

## **Matthew 4:25-5:12 (Gospel, Saint)**

Great multitudes followed Him – from Galilee, and from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan. And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.



## **Luke 1:24-38 (Gospel, Theotokos)**

Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months, saying, Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among people. Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, “Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!”

But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.” Then Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I do not know a man?” And the angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.” Then Mary said, “Behold the maid-servant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

## **Hebrews 6:13-20 (Sunday, Epistle)**

For when God made a promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, “Surely blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you.” And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. For men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute. Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

## **Mark 9:17-31 (Sunday, Gospel)**

Then one of the crowd answered and said, “Teacher, I brought You my son, who has a mute spirit. And wherever it seizes him, it throws him down; he foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth, and becomes rigid. So I spoke to Your disciples, that they should cast it out, but they could not.” He answered him and said, “O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Bring him to Me.” Then they brought him to Him. And when he saw Him, immediately the spirit convulsed him, and he fell on the ground and wallowed, foaming at the mouth. So He asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” And he said, “From childhood. And often he has thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him. But if You can do anything, have compassion on us and help us.” Jesus said to him, “If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out and said with tears, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” When Jesus saw that the people came running together, He rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it: “Deaf and dumb spirit, I command you, come out of him and enter him no more!” Then the spirit cried out, convulsed him greatly, and came out of him. And he became as one dead, so that many said, “He is dead.” But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. And when He had come into the house, His disciples asked Him privately, “Why could we not cast it out?” So He said to them, “This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting.” Then they departed from there and passed through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know it. For He taught His disciples and said to them, “The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise the third day.”

## Through the Cross... Joy!

By Fr. Steven Kostoff

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comprehension" [2 Corinthians 4:17].

The Sunday of the Veneration of the Cross extends throughout the entire week. Thus, we continue to "bow down" and venerate the Cross whenever we gather together for any services throughout this week up to, but not including, Great Vespers on Saturday evening. The Cross is the goal of our lenten journey—as is the empty tomb and the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Cross and Resurrection are the two components of the one integral paschal mystery. This is not only the crown of our liturgical year, but the very substance of our Orthodox Christian Faith. A Cross without the Resurrection would have buried Jesus in the oblivion of historical time. But according to the design of God, there could be no Resurrection without the scandal of the Cross. No death—"even the death on a Cross" [Philippians 2:8]—no Resurrection. It would be very difficult to find a scriptural text that makes explicit mention of the Cross without a balancing text that connects the Cross to the Resurrection, or to an understanding of the Cross that reveals its fulfillment in the Resurrection. In the divine *oikonomia*, suffering leads to glorification. As Saint Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised Him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it" [Acts 2:23-24]. In a compact formulation, the Apostle Paul writes of our Lord Jesus Christ, "Who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" [Romans 4:25].

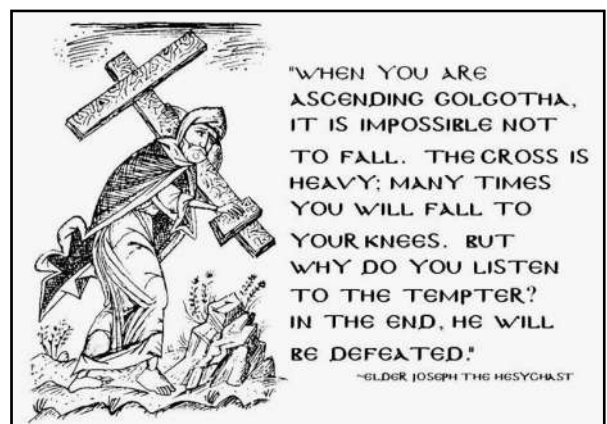
Further, in what amounts to be something of a creedal formula of the early Church, the Apostle Paul proclaims the Gospel that endures to this day when he writes, "for I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve" [1 Corinthians 15:3-5].

We find this organic connection between the Cross and glorification already revealed in the Lord's "passion prophecies" as recorded in the Gospels. At the conclusion of the Gospel reading prescribed for the upcoming Fourth Sunday of Great Lent, we will hear Christ proclaim, "the Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He is killed, after three days He will rise" [Mark 9:31]. As difficult as it may be to look beyond the suffering and anguish of the Cross—and of our own personal crosses—the promise of God is that this is the true way to

glorification: "Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the Cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" [Hebrews 12:1-2].

Our liturgical life of prayer and practice is fully consistent with the scriptural witness of uniting the Cross and Resurrection in an endless proclamation of how God has transformed suffering into joy: "For through the Cross, joy has come into the world!" The purpose of the hymnography and rites of the Church is never to cover up the scandal and shame of the Cross endured "for our sake" by the "Lord of glory." But the mystery of Christ is the disclosure that what is sown in dishonor will be raised in glory [1 Corinthians 15:43]. In the holistic life of the Church that appreciates and recognizes the human person as a psychosomatic unity of "soul and body," we express this belief by literally—that is, bodily—prostrating ourselves before the life-giving Cross as we sing the powerful hymn, "Before Thy Cross we bow down in worship, O Master, and Thy holy Resurrection, we glorify."

We worship the One Who was nailed to the Cross and we simultaneously glorify His resurrection. This hymn perfectly captures the Good News in a world often overwhelmed by bad news. And in a world paralyzed by uncertainty and "relativism," what a blessing and privilege to bow down before the Lord Jesus Christ, "the same yesterday and today and forever" [Hebrews 13:8], crucified and raised for our salvation!



"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

~ Philippians 4:4-7 ~

## Venerable John Climacus of Sinai, Author of “the Ladder”

Commemorated on *March 30*

Saint John of the Ladder is honored by Holy Church as a great ascetic and author of the renowned spiritual book called THE LADDER, from which he is also called “of the Ladder” (Climacus).

There is almost no information about Saint John’s origins. One tradition suggests that he was born in Constantinople around the year 570, and was the son of Saints Xenophon and Maria (January 26).

John went to Sinai when he was sixteen, submitting to Abba Martyrius as his instructor and guide. After four years, Saint John was tonsured as a monk. Abba Strategios, who was present at Saint John’s tonsure, predicted that he would become a great luminary in the Church of Christ.

For nineteen years Saint John progressed in monasticism in obedience to his spiritual Father. After the death of Abba Martyrius, Saint John embarked on a solitary life, settling in a wild place called Thola, where he spent forty years laboring in silence, fasting, prayer, and tears of penitence.

It is not by chance that in THE LADDER Saint John speaks about tears of repentance: “Just as fire burns and destroys the wood, so pure tears wash away every impurity, both external and internal.” His holy prayer was strong and efficacious, as may be seen from an example from the life of the God-pleasing saint.

Saint John had a disciple named Moses. Once, the saint ordered his disciple to bring dung to fertilize the vegetable garden. When he had fulfilled the obedience, Moses lay down to rest under the shade of a large rock, because of the scorching heat of summer. Saint John was in his cell in a light sleep. Suddenly, a man of remarkable appearance appeared to him and awakened the holy ascetic, reproaching him, “John, why do you sleep so heedlessly, when Moses is in danger?”

Saint John immediately woke up and began to pray for his disciple. When Moses returned in the evening, Saint John asked whether any sort of misfortune had befallen him.

The monk replied, “A large rock would have fallen on me as I slept beneath it at noon, but I left that place because I thought I heard you calling me.” Saint John did not tell his disciple of his vision, but gave thanks to God.

Saint John ate the food which is permitted by the monastic rule, but only in moderation. He did not sleep very much, only enough to keep up his strength, so that he would not ruin his mind by unceasing vigil.

### *St John Con’t*

“I do not fast excessively,” he said of himself, “nor do I give myself over to intense all-night vigil, nor lay upon the ground, but I restrain myself..., and the Lord soon saved me.”

The following example of Saint John’s humility is noteworthy. Gifted with discernment, and attaining wisdom through spiritual experience, he lovingly received all who came to him and guided them to salvation. One day some envious monks reproached him for being too talkative, and so Saint John kept silence for a whole year. The monks realized their error, and they went to the ascetic and begged him not to deprive them of the spiritual profit of his conversation.

Concealing his ascetic deeds from others, Saint John sometimes withdrew into a cave, but reports of his holiness spread far beyond the vicinity. Visitors from all walks of life came to him, desiring to hear his words of edification and salvation. After forty years of solitary asceticism, he was chosen as igumen of Sinai when he was seventy-five. Saint John governed the holy monastery for four years. Toward the end of his life, the Lord granted him the gifts of clairvoyance and wonderworking.

At the request of Saint John, igumen of the Raithu monastery (Commemorated on Cheesefare Saturday), he wrote the incomparable LADDER, a book of instruction for monks who wished to attain spiritual perfection.

Knowing of the wisdom and spiritual gifts of Saint John of Sinai, the igumen of Raithu requested him to write down whatever was necessary for the salvation of those in the monastic life. Such a book would be “a ladder fixed on the earth” (Gen. 28:12), leading people to the gates of Heaven.

Saint John felt that such a task was beyond his ability, yet out of obedience he fulfilled the request. The saint called his work THE LADDER, for the book is “a fixed ladder leading from earthly things to the Holy of Holies....” The thirty steps of spiritual perfection correspond to the thirty years of the Lord’s age. When we have completed these thirty steps, we will find ourselves with the righteous and will not stumble. THE LADDER begins with renunciation of the world, and ends with God, Who is love (1 John 4:8).

Although the book was written for monks, any Christian living in the world will find it an unerring guide for ascending to God, and a support in the spiritual life. Saints Theodore the Studite (November 11 and

*Continued next page*

January 26), Sergius of Radonezh (September 25 and July 5), Joseph of Volokolamsk (September 9 and October 18), and others relied on THE LADDER as an important guide to salvation.

The twenty-second step of THE LADDER deals with various forms of vainglory. Saint John writes: "When I fast, I am vainglorious; and when I permit myself food in order to conceal my fasting from others I am again vainglorious about my prudence. When I dress in fine clothing, I am vanquished by vanity, and if I put on drab clothing, again I am overcome by vanity. If I speak, vainglory defeats me. If I wish to keep silence, I am again given over to it. Wherever this thorn comes up, it stands with its points upright.

A vain person seems to honor God, but strives to please men rather than God.

People of lofty spirit bear insult placidly and willingly, but only the holy and righteous may hear praise without harm.

When you hear that your neighbor or friend has slandered you behind your back, or even to your face, praise and love him.

It is not the one who reproaches himself who shows humility, for who will not put up with himself? It is the one who is slandered by another, yet continues to show love for him.

Whoever is proud of his natural gifts, intelligence, learning, skill in reading, clear enunciation, and other similar qualities, which are acquired without much labor, will never obtain supernatural gifts. Whoever is not faithful in small things (Luke 16:10), is also unfaithful in large things, and is vainglorious.

It often happens that God humbles the vainglorious, sending a sudden misfortune. If prayer does not destroy a proud thought, we bring to mind the departure of the soul from this life. And if this does not help, let us fear the shame which follows dishonor. "For whoever humbles himself shall be exalted, and whoever exalts himself shall be humbled" (Luke 14:11). When those who praise us, or rather seduce us, start to praise us, let us recall our many sins, then we shall find that we are not worthy of what they say or do to honor us."

In THE LADDER Saint John describes the ascent toward spiritual perfection, which is essential for anyone who wishes to save his soul. It is a written account of his thoughts, based on the collected wisdom of many wise ascetics, and on his own spiritual experience. The book is a great help on the path to truth and virtue.

The steps of THE LADDER proceed gradually from strength to strength on the path of perfection. The summit is not reached suddenly, but gradually, as the Savior says: "The Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force" (Mt.11:12).

Saint John is also commemorated on the fourth Sunday of Great Lent.

## ST. PETER & PAUL ORTHODOX CHURCH 85TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

**When:** Sunday, April 23, 2017, (St. Thomas Sunday)  
@ 5:00pm / Dinner to be served @ 5:30

**Where:** Capri Banquets @ 6240 Joliet Rd., Countryside, IL 60525

**Price:** Adults: \$40 / Teens 13-17: \$30 / Children 5-12: \$15 / Under 5 is free

**RSVP:** by April 9 (Palm Sunday) to *85th Anniversary Dinner* c/o Deacon & Matushka Kenny, 2805 Yosemite Dr., Aurora, IL 60503

PLEASE SIGN UP IN BACK OF CHURCH IF YOU PLAN TO GO & WE CAN SEND IN THE FORM FOR OUR CHURCH. SEE FR. ANDREW FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION.

The following opportunities for special donations are being offered. A portion of the profits will go to benefit the Holy Trinity Building and Restoration Fund.

- THE 85 CLUB: Enjoy a special VIP reception beginning @ 4:00pm for 85 Club & 185 Club members only. Includes hors d'oeuvres, two drink tickets, and recognition in the program. (\$85 per family)
- THE 185 CLUB: Benefits of the 85 Club plus a commemorative icon and two additional drink tickets. (\$185 per family)
- SPONSOR GUEST CLERGY: Sponsor a clergy member's complementary ticket, with recognition in the program. (\$40)

### MENU

First Course: Freshly Baked Bread & a Caesar Salad

Second Course: Rigatoni w/ Vodka Sauce / Chicken Vesuvio with garlic, white wine, special seasonings & peas / Homemade Italian Sausage with tri-colored peppers / Vesuvio Potato Wedges / Fresh Green Beans with garlic & oil

Children's Menu: Chicken fingers & fries

Third Course: Tiramisu & Gourmet Anniversary Cupcakes