



St. Cyril Orthodox Church

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+ **February 23, 2020** +
Sunday of the Last Judgment
St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (+167)

Forceful warfare
against sinful habits is
considered by God to
be akin to martyrdom,
and he who defeats his
habit is crowned with
the crown of the
confessors who labor
for the Law of God.

- St. Ignatius
Brianchaninov

MEATFARE SUNDAY TODAY – Beginning tomorrow we fast from meat until Holy Pascha.

FORGIVENESS SUNDAY – Following the Divine Liturgy next Sunday we will celebrate the Vespers of Forgiveness, and ask forgiveness of one another as we enter the Great Fast on Monday.

MEMORIAL SATURDAY – On Saturday, March 14, we will have a special Liturgy to commemorate the departed. If there are names of departed Orthodox Christians that you would like remembered, please submit them to Fr. Benedict by email or text by Friday, March 13.

COFFEE HOUR – We will have a **potluck meal** in the hall for next Sunday, March 1 (Cheesefare Sunday). This is a chance to clear out your refrigerator before the Great Fast begins.

RECOMMENDED READING FOR LENT: *The Lenten Spring*, by Fr. Thomas Hopko. This is a beautiful series of forty meditations of the meaning of Lent, focusing on the hymns of the Lenten services. Highly recommended. This is available new for \$18 from Amazon or the Ancient Faith store.

TREASURER UPDATE – February offerings so far: \$9,213. Projected expenses: \$10,678.

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The Incomprehensible Mystery of God

God is a Spirit that is one, eternal, bodiless, invisible, incomprehensible, unchanging, all-good, holy, all-righteous, omnipresent, almighty, all-knowing, loving, most wise, all-complete, in need of nothing. He is the source of goodness and righteousness, the light unapproachable, the power beyond all measure, measurable by His own will alone – for all that He wishes He is able to do. He is the Creator of all creatures visible and invisible, all-encompassing, without limitations, yet preserving and providing for all things. He is the Ruler who rules over all things and reigns with a kingdom that is unending and immortal, who has no rival at all.

God's power permeates everything that exists, itself remaining pure, abiding beyond the bounds of all things and set apart from all entities as supreme in essence and above all that exists, which establishes all authorities and ranks, but is itself above all authority and rank, above essence, life, word, and understanding. God is Light itself, Goodness itself, Life itself, Love itself, Essence [*Being*] itself, for He does not receive existence from anything else, but rather He is Himself the source of existence for all that exists, of life for all that lives, of reason for all that is rational, the cause of every good for all creatures. He has known everything

before it ever came to be. He is the Savior of the perishing, the Healer of the suffering, and the righteous Judge of all creation.

God is triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet He is not three Gods, but one God. Three Persons, but one Essence, one glory, one power and Kingdom, one will. The Father eternally begets the Son, and from His essence He brings forth the Holy Spirit.

To help clarify this mystery we may compare God to the sun. It is one, yet in it one may distinguish the orb, the rays, and the warmth. All three phenomena are a single whole, though they are not identical to one another. So also the Father eternally begets the Son, like the ray of sunshine, and brings forth the Holy Spirit, like the warmth. The comparison falls short in that the ray and the warmth are not equal to the sun's orb, whereas the Son and the Spirit are equal to the Father.

We ourselves resemble God in another way. Our rational soul possesses the power of verbal expression and the power to enliven the body. But here again we do not have a perfect analogy, but only a feeble likeness. For mind, word, and life are not separate persons, but properties of a single consciousness, whereas in God the Mind, the Word, and the Spirit are three Persons. Hence it is wisest to humbly bow before this mystery of mysteries, hidden even from the flaming heavenly seraphim. One can only come to know the Trinity through love for God from a pure heart. As the Apostle John the Theologian says, *he who dwells in love dwells in God, and God dwells in him* (I John 4:16).

Once, Blessed Augustine was walking along the seashore, pondering the mystery of the Trinity, when he happened upon a little boy who had dug a little hole in the sand and was spooning water from the sea into it.

“What are you doing?” Augustine asked in surprise.

“I want to pour the sea into this hole here,” the boy answered.

“But that's impossible! The hole isn't big enough. How can the sea fit into it?”

“And how is it that you attempt with your small mind to understand the mystery of the eternal Trinity?” the boy replied, and became invisible.

Thus an angel showed both the saint and us the incomprehensibility of the Divinity, before whom our weak mind must bow.

– Fr. Daniel Sysoev (+2009)

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We have no excuse when we don't want to repent and confess, but rather we prefer to remain stuck in the mud. Some people don't confess because they have the impression that they'll just fall into the same sins again anyway. This simply means that they add more and more layers on top of the old layers of mud. Yet when these same people stain their clothes, they wash them and take care not to soil them again; and when they are stained again, they clean them once more.

– St. Paisios of Mt. Athos (+1994)

The *Real* Language of Orthodox Worship

The Orthodox Church uses many languages in her worship, and yet there is basically just one truly liturgical language. It is the language of Holy Scripture, of the Bible. In order to understand the liturgy, it's not enough simply to translate it into an "understandable" language (such as English). It's also necessary to learn its Biblical form and contents – its images, comparisons, references, and the whole system of expressions taken directly from the Bible. The first Christians naturally used the forms and expressions of Jewish worship, of which Christian worship is a direct continuation. Later Christian writers who helped write our hymns and prayers were also deeply rooted in the Bible, and wrote their hymns using Biblical language.

One way that the Church uses the Bible as its language of worship is by using the Biblical texts themselves. Biblical readings constitute some of the most important parts of our services, as Old Testament lessons, readings from the Epistles and Gospels, and as the content of some of our hymns, such as the Song of Mary, the Prayer of Symeon, and so forth. This is especially noticeable in the Church's use of the psalms, either whole psalms or isolated verses from the psalms (*prokeimena*). The Church fathers and liturgical writers knew the psalms by heart, and considered them the divinely inspired expression of all worship.

The Church also uses biblical expressions in her worship, sometimes in the Hebrew language, or in other cases translated. The most important of these include:

Amen, "so be it." This is a solemn acceptance by the people of the truth of the prayer that has been said. Each prayer and liturgical action are "sealed" by this Amen of the people.

Alleluia: "Praise God!" A joyful exclamation of those who see and experience the presence of God. Our worship brings us into the presence of God, and we respond with joy.

Blessed is . . . – A biblical expression of worship, in which we proclaim that God and the triumph of His will and purpose are the ultimate goals of all our desires. For example, we use this expression in the hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord of Sabaoth," and again in the hymn "God is the Lord and has revealed Himself to us," and in other places, where we express that in Christ all the hopes and prophecies of the Old Testament have found their fulfillment.

All the Church's hymns and prayers are full of images, symbols, and expressions taken from the Bible, requiring the knowledge of the Scriptures to be understood. When the Virgin Mary, for example, is compared to "the bush that burned yet was not consumed," or to the censer, or to the Temple, the mountain, etc., all these references require us to know the theological and symbolical meaning of these passages from Scripture. In order to understand how the liturgy uses words and concepts like "light," "darkness," "morning," "day of the Lord," or symbols like water, oil, wine, we have to look first at their significance in the Bible.

– based on the writings of Fr. Alexander Schmemmann in *Liturgy and Life* (1993)

Remembered today:

St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (+167)

St. Polycarp was born in the first century, and lived in Smyrna in Asia Minor. He was orphaned at an early age, but at the direction of an angel, he was raised by a pious widow named Kallista. After the death of his adopted mother, Polycarp gave away his possessions and began to lead a chaste life, caring for the sick and the infirm. He was very fond of and close to his bishop, St. Bucolus (February 6). He ordained Polycarp as deacon, entrusting to him to preach the Word of God in church. He also ordained him to the holy priesthood.

The holy Apostle John the Theologian was still alive at this time. St. Polycarp was especially close to St. John, and sometimes accompanied him on his apostolic journeys.

Shortly before his death, St. Bucolus expressed his wish that Polycarp be made bishop of Smyrna. When St. Polycarp was consecrated as a bishop, the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to him. St. Polycarp guided his flock with apostolic zeal, and he was also greatly loved by the clergy.

The emperor Marcus Aurelius (161-180) began a fierce persecution against Christians. The pagans demanded that the judge search for St. Polycarp, “the father of all the Christians” and “the seducer of all Asia.” When the soldiers came for him, he went out to them and invited them in to eat. He asked for time to pray, in order to prepare himself for martyrdom. His suffering and death are recorded in one of the oldest documents of Christian literature.

At his trial, St. Polycarp firmly confessed his faith in Christ, and was condemned to be burned alive. The executioners wanted to nail him to a post, but he declared that God would give him the strength to endure the flames, so they could merely tie him with ropes. The flames encircled the saint but did not touch him, coming together over his head in the shape of a vault. Seeing that the fire did him no harm, the pagans stabbed him with a dagger. So much blood flowed from this wound that it extinguished the flames. The body of the saint was then cremated by the pagans. The Christians of Smyrna reverently gathered up what remained of his holy relics, and each year they celebrated the day of his martyrdom.

During his life the holy bishop wrote several letters to his flock and to various individuals. The only one that has survived to the present day is his letter to the Philippians, which was so treasured by the churches of Asia Minor that it was read there in the divine services.

