

# THE GIFT GIVER

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LENT PASCHA 2009

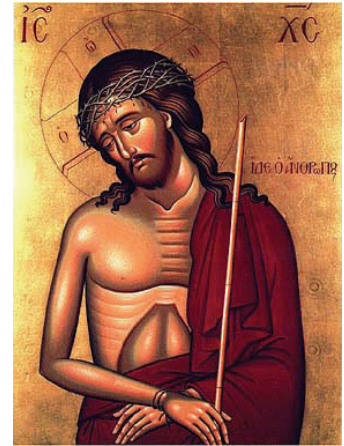
## THE PASTOR'S REFLECTIONS

*Behold, the Bridegroom comes at midnight, and blessed is that servant whom He shall find watching, and again, unworthy is the servant whom He shall find heedless. Beware, therefore, O my soul, do not be weighed down with sleep, lest you be given up to death, and lest you be shut out of the Kingdom. But rouse yourself crying: Holy, Holy, Holy, art Thou, O our God, Through the Theotokos have mercy on us.*

When I was younger I thought that talk about the Last Judgment (whether personal or universal) was something from a different, less enlightened, phase of Church history. I believed that the fired up TV preachers who ranted on about hell-fire and damnation were throw-backs to darker and crueler times. Surely God would not condemn a person because he or she failed to repent of a particular behavior or attitude or set of beliefs! After all, He made us and He loves us, how could He possibly shut us out of His Kingdom simply for “being human”? I had, as I’ve since come to learn, an inadequate understanding of both the power of sin and the magnitude of human freedom.

If we make a point of reading the Holy Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments, on a daily basis along with the teachings of the holy fathers of the Church we will be struck by just how clear our Lord, Jesus Christ, is in His teaching about the Last Judgment. He leaves no doubt that the ultimate place in eternity of each and every one of us is very much tied up with our behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. In fact, He is dreadfully clear about His expectations and about what will happen to us if we fail to heed them. This is not the ‘faith’ of many—if not most—modern Christians. And that in itself is frightening.

Most modern people—meaning people living in the affluent and comfortable societies of North America and Europe—spend little time examining their consciences and reflecting on eternity. They are simply too busy, too caught up with the “cares of this world” to concern themselves with the next. If Jesus is to be taken at his word, this is a very dangerous assumption. As the Bridegroom Hymn (based on the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in the gospel of St. Matthew, 25:1-13) makes clear, if we are caught unaware when the day of Judgment comes we will be shut out of the Kingdom. It is that simple.



*Behold, the Bridegroom comes at midnight, And blessed is that servant whom He shall find watching, And again, unworthy is the servant whom He shall find heedless. Beware, therefore, O my soul, do not be weighed down with sleep, Lest you be given up to death, and lest you be shut out of the Kingdom. But rouse yourself crying: Holy, Holy, Holy, art Thou, O our God, Through the Theotokos have mercy on us.*

### INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

PASTOR'S REFLECTIONS	1
LITURGICAL SERVICES	4
LENTEN RECIPES	3
PARISH SURVEY	4
CONTRIBUTORS' CORNER	6

Of course, Judgment Day comes to each of us when we die. Yes, there is the great judgment at the end of the ages, but for you and me the only judgment that matters is the one that is passed on us as the result of our own faith and actions (the two are inseparable). Far too much attention has been paid to the images we find in the various “apocalypses” of the stars falling from the sky, the sun being darkened, and the world perishing in fire. The grim reality is that EACH of us faces a personal judgment for the life we’ve lived and the faith we have held (or betrayed). This is what is meant by the “dread (or awesome) judgment seat of Christ” that we hear mentioned so often in the litanies during the Divine Liturgy and other services of the Church. It is about our personal encounter with the Lord at the end of (our) days. There is no such thing as a mass judgment—at least not in the Orthodox Christian understanding of the Scriptures. Everything is personal.

The greatest danger we face is not our tendency to sin, but our tendency to be inattentive—to be spiritually asleep. If we sin and repent, we will be forgiven. But if we are ‘asleep’ in our sins—meaning, if we are in such a spiritual torpor that we are not even aware of them—we are in the greatest danger. If we are so indifferent to eternal life that we have for all practical purposes forgotten it and if we are so indifferent to the gift of salvation that the Savior offers us that we would trade it for any earthly pleasure—great or small, then how can we expect anything other than to be ‘locked out’? We have already made a choice about what is most important to us—and it isn’t the Kingdom of God.

The wonderful grace of the season of Holy Lent is that it provides us a spiritual wake up call. If we are even a little bit aware of the message this beautiful and, in our Orthodox Tradition, deeply joyful season, we will see in it an invitation to reset our priorities and to reorient our hearts towards something much greater than anything this world can offer. Indeed, the Church sings of the Great Fast (the proper name for the season) as a time of joy:

*“Let us begin the Fast with joy. Let us give ourselves to spiritual efforts. Let us cleanse our souls. Let us cleanse our flesh. Let us fast from passions as we fast from foods, taking pleasure in the good works of the Spirit and accomplishing them in love that we all may be made worth to see the passion of Christ our God and His Holy Pascha, rejoicing with spiritual joy.” (Forgiveness Sunday Vespers)*

This is our “wake-up call” to be ready for the Bridegroom when He comes. This is the prescription we are given for re-orienting our lives towards eternity. It is not, in truth, something which is limited to the Lenten season; it is meant to become a way of life. Lent just gives us an added push in the direction of becoming truly spiritually awake and prepared to stand before the “awesome judgment seat of Christ”. The season of the Fast awakens in us the desire to change, to repent, to turn our hearts toward what really matters, the “pearl of great price” that never loses its value.

In the end, a real and permanent spiritual awakening is grounded in love. And, as anyone who has ever experienced love knows, this requires a willingness to work diligently to find ways to express what we feel for our beloved. There is no better expression of love for Christ, the Bridegroom and His Kingdom than the words of the prayer of St. Ephrem—said as part of virtually every Lenten service:

*“O Lord and Master of my life, do not give me a spirit of sloth, despair, lust of power and idle talk! But give rather a spirit of chastity, humility, patience, and love to Your servant! Yea, O Lord and King grant me to see my own transgressions and not to judge my brother, for blessed are You to the ages of ages. Amen”*

If we were to actualize this prayer in our lives, we would truly be awake and our place in the Kingdom would be guaranteed.

## PARISH NEWS

### LITURGICAL SERVICES

**SUNDAY FEBRUARY 15, 2009**

**VISIT BY HIS GRACE, BISHOP NIKON**

*(followed by Festal Potluck Dinner in the Parish Hall)*

**SATURDAY FEBRUARY 21, 2009 Memorial Saturday Liturgy 10 AM**

**SUNDAY MARCH 8, 2009 THE SUNDAY OF ORTHODOXY (First Sunday in Great Lent) Divine Liturgy and Procession of Icons 10 AM**

*(this is the first time we will have celebrated the Sunday of Orthodoxy in 50 years. The normal Sunday of Orthodoxy Liturgy hosted by the Orthodox Council of Churches in Worcester has been cancelled this year)*

**LENTEN SERVICES**

**PRESANCTIFIED SERVICES AT ST NICHOLAS**

**WEDNESDAY MARCH 4; WEDNESDAY MARCH 18; WEDNESDAY APRIL 1--ALL AT 6:30 PM**

**AT ST. MICHAEL'S: MARCH 11, MARCH 25\*, APRIL 8**

**\* ANNUNCIATION-REGULAR DIVINE LITURGY**

**FRIDAY MARCH 13-- 7 PM AKATHIST SERVICE**

### ADULT BIBLE STUDY TO BEGIN IN MARCH

**FIRST SUNDAY OF THE MONTH FOLLOWING COFFEE HOUR IN THE PARISH LIBRARY**

**Our focus for the March 1, April 5, May 3 and May 31 (our "June" session), 2009 sessions will be the Messianic texts in the Prophet Isaiah:**

**ISAIAH 40:1-57:21**

**Sessions will last no longer than 1 hour and will be led by Fr. John**

### HOLY WEEK AND PASCHA SERVICES

**LAZARUS SATURDAY APRIL 11, 2009**

**10 AM DIVINE LITURGY**

**PALM SUNDAY APRIL 12, 2009**

**10 AM DIVINE LITURGY**

**WEDNESDAY APRIL 15, 2009**

**6:30 PM HOLY UNCTION SERVICE (FOLLOWED BY THE DIVINE LITURGY OF ST. BASIL FOR HOLY THURSDAY—ABOUT 8 AM)**

**THURSDAY APRIL 16, 2009**

**6:30 PM THE PASSION GOSPELS**

**FRIDAY APRIL 17, 2009**

**3 PM VESPERS (THE TAKING DOWN FROM THE CROSS)**

**FRIDAY APRIL 17, 2009**

**6:30 PM THE LAMENTATIONS SERVICE**

**SATURDAY APRIL 18, 2009**

**9:00 PM NOCTURNES, MATINS & DIVINE LITURGY OF PASCHA (FOLLOWED BY THE AGAPE DINNER IN THE PARISH HALL)**

### LENTEN RECIPES FROM OUR COOKBOOK

**HOLY BREAD**

**MESHË**

**3 c. flour, sifted**

**½ tsp. salt**

**1 c. warm water**

**1 yeast cake**

Dissolve yeast in small amount of warm water. Combine flour, salt and water. Add yeast. Mix well. Turn onto floured board. Knead until soft smooth dough is formed, adding more flour if necessary. Allow to rise in a warm place until double in bulk. Punch down. Knead again slightly, forming two round loaves.

Place in a greased 8-inch round pan layering one loaf on top of the other. Either lightly dust the top of the loaf with flour or dip the seal in flour then tap to remove excess flour. After making the sign of the cross, press the holy seal into the center of the loaf. Carefully remove the seal. Allow to rise again, about 35 minutes. Bake at 375° for 45 minutes. Makes one bread.

*The following is a quantified data analysis of a survey conducted in St. Nicholas Parish during December 2008 and January 2009 with regard to the unification of St Nicholas Albanian Orthodox Church and St. Michael's Romanian Orthodox Church, Southbridge, MA.*

A total of 29 surveys were returned representing approximately 73% of those attending the Sunday Divine Liturgy on a regular basis. This survey was distributed at Church; it was NOT mailed out to members of the parish who do not attend services on a regular basis for whatever reason (distance, etc.). Thus it represents the opinions of the ACTIVE membership only.

The results of the survey express the hopes and concerns of the congregation as discussions about future unity progress. The conversation has been going on in one form or another for over 40 years; this represents the first time that they have moved on to consider specifics—including a potential time line of approximately five years.

In many respects, both the hopes and concerns expressed by the parishioners are somewhat predictable. On the positive side there is a widespread understanding that our Orthodox mission to the community is dependent on greater unity, as is our long-term survival as an Orthodox presence in the Southbridge area. Likewise, many of the concerns and anxieties expressed are focused on issues of what will become of a much beloved house of worship, deeply valued traditions and customs, and the continuing ministry of the current priest.

Alternative solutions are generally not well articulated; there is a sense that many of the ones mentioned have been tried in the past and have not borne fruit. Interestingly, there is virtually no support for building a new church building should the parishes unite, the consensus being that the St. Nicholas facilities should be sufficient, at least for the time being, for any united parish.

### **What are the three most positive things that you can identify about the proposed uniting of the parishes?**

ANALYSIS: A combined total of sixty four responses were made to the three questions posed in the Survey (for an average of 2.2 responses per person). At least 14 responses were unambiguously related to the larger mission of the Church (22%); 17 responses were unambiguously related to Orthodox unity (27%). 19 responses were unambiguously related to church (congregation) growth (30%). Only 4 responses were unambiguously related to finances (6%). 4 responses were unambiguously related to ethnicism (6%). 2 responses were unambiguously related to combined activities (3%). 3 responses seemed to have best fit in the next category (concerns) (5%). 6 responses, or, 9% were unique or may have fit into several categories (e.g., *'we should meet to discuss this with the bishop'*, *'love for one another'*, *'preserve traditions'*, *'none—until the bishops consent in writing to parishioners and give reasons'*, *'one church building'*).

In this section the positive dimension (hopes) of unity was discussed. The vast majority of expressions were positively related to Orthodox unity, Orthodox mission, and congregational growth, or 'combined activities' (81%); Only 17% were concerned with issues of ethnicity, finances, or 'concerns'.

### **What are the three things that most concern you about the uniting of the two parishes?**

ANALYSIS: A combined total of sixty four responses were made to the three questions posed in the Survey (for an average of 2.3 responses per person). 7 responses or, 10% were unambiguously related to 'traditions' (conflicts between parish practices); 18 responses, or, 27% (including 1 in the previous section) were unambiguously concerned with the issue of who will be the priest; 18 responses, or, 27% (including 1 in the previous section) were unambiguously related to church property (mostly anxiety about moving out of the current property); 6 responses, or, 9% were unambiguously concerned with jurisdictional matters (which jurisdiction would we belong to?); 11 responses, or, 16% were unambiguously related to issues of political and personal conflicts including Church Council membership; 2 responses, or, 3 % were unambiguously related to changing the name, of the Church (though this may just as well be related to identity/ traditions/ property); 5 responses, or, 7% were unambiguously related to attendance DECLINING as a result of a union of the parishes. 7 responses, or, 10% were either unique or fell into several categories, (e.g., *No concern on my part, unwillingness to join in one language (English), Taking too long to do it, Putting the material needs before the spiritual needs, People will need to put Orthodoxy first, There will be a cost in making a change, Why now?*)

In this section concerns (or anxieties) about possible union were addressed. The combined total percentage of concerns about 'polity' (the practical dimension of unity) amounted to 86%. The question of who will be priest and what will become of parish property (including which Church will be used and the name of any new congregation) were of highest concern followed rather closely by concerns about 'political disagreements' arising out of combining two well established congregations. There was also considerable anxiety about jurisdictional affiliations (closely related to political concerns) and the possibility that the venture will fail and lead to decline rather than growth.

### **Do you think that a five year plan for achieving unity is realistic?**

ANALYSIS: 17 responses were made altogether on 29 returned surveys, meaning 58% of the survey takers answered the question (the remaining 42% making no comment). Of the 17 responses all were positive. 1 respondent, or 5%, would prefer a longer time period, 3 respondents, or, 18% would prefer to see unity accomplished over a *shorter* period of time.

The very high degree of ambiguity in this area indicates that a significant part of the parish is not convinced yet that relatively near term unity is possible (or, desirous?).

### **Can you think of any other alternatives that would lead to the growth of St. Nicholas parish other than combining the two churches?**

ANALYSIS: 23 out of 29 returned surveys, or, 79%, had responses to this question. Because of the openness of the question, it is more difficult to quantify responses for data purposes. For instance, 7 respondents, or, 30% refer to the possibility of 'bringing back former members/Albanians in town who no longer attend'—but 3 of these responses or, 42% are qualified with the acknowledgment that "this has already been tried and hasn't worked". 6 respondents, or, 26% went into some detail reiterating concerns from question 2—e.g. politics, name change, affiliation, traditions, priest, etc.. 7 respondents, or 30% of the total, stated either they had no further suggestions, but 4 of those 7, or, 17% of the total responses, qualified this by indicating that unity should occur.

Thus, in this section we see a recitation of the hopes and concerns mentioned in response to questions 1 and 2 along with a rather broad consensus that many of the perceived alternatives have already been tried or considered and have not been successful.

**“A PERSONAL TOUCH—WITH A BIT OF HEAVEN”**

Anonymous

If God would grant me “wish” come true,  
it would make me very glad,  
To be able to express in words, a special  
tribute to my Dad  
While his life on earth is ended, and he’s  
now with God-Above  
His memory is always with me, and I think  
of him with love.  
Someday I TRUST the words will come,  
they have to be “special” you see,  
For the “Spirit” Dad showed through all  
of his life, reflects a deep meaning to me  
I remember his smile, his twinkling eyes,  
and the stories he loved to relate—  
So, until I can find adequate word, I  
will just have to “trust-with-Faith”.  
“A Little-bit-of-Heaven” fell from out of the  
sky today,  
With it brought the special words of a  
“message I’ll convey  
“Remember all the happiness we  
shared from year to year  
Be thankful in your heart now,  
for the “blessings” you have near  
Think of me with happy memories—  
the way it’s meant to be  
Follow all your hopes and dreams,  
as they are part of me  
Just keep right on believing sure as  
there’s a God above  
He will away Bless you—in the  
Memory of my love  
I have found much consolation, as my  
“Wish” has now come true,  
And the trust and Faith I believe, I am  
passing on to you  
Although your heart is burdened, and  
you’re grieving very much  
Remember “A Little-Bit- of Heaven and  
give it YOUR Personal Touch!