God Who of old spake through the law and the prophets. / Of Him was the voice of the Father heard saying from the cloud of light: / "Him do ye obey, / Who through the Cross made hell captive // and granteth life everlasting to the dead!" (Lord I have cried, Tone 4)

"Moses the God-beholder and Elijah of the fiery chariot, / who traversed the heavens without being consumed, / beholding Thee, O Christ, in the cloud at Thy Transfiguration, / bore witness to Thee / as the Creator and Fulfiller of the law and the prophets. / With them vouchsafe Thine enlightenment also unto us, O Master, // that we may hymn Thee forever." (Sticheron for "Now and Ever," Aposticha)

The Vesprial OT readings provide further mystical illumination concerning the presence of Moses and Elijah. The former asked to see God face to face, and the latter heard Him in the "still small voice." Both intimately experienced the energies of God. Their experiences were a harbinger of things to come.

ANSWER 7 The Apostles were pious Jews and also weak men who needed to be told by Jesus over and over about His upcoming passion. It was very difficult for them to believe that such a terrible thing would happen. As pious Jews, they believed in the scriptures and revered Moses and Elias and reliable witnesses of the truth. Their prophesying about Jesus' upcoming passion must have affected them and helped prepare them for the eventual event. It also showed Jesus was in agreement with the law and the prophets.

".. Since many were thinking that Jesus, in seeming to put aside the Sabbath and transgress the law, was opposed to God, the Lord on the mountain appears with the prophets, one of whom was the lawgiver, and the other a Zealot. Such prophets as these would not have conversed with one who seemed to abolish the law, if what He said did not please them" (Blessed Theophylact, Commentary on Mark 9)

ANSWER 8 Much of the meaning of a particular event is revealed in the holy services, especially Vespers and Matins. This is why it is vital for a Christian to attend the Vigil service zealously. The services, and the commentaries of the holy fathers, which have entered into the mind of the church, explain that the apostles were prepared for the crucifixion by witnessing the Transfiguration, and the "splendor of the resurrection" that it prefigured. They would soon be subjected to terrible temptations and fears, and our Savior wanted to put the knowledge of His divinity indelibly in their minds, to help them in the terrible days of his trial and death.

On the mountain wast Thou transfigured, / and Thy disciples beheld Thy glory as far as they could bear it, O Christ God; / that when they would see Thee crucified, / they would comprehend that Thy suffering was voluntary, / and proclaim to the world that Thou art of a truth // the Effulgence of the Father. Kontakion of the Feast, Tone 7

Before Thy crucifixion, O Lord, / the mountain emulated the heavens, / and the cloud spread itself out like a tabernacle / when Thou wast

transfigured and borne witness to by the Father. / There were Peter, James and John, / for they were to be with Thee also at the time of Thy betrayal, / that, beholding Thy wonders, / they might not be afraid of Thy sufferings, / which do Thou vouchsafe that we may venerate in peace, // for the sake of Thy great mercy. (First Sticheron of the Feast for Lord I have cried, Tone 4)

Taking the disciples up upon the lofty mountain / before Thy crucifixion, O Lord, / Thou wast transfigured before them, / illumining them with effulgence of power, / desiring both in Thy love for mankind and in Thine authority / to show them the splendor of the resurrection, / which do thou vouchsafe unto us in peace, // in that Thou art merciful and lovest man-kind. (Third Sticheron of the Feast for Lord I have cried, Tone 4)

ANSWER 9 "Then to show that he was holden with great fear, both he and the rest, he saith, "They were heavy with sleep, and when they were awake they saw His glory;"²⁵ meaning by deep sleep here, the deep stupor engendered in them by that vision. For as eyes are darkened by an excessive splendor, so at that time also did they feel. For it was not, I suppose, night, but day; and the exceeding greatness of the light weighed down the infirmity of their eyes." (St John Chrysostom)

ANSWER 10 Jesus ordered his three disciples to say nothing about His transfiguration:

" And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead." (Matthew 17:9)

The Lord told them to be quiet so that people would not be scandalized when they saw him on the cross. He saved this knowledge only for His three favorites, because He knew it would help them.

¹ This is a typical greeting Slavic peoples give to each other on any festive day. The audio has a mistake, saying that *S prazdnikom* means "greetings on the feast." The meaning is close to that, as our Russian Translator, Natalia H explains: "Prazdnik" (n.) = feast, holiday.

² The feast of the Transfiguration occurs exactly 40 days before the feast of the Exultation of the Holy Cross. In historical time, it occurred exactly 40 days before our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, but the church wanted to celebrate this feast with more festivity, so it was moved outside of great Lent, and to keep the connection of the Transfiguration with the Cross, the feast occurs 40 days before the Exultation of the Holy Cross

³ For example, see Matthew 17:1-9

⁴ 2 Peter 1:13-15 KJV Yea, I think it meet, as long as I am in this tabernacle, to stir you up by putting you in remembrance; (14) Knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ hath shewed me. (15) Moreover, I will endeavor that ye may be able after my decease to have these things always in remembrance.

⁵ 2 Peter 1:16-18

⁶ 2 Peter 1:19

⁷ Exodus 33:11-23; 34:4-6, 8, read as the second of three readings (also called "Parables") at Vespers for the Transfiguration. Here is an excerpt: "20 And again he said: Thou canst not see my face: for man shall not see me and live. 21 And again he said: Behold there is a place with me, and thou shalt stand upon the rock. 22 And when my glory shall pass, I will set thee in a hole of the rock, and protect thee with my right hand, till I pass: 23 And I will take away my hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face thou canst not see"

⁸ 2 Peter 1:10-19, read at the Liturgy on the Transfiguration.