

Archive 2003

A Clash of Civilisations

by Fr. Gregory

Samuel P. Huntington has tried to draw the attention of the west to what he sees as a "clash of civilisations." (Chapter 1 of his work may be found [here](#)). He sees new alignments emerging at the end of the Cold War ... a clash of world views ... one, western, pluralist, liberal and market led ... the other non-western and driven by religious or other ideological outlook inimical to the western model. This is a hypothesis I warm to and should like to develop in a particular direction in the parlous times we now face as America and Britain get ready to invade Iraq.

I don't think that the west truly understands either Orthodoxy or Islam OR it deliberately chooses not to acknowledge the differences between these two faiths' world views and its own. It must be said immediately that there are enormous differences between Orthodox Christianity and Islam. The two faiths are in many ways diametrically opposed. This opposition, however, is on religious rather than cultural grounds where this is much more in common. Even in the religious sphere though they do share one important factor in common which distinguishes them both from the western view point. They are both concerned with TRUTH.

The west, meanwhile, is playing around with post modernism and, on its back, chasing a more and more secular ideal in which religion has no place in the public domain and its position in the private domain is validated by personal opinion and choice only. Faith in the west has assumed the relevance of what colour of toothbrush I should buy this month.

It hasn't always been thus but for the last 300 years (at least) we have seen a long drawn out drama in which the sacred has been pushed to the margins of the public mind and religious truth relativised into a private option of increasingly diminished proportions. The nadir of this long demise of faith in the west is upon us ... almost total surrender to consumerism and a liberal humanist philosophy. This degradation is, however, self defeating. Since the west no longer has a public ideological or faith position it is no longer in any position to inspire its people with a collective ideal to defend its values. It can only send its young to war based on such crude "verities" as:- "He is a nasty man. He has got some nasty weapons, (maybe)." Perhaps people in glass houses shouldn't throw stones! Many people in America and Britain can see just how hollow all that is. Meanwhile, both countries, using the terrorist inspired hysteria generated by 9/11 have been quietly rolling back civil liberties right, left and centre without anything other than a whimper from the press and opposition parties. They have also justified this (in the UK particularly) by pandering to racism in a tabloid / gutter press inspired insane mixing of Islamist terrorism and asylum issues. In consequence, right wing opinion has tried to mobilise ignorant tribal "Christianity" against Muslims as a whole group. Sensing this, the Home Office minister (David Blunket) has protested and Prince Charles has lionised Islam for its civilisation and tolerance.

The trouble is that the west can only accept other belief systems on its own terms ... liberal, pluralist, post-modernist terms, and this view does not fit either Orthodoxy or Islam. No doubt there are some who still believe in the ultimate triumph of western liberal values ... which is one of the non-oil reasons why the west is so confident to go to war, (that and more fire power). It remains to be seen, however, whether or not western civilisation has enough ideological coherence to survive more enduring philosophies that don't care a tuppence about celebs and the latest must-have accessory. Personally I think not. There are some things in life more important than shopping and Napoleon's caustic remarks about the British (a nation of shopkeepers) may find a strange vindication as that consumerist creed is shown for the insubstantial vapour that it really is. A wind is blowing and paper houses will not survive. When the dust settles there will be two contenders for the ideological vacuum in the west, Orthodoxy and Islam.

Raising Children in the Orthodox Faith

by Fr. John-Mark

You may think it odd of Fr Gregory to ask someone with no direct knowledge of the subject to speak about the Raising of Children, but he is really being, as usual, very astute. Not only does the outsider often see more of the game, but this particular aspect of the Eastern religion was the main cause, many years ago now, of my initial interest in Orthodoxy. I say this, because it didn't take me long, as an Anglican parish priest, to see that in the introduction to, and raising of, children in the Christian faith, the Eastern Churches were approaching the subject in a much more intelligent manner than the Western Churches.

On paper, the differences do not appear to be great, but in practice there is all the difference in the world. As you probably know, the Western Church has generally speaking, a three-step approach to Christian initiation. A baby is baptised and then waits a good number of years before being confirmed and in my early days, then had another wait of perhaps days or even weeks, before receiving Holy Communion. The results of this in practice were :--(1) Most parents expected "someone else" to inform their child about the Christian faith -- day or Sunday school teachers, the parish priest,--any one, but them. (2) If a baptised child was brought to Church, he/she could not receive Holy Communion and so came to regard themselves as second-class Christians. (3) A lot of children, baptised as infants, were never brought back for Confirmation and Holy Communion. This meant that in any parish there was a significant number of half-baked Christians.

That system, good in theory, failed in practice. When someone explained to me the Orthodox procedure of dealing with Christian initiation, I realised at once its advantages. First, there are no gaps -- the child is a complete Christian like his peers and a vessel of the Holy Spirit as soon as he is baptised and chrismated, and this in itself, is a real source of strength. Secondly, the service makes it quite clear to the family that as a result of Christian initiation it is THEIR responsibility to see to the child's Christian formation ie to teach him as much as possible in the home, but also to bring him to the Liturgy where he can learn both from the action and the atmosphere and also receive the saving Gifts of Holy Communion, so that Our Lord and the Holy Spirit may play their proper part.

And this, I believe, is the bedrock of the whole Orthodox approach to the raising of children. But notice one interesting feature: After the baptism and chrismation, the focus concerning the raising of children as far as Orthodoxy is concerned, changes from the church to the home. This is because so much responsibility for the Christian formation of the child has been placed on the shoulders and in the prayers of the parents and god-parents. As St John Chrysostom says "their example is everything" He is being careful there to guard against any form of coercion. He is stressing that the words they use; their manner of speaking to each other and to their child, will have decisive influence on the child's own way of speaking.

In general, three main elements are stressed in the raising of Orthodox children. The first obviously is the need for a loving background to the child's whole life and this is shown to them as an image of God's love for mankind. This will be apparent in very many aspects of life but the most testing will come when the child misbehaves. Obviously, every child has to learn the difference between right and wrong. Children are very sensitive to the meaning of "justice" and cannot understand when their parents are violently angry over some small misdemeanour. Often this arises when the child is thought to have "shown up" their parents in public. The parents should remember that when they warn the child and threaten punishment, they should keep the warning within the limits of what they will really do. And after reprimand there must come a readiness to forgive. Often children are left with the lingering thought that their parents do not love them because they are naughty. As in all areas of forgiveness, we do not like the sin, but we love the sinner, and children can be brought to see this.

In the same way, if a child owns up to a misdeed, or shows repentance, the response must be tempered accordingly. This does not mean that we even seem to condone the sin, but encourage them not to hide it. Deceit is a much more serious condition than

any amount of naughtiness and deceit between parents and child, either way, will make it increasingly difficult to maintain a loving relationship in the family..

In the same way, any child who grows up surrounded in an atmosphere of prayer in the home will, almost certainly, find himself drawn into that pattern of regular and

effortless prayer. By "effortless" there, I don't mean that we don't have to put effort into our prayers; I mean that sort of home where time spent in prayer is taken for granted without some great up-heaval of routine.. "Now we will have our time of prayer" always seems to me to be more of a threat than a promise.

By the example of love and prayer in a home, a child's heart will be touched and without any long winded explanations, he will be drawn into prayer as a recognised activity and without asking for proofs of God's presence. The key here is loving persistence with lots of variations: -- use of icons and singing; plenty of actions like the sign of the Cross; reading and drawing and miming all of which can be employed at different time to focus on the one thing necessary. What is that? Surely it is to teach them to love God as God loves them, and slowly, as they grow up, to go on to help them find what God wants for them in this life.

The big question and one which many fear to face, concerns obedience. But again, the example of the parents is over-riding importance. If they are seen as not showing respect for each other's will, their child can never come to terms with obedience. All pilgrims of the Christian life have to realise that obedience is spiritually vital, and children who do not get this point in their earliest days will find it very much harder later in life. Children who develop tricks for getting their own way will never learn to love, for true love is always a by-product of obedience. Probably it has to begin with variations of "do as you are told" but as the child grows, it must come to mean "prefer the will of another out of love".

St John Chrysostom also urges parents to watch over the senses of the children. We can't put blinkers on them but it is possible to ensure that they see something other than the negative scenes which too often appear on TV. We can help them to appreciate the beauty which God has created in His world. This can be done through taking them from the cities into the country but also by having some items of natural beauty in our homes. Moreover children have to be shown how to appreciate the beauty of music and the arts. Sometimes schools will tackle this but parents will do well to supplement what is taught there.

The possibilities are endless and each child is different, anyway. Perhaps it is best to try to ensure that children are conceived, born, and brought up surrounded by love and prayer and truth and beauty, so that they will grow up as spiritual persons and in due course, fulfil their human vocation as children of God.

Temple of the Living God

(a sermon preached by Fr. Gregory)

It's easy to forget sometimes when we read the Apostle, today the first letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians, that these writings were actual letters to churches that the apostles had themselves founded. It's easy to forget that Corinth was and is an actual place in Greece in the province of Achaia. It has, like many ancient cities had a very chequered history.

The city was situated on the Isthmus of Corinth, which joins the Peloponnesus to the mainland of Greece. In 146 BC, because of its rebellion against Rome, the Roman general Mummius completely destroyed it. The site remained uninhabited for a century, when the city was refounded as a Roman colony in 46 BC by Julius Caesar.

Corinth became a major centre of commerce in the Roman province of Achaia between the Adriatic to the west and the Aegean to the east. In 29 BC, Corinth was chosen as the administrative capital of the province, the seat of the Roman proconsul. The population of the city was Roman, Greek and other peoples, including Jews.

It was to this city that St. Paul came and preached, initially addressing the synagogue, as was his custom. Now Corinth has developed somewhat of a reputation of being a city of vice. The ancient historian Strabo claimed that over 1000 temple prostitutes served at the temple of Aphrodite. However, Strabo was writing as a partisan of Athens, Corinth's commercial rival and the modern Christian theologian Conzelmann has shown that Corinth was no more notorious than any other Greek commercial city of the time. Nonetheless temple prostitution did exist and being a double port on both sides of the Isthmus of Corinth the city certainly did cater to onshore maritime leisure interests, (let the reader understand!)

It was against and in this backcloth that St. Paul preached the gospel alongside those Jewish refugees from Rome, Saints Aquila and Priscilla and Apollos his co-worker. The Corinthian Jews who had become Christians, including the head of the synagogue, Crispus were necessarily and already a nation set apart from the pagan licentiousness of their surroundings. St. Paul's later Gentile converts, usually drawn from the poorer and more marginalised strata of society, had to learn what it was to be set apart for God often making conversion decisions that revolutionised their own lives and the lives of their families. They, like their Jewish co-believers in Christ, had to learn to become the "New Temple."

All this background is necessary to understand St. Paul's message in the Apostle today ...

2 Corinthians 6:16f:

"For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

17: Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you,

18: and I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

17:1: Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God."

A God fearing Jew or Gentile proselyte knew where the Temple was. It certainly was nothing remotely like any of the scores of pagan temples that surrounded them. The Holy Temple was in Jerusalem. Everyone knew that. There was only one Temple. This was still some 20 years before the Romans would destroy the Temple and 80 years before the Emperor Hadrian would return to build a temple to Jupiter on the site, putting down the final Bar Kochba Jewish rebellion in the process. However, back in 50 AD or so, here was the Apostle, Saint Paul telling them that THEY constituted the Temple of God, people not stones. On the other side of the Mediterranean, St Peter was teaching very much the same sort of thing.

1 Peter 2:4f:

"Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; 5: and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Our Lord himself had referred to the Temple of his own body being raised after three days in the tomb. St. Paul had developed a whole theology of the Church as that body on earth in the earlier first letter to the Church at Corinth. St. Paul's message to the Corinthian Church was therefore based on the universality of Christ and his presence amongst his people ... a worship and a service now no longer tied down to one place. Wherever Christ was, there were His People and wherever his people gathered, there the Temple of Christ's own Body was constituted. For many of the Christians of that time this message and self-understanding was enormously empowering. There were a people called out of the darkness of this world into the light of the kingdom. A Christian was a citizen of heaven, the first true transnationalist and internationalist. Even the Roman Empire wasn't as grand as that and this is why even that Empire eventually fell and worshipped at the feet of Christ.

There is enormous transformative power in being the temple of the Living God. That power to change human lives, and indeed the whole world, belongs to God working with and in his people. We here at St. Aidan's today stand in that great tradition of the temple. We are living stones, a royal nation, a holy priesthood. We are more than ourselves when humbled of our own self-importance. We need this encouragement and this faith today because Christians are re-entering very troubling times. Christendom has finally fallen. Rome passed away in the west and the east a long time ago. We have new emergent empires now that are just as pagan and idolatrous as anything of old. The pagan temples that are being raised in our midst today are temples to materialism and hedonism, to the lust for power and self-worship ... the ultimate narcissism of making a god of oneself and one's own destiny. St. Paul's call to come out and stand firm is a call to God's People now to stand as a Temple built on firm foundations ... Christ himself. It requires guts and grace to do that; to be clear in front of the court of kings and petty rulers of all sorts that we serve a kingdom that has no human shape but which subverts all human imperialism ... the kingdom of the love of God ... the temple of the New Creation. Make no mistake. We shall be killed for this. We always have been. There is honour in that ... a witness to a truth those empires can never face that Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Thus shall God's Temple prevail, His Church ... if we consent to be its Living Stones.

Fr. Gregory

I Believe in the Communion of Saints

by George Weymont

(an address to an Anglican group on the Orthodox understanding)

"Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and on those in the tombs bestowing life."

Everything springs from the resurrection. Our beliefs, our faith, our hope, our very lives as Christians.

We are in the middle of Lent. That period of re-focusing, re-committing ourselves to follow Christ – to re-understanding and reminding ourselves just what that commitment involves.

In four or five weeks Easter morn will dawn! (a week later for us Orthodox, but that's another story) and what joy – we celebrate with hymns and feasts, Christ's resurrection.

We Orthodox sing over and over again – "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and on those in the tombs bestowing life."

Why are we all so happy? Because it is not only Christ who has risen – he has opened the door for us all to pass from death to life – and share in his resurrection.

Here is the good news for mankind – Here is our salvation from this world of suffocating sin we know so well and despair of extricating ourselves from...

Without Christ's death and resurrection there is, of course, no salvation. But equally, without our *participation* in his death and resurrection, we are unable to avail ourselves of his precious offer.

What we believe is vital. - doctrine, the creeds and so on – because they lay out the path, the plan, the medicine of salvation that God has offered us.

Get that wrong and the medicine is inadequate or false and we can't be healed. (Christ was just a good man, etc)

But equally, unless we actually *take* the medicine however effective it is – unless we make our own, the doctrines and creeds – which are none other than pictures of the Risen Life inaugurated through Christ for the cosmos – then we ourselves will not be able to step with him into this Light. Easter will be nothing but a last minute purchase of Easter eggs and a probable wet bank holiday – and of course, much worse, the despairing knowledge, either looming near and dark overhead, or as a small cloud on the periphery of our vision, - that something in life doesn't add up - in our own lives, in history, in today's society, politics, culture, the lot...

Now if all this is true – and I've said nothing out of the ordinary here;

if our salvation depends on partaking, sharing, making our own, the resurrection of Christ – is it any wonder that we take such pains to preserve and present God's saving acts in Christ, – not for own sake alone – but in order that others may both see and understand what is offered and be drawn to it to their indescribable benefit.

In other words we both guard the purity of the medicine (nothing added and nothing taken away) and make it freely available – not only objectively – these are our doctrines written down in books or even presented in our services – but by our own individual willingness to be made whole – actually demonstrate that something has happened in Christ (to show that the medicine works! – if I dare be so straight forward) and therefore encourage others –

I'm trying to convey the idea of the availability and efficacy of these saving acts is an *active* affair, depending on the concrete risen life of those who preserve and present them.

We cannot do this alone of course. And neither can we do it by our own efforts or in our own strength. Christ did not expect us to!

We Christians do it together – and we do it in Him. Christ has given us the fellowship of the Church – which is none other than his Body.

The Orthodox take this very literally. The Church is far, far more than a human organisation that enables things to happen. It is far, far more than a voluntary society of individuals that comes together for mutual strengthening and edification in order to behave in certain ways and carry out certain tasks; though it is both those things.

In the words of Bishop Kallistos - "The Church is the extension of the incarnation, the place where the incarnation perpetuates itself."

Or another Orthodox writer, Stanley Harakas - "The Church is the Body through which Christ is present and active in the world today."

"The place where the incarnation perpetuates itself..." ... "Christ is present and active in the world today..."

These words indicate, not a dry description of an accidental arrangement of a human structure, but a dynamic, organic - Body - there is no better word – founded by Christ and nurtured and sustained in him.

Incidentally, Orthodox also see the Church as an icon of the Holy Spirit – diversity and distinction of persons – individuals, local and national churches – amidst the unbreakable unity of the whole.

We also see the Church as a continuing Pentecost. Each member actually gains individual freedom, diversity of talents can flourish, we can become who we really are as individuals, as we step deeper and deeper into the Body.)

But tonight let's stick with the primary image of the Body.

Nowhere do we experience more vividly the reality of all being members of Christ's Body than at the Liturgy. – The Orthodox Eucharist or communion service.

Here Christ is truly present. Here we can be seen, and see ourselves, as truly all part of the one Body, as we partake of the one bread.

Here as Christ comes to us, we ascend to him. Confessed and cleansed of our sin we glimpse Heaven and realise with both joy and pain that nothing else will do for us and world...

Every Liturgy is an Easter Day. Death has been trampled down by death. In Christ we rise to life transformed – or rather from ordinary death to ordinary life in Christ – which is the only life there is....

And now, at last, we can talk about the communion of saints! Not as a doctrine to be intellectually assented to, but as a lived reality!

Christ is present at each Liturgy, not just for those from the local congregation who are standing there that morning. He is there for the whole Church, the whole Body.

And if death has really been trampled down by death and done away with, then there is no distinction between those members who still walk and struggle on this earth and those believers who happen to have departed.

As the Liturgy begins you will hear many prayers which refer to the saints. (and we're not yet referring specifically to the saints with a capital S whose icons you will see on the walls – but to the saints as in you in me – a word for believer or Christian.

"...therefore with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven (that's the saints) we laud and magnify thy glorious name..."

And, "having remembered all the saints, again and again let us pray to the Lord."

Further, "...calling to remembrance our most holy, pure, blessed, glorified Lady, Theotokos and ever virgin Mary, *together with all the saints*, let us commit ourselves and each other to Christ our God."

Can you see two things? First, yes we do remember and stand with the saints departed – but in doing so we are always re-directing ourselves back to our Lord.

"... having remembered, let us pray to the Lord ..."

"... calling to remembrance, let us commit ourselves ..."

"... with all the company of heaven *we* laud and magnify thy glorious name ..."

Even the Virgin Mary, (whom Orthodox normally call Theotokos or Mother of God to safeguard the reality of the incarnation) is always pictured in the icons *with* her Son the incarnate Word - and she is always shown pointing away from herself and towards him.

I believe in the communion of saints. There is one Church. There is no death for believers. It has been trampled on. So *of course* this one Church includes both ourselves and those who have fallen asleep.

And just as it's the most natural thing in the world for members of the fellowship here to ask one another to pray for them – why should we deprive ourselves of the love from a great swath of that Body?

Let us be clear as to what is *not* happening. The saints are not mediators between us and God. Christ is the one mediator. The saints cannot "save" us any more than a fellow member of the congregation here can "save" us. – but just as members here can play an enormously important role in showing us the way and sustaining us, so the saints can intercede for us, just as we ask our fellows here.

And just as we not only ask others here to pray for us, but also we pray for them, so we pray for the saints departed.

Such communion of prayer between the living and the living and the living and the departed springs from all I have said before. The Church cannot be divided. It is a Body in which *all* its members depend on one another.

Of course Christ is sufficient. But in our stubbornness and blindness we refuse in varying degrees to partake of His offered medicine of immortality. Our brothers and sisters the saints, can help, encourage, correct, teach, inspire and pray for us – though even here of course it is still Christ at work in them...

Let me pre-empt one obvious objection that someone will want to raise. Yes, prayer for others can be effective whilst they and we are still on earth – because here is the arena of our salvation where possibilities of change and repentance can occur. But isn't it clear that now is the time for choosing? Once we have passed this way isn't it too late to change anything?

Yes and no. The story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke tells us very clearly that there is no communication between the living and the dead. We are warned elsewhere in the Bible not to have anything to do with any such attempts.

The New Testament tells us that *now* is the time to repent and – live.

But isn't it also true that those believers who have fallen asleep, are not dead, but alive in Christ? Yes they most certainly are!

What I am trying to say is this – we don't know how it works, but it does! Just as prayer for one another here works!

Personally I am almost a follower of Origen the third century theologian who was condemned by the council of Constantinople in 553 for stating categorically that *all* would eventually be saved.

The Church in her wisdom reminds him and me that such a belief, whatever its motive of love, in fact makes love impossible. We want someone to love us because they freely choose to do so. Anything else is not love and is therefore not life either.

However such thoughts should make us redouble our efforts to love everyone and pray that all will *choose* life and be saved.

The communion of saints! Are you beginning to see what a wonderful facet of our faith it is?

To be able to continue to commend to God those from our fellowship who are no longer with us in the flesh, and to continue to rely on them. And not only those of our immediate family and fellowship, but those we read of across the world and back into history.

As we do this the Body becomes more and more complete – and as a very minimum for those find all this difficult to go along with – we ourselves, as our love and concern spreads wider and deeper – are sensitised and made more open to the fullness of the Word in our hearts.

We probably start praying for those near to us – for me, my dear old mum and dad, a sister of mine who died young. A Pakistani Muslim man, the same age as me, - we loved each other as brothers... How can I miss him out? A young man, a friend of my daughters', in and out of prison, so funny, so generous ... dead of an overdose, alone in a grotty flat on a grotty council estate. I've got to keep praying for him! "Stop!" some of you will say. It sounds to me if some of the names on my daily list may not be believers – and therefore may not have risen with the saints in Christ! I know - and I don't care! Am I going beyond my brief? God's grace is not to be limited. Let's aid it! – in prayer. We Orthodox might say that we know where the Church is, but we also, thank God, are not prepared to say where it is not.

I believe in the communion of saints! And now for a real glory of Orthodoxy! The Saints with a capital S. I know that others honour the saints. But let me boast. Nobody honours and loves them and asks for their prayers like we Orthodox!

The Saints with a capital "S" are none other than us saints with a small s who have emerged as having been particularly open to the Holy Spirit, as having been especially willing to listen and obey and to have become changed in fuller and fuller measure to the likeness of Christ. To have been in Christ and he in them.

We love them because they inspire and show what is possible for us. We especially ask them to pray for us because we trust them. They have demonstrated their willingness to love on our behalf.

Just as amongst our congregation here we ask one rather than another, to pray for us because we know that that person is reliable, honest, discreet, and generous – so by extension we naturally go to those who have proved themselves our helpers.

Local saints, national saints, women saints, our name saints, modern saints, theologian saints, saints associated with a particular human activity or predicament. Saints who became "fools for Christ" to remind the very Church they sprang from, that order and intellect come second to love and obedience. Child saints, martyred soldier saints, who were Christians for only a few minutes as they were "baptised in their own blood" as they witnessed the courage of other Christian martyrs and came to join us. What a glorious family to be part of!

Each one concretely demonstrating in their lives the truth of the assertion that God descended to us that we might ascend to Him. They show us that we *can* be in Christ and he in us. That we really *can* acquire the Holy Spirit. That we *can* partake of the very energies of God.

No wonder we love them! Like a mother with her wayward son, by their love and prayers they return us again and again to the Christ we have forgotten so often.

Let me give you a tiny flavour by mentioning three that I feel near to.

St Paul the Simple. A contemporary of the third century Saint Antony. Already an old man, he had domestic difficulties, and set off to find Saint Antony and become his disciple. St Antony seeing this elderly layman outside his door and knowing the discipline and severity of his own life style, at first refused him – expecting that he would quickly give up, return to the city disillusioned and cause trouble by speaking ill of the monastic way.

But dear St Paul the Simple was not to be denied. By his utter straightforwardness, simplicity of manner and obedience, he won over St Antony and came to live with him.

One day Antony and his other disciples were having a deep discussion on salvation matters. St Paul the Simple listened, trying to follow. At last utterly confused, he interrupted and asked "who was it who came first, Jesus or the prophets?"

I regret to say that even the great St Antony himself was exasperated by the remark and told him to go away. Which he did, - working at his chores until remembered by the group several hours later.

I love him for two reasons. First he reminds me that I don't need to be clever to be part of the Kingdom – only guileless and obedient. And secondly as another story shows, God can, and does, do wondrous things through us however unpromising we are.

This time St Antony is confronted by a parent with their child to be healed. Sensing the severity of the case, St Antony, in his humility, is aware that he is unable to affect the cure. Recognising St Paul the Simple's vocation to straightforward obedience, he tells him to go and heal the child – which he does without hesitation.

I often ask St Paul the Simple to help me dissolve something of my awful complicatedness, which doesn't help anyone, and replace it with a little of his simpleness which can heal so effectively.

Twentieth century Russia. The worst days of the Stalinist labour camps. Fr Arseni, art historian and Orthodox priest. Violence, cold, hunger and arbitrary death all around. What a place to discover your vocation!

Through long terrible years Fr Arseni grew and grew into a quiet but flaming torch of love that confronted and healed those whom he met. – at enormous personal cost ... Religious and political prisoners, ordinary criminals who were also in the camps, guards and camp administrators alike ...

I often ask Fr Arseni to help me to be freed from self-pity and feebleness in the face of my tiny difficulties – and to witness to the secular and brash world around me, with courage and endurance.

Incidentally, here is an example of saint with a big S in the making. We, the local Church are touched by one amongst us. The news spreads. More and more are edified by the person's example and prayer. The whole Church begins to consider formal recognition. We mustn't hurry. Individuals and small groups however real the love to and from "their saint", may not have seen the whole picture. Let's hope all of us have some useful graces for others – but we may also be deeply flawed in our willingness to follow Christ – flaws that we hide all too easily. Of course that will not affect the possibility of God's mercy on me – but if we are to offer some from amongst us for the benefit of the whole Church – let us

proceed gently - so that we hold up especially – those who have opened themselves in full measure to the Holy Spirit.

And finally St George. My own name saint. A soldier, who converted to Christ, refused to bow before idols, tortured and beheaded. There were thousands like him. And it was those early martyrs and saints who by their extraordinary behaviour gave the early Church such strength and enabled the Gospel to reach you and me.

One word about St George and the dragon. Call me a fool, but I love that story as well. Courage again, applied in the defence of innocence against evil. And the lance in St George's hand? In Orthodox icons it is always painted as slender – delicate almost. – reminding us that though our courage must be real, our own strength and human aids, however mighty, - are nothing without the Holy Spirit.

I'm always asking St George to pray to our Lord that I will share a little of his commitment to stand up, speak up where appropriate, and be counted ...

So there we are! I believe in the communion of saints!

We finish where we started. The Resurrection. Christ trampled on death and rose to life. We believers have chosen to die and rise with him.

God knows, - our resolve is constantly put to the test and found wanting. We need all the help we can get! Thank God for His Body the Church where all the members support one another in prayer and deed.

Are we raised to life in Christ? The matter of departing this earth is as nothing. We are all part of the one Body.

"having remembered all the saints, again and again in peace, let *us* pray to the Lord ..."

Amen.

Roll Up - It's the End of the World, Folks! **by Fr. Gregory**

"End of the world" scenarios didn't really materialise in the year 2000, (apart from software bug worries that proved groundless). In so far as planes didn't fall out of the sky or nuclear reactors experience meltdown most people breathed a sigh of relief and consigned all such apocalyptic warnings to deranged jeremiads.

However, this complacency was soon enough shaken by the events of 9/11 and the growth in international terrorism. Latterly we have had the relatively mild but nonetheless devastating SARS global epidemic. If Ebola was to spread along aircraft routes like SARS, in the absence of draconian containment procedures 90% mortality is expected within 6 months. This nasty little African jungle virus dissolves the body from the inside out. There is no cure, no vaccine. Death occurs within 10 days ... if you're lucky.

Suddenly human life on this planet has begun to look both even more fragile and volatile. Now the scientists and scientifically informed novelists have joined in the prophecies of doom.

I suppose we should take these warnings even more seriously if only because these warnings are informed and relate to provable real and present dangers.

A Warning from Science

Rachel Carson was perhaps the first scientist who brought environmental catastrophe to public attention in her enormously influential 1962 novel, *Silent Spring*. Perhaps the novelist's crown for a contemporary call to arms, this time in respect of genetic engineering, is Margaret Atwood in her novel *Oryx and Crake*, a cautionary tale of what can happen when humans start playing God with DNA, (although she wouldn't put it like that).

On a wider front the highly respected research professor in cosmology and space science at Cambridge University, Sir Martin Rees, has just written a book entitled: *Our Final Century*, (*Will The Human Race Survive the 21st Century?*). He puts the odds only at 50:50 as he surveys potential for disaster in genetics, greenhouse warming, high energy physics unstitching of the Universe, nanotechnology take-over ... and that's only some of the humanly inspired agencies of doom. The killer ape is still rampaging across the savannah but this time he has bigger and better toys.

What are Orthodox Christians to make of all this?

It seems to me that we have to avoid two extremes in our way of theological thinking.

I characterise these as the "*God changes the script*" and the "*Let's take to the hills*" approaches.

God' Changes the Script

According to this view, since God is Director-in-Chief, He watches over us ready to intervene at the last moment and save us from ourselves. The Great Story Teller changes the script of human history. Down comes the divine foot ... just as in Monty Python and we're safe. It seems to me that this is not only very dodgy theology, (God scripts everything), but it also reflects the marriage of despair in humanity with confidence in God. Now, it's good to be measured in our human optimism and clear in our trust of providence but God never absolves us from the responsibility for our actions and their consequences. From the cross comes forgiveness and reconciliation but once sin has wreaked its havoc the world will have irrevocably changed. Atonement does not change that. We can face the future with hope because of the resurrection; but the wreckage is still there this side of the grave. We can make a wasteland of this world. God takes care of us in the midst of the blight but he usually insists that we live with what we have created ... or destroyed. In truth we are not impotent actors in God's story, we are free agents in our own story which God himself must adapt to if he is to help us advance towards His goal for human life and ensure a satisfactory outcome.

Let's take to the hills

This view does take seriously our capacity for self destruction and the likelihood that if should such a thing might happen God would not change the rules of human responsibility. The response here though is to shrug and say:- "what did you expect?" retiring to a hypothetically safe distance, (no such place now exists), and await divine rescue. This is the happy hunting ground of western chiliasts with their heretical doctrine of the "Rapture" ... the notion that God will let the world implode but, just in time, he will (physically!!!) remove his elect children from the earth ... whisking them to safety "in the clouds." Well it's nice to think that there's a safe place "up there" for Christians whilst hell reigns on the earth. I can't think of a more pernicious and pre-scientific doctrine than this; a devastating indictment of fundamentalism's inability to see this world as it is and change it for the better.

Paschal Hope

If "*God changes the script*" sacrifices freedom, "*Let's take to the hills*" sacrifices hope. Both views share an approach that would relieved us of responsibility for our actions on the grounds that "nothing can be done." It is this that I reject ... the very moral paralysis that tends to fulfil its own prophecies and,

thereby, renders human beings even more insensible to the dangers that face them and, therefore, even more incapacitated in addressing and resolving those dangers.

Pascha is definitively God's act. We cannot resurrect anything. Only God can raise the dead, (and perhaps conversely ... God can only raise the dead). The point of the resurrection though is that death having been destroyed we now possess the Holy Spirit. New possibilities unheard of before now exist for the human spirit.

Priests of a New Creation

God has placed great power / powers in our hands. He expects us to use those powers as priests of his creation. Here is the nub of an authentic Orthodox response. We are HIS priests ... not priests of our own deadly and death dealing temples whose names are Hiroshima, Guernica, Auchswitz and other infamous and infernal desecrations.

The only proper response to the challenge of this century is a call to repentance ... a challenge to each one of us, scientist and layman alike to work as agent's of the Holy Spirit .. co-creators with God in and for his creation. This will involve a change of heart, a new service. The idols of Mammon, Narcissism and Nihilism come crashing down as we present to humanity new possibilities for human advancement.

These possibilities have everything to do with engaging humans in their collective futures by placing our powers at the service of the God of Life. Nothing need be restrained (science can relax here) provided that we all seek by God's grace and power to build a better world ... according to His design, not ours. That design is an Empty Tomb, OUR empty tomb.

Fr. Gregory

Weddings and Marriages

by Fr. John Mark



One big difference between the Eastern and Western Church traditions lies in their approach to weddings and marriages. In the West, the couple are said to marry one another "I Joe take you Pru to be my wedded wife" and then the priest blesses their action This, it is claimed, absolves the church concerned from blame over any subsequent marital breakdown.

In the East, the service is regarded as a sacrament because the priest commands God to marry the bride and groom. In our Orthodox Marriage service the priest addresses God directly saying "Do Thou Thyself now.....stretch forth Thy hand from Thy Holy dwelling place, and join together this Thy

servant, Joe, and this Thy hand-maiden, Pru, for by Thee is a man joined to a woman. Unite them in oneness of mind, crown them in one flesh, granting them fruit of the womb, and the gain of fair children. For Thine is the might etc."

.The gap between the two traditions at this point is, therefore, very big; but it is not the only difference in this area of marriages. The Orthodox Church regards marriage as one of the paths to true holiness of life, that is, it is seen as a way of salvation. Fine, many people would agree with that. But what is the other main line to holiness and salvation in the Christian East? And the answer to that question comes as a shock to many because it is monasticism. The Church regards holiness/salvation is possible in the main/for the vast majority of people by either marriage or monasticism.

It is true that it is possible to find Eastern writers who give the impression that they regard monasticism as the higher ideal -- but that is their personal opinion, and as one contemporary monastic explains, "Discussion comparing marriage and monasticism are rarely profitable. Each person must find his own path of salvation by asking God to show him which path is best for him -- and then work out his salvation (Phil.2.12) in the circumstances God has given him. We compromise our salvation by not choosing one way of life or another, but by falling away from the will of God concerning ourselves personally. Ultimately, then, the decision to marry, become a monastic, or live as a celibate in the world, is a matter of personal gift and calling, and one must choose the way which will most assure one's own salvation" (Sr Magdalen, Tolleshunt Knights Monastery, in her book: "Children in the Church Today")'

Two important points are being made here as regards our discussion and the first is really a warning against drifting through life with the view to "seeing what happens."

With the Church's encouragement, we are urged first, to see our life as the route to salvation, and then sort out whether our route to that destination is going to be via marriage or monasticism. Now, undoubtedly, this is a very high ideal but I can't help feeling that if only we could get this across to our young people today, it may save many an unhappy lifestyle from developing.

The second point which concerns us, is that the marriage service, as you would now expect, contains some cross references to the life of the monastic, that is, there are some reminders that marriage is not a bed of roses but a life of self-denial; of putting God first, the partner second and self last; again a high ideal but entirely within our grasp.

Immediately after the request, already quoted, to God to join together the couple in Holy Matrimony, the priest put crowns on their heads and these are joined by a length of ribbon. Then they take their first steps of married life as they walk, led by the priest, three times round the makeshift altar-table which has been set up in the middle of the Church. The walk is called the "Dance of Isaiah" from the first hymn sung during it, and it symbolises the couple's commitment always to be led by Christ, and to have His teaching, proclaimed in the Gospels lying there on the table, at the centre of their lives.

And the crowns? They have two different themes intertwined. First is St Paul's picture of the winner in the earthly Olympics who is crowned with a wreath which will soon fade and wither. But we run, St Paul says, "to obtain a crown which will last for ever" (I Cor9.24/25). Again, he says to Timothy:- "I have fought the good fight; I have finished my course; I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness" (2 Tim.4.7/8).

Certainly, the other way in which crowns appear in Christian usage are in icons on the heads of martyrs, that is, those who have borne witness (= what the word "martyr" means) to Christ through giving up their lives rather than betray Him. "Be faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life" says Jesus in Revelation (2.10).

None of this, of course, is meant to imply morbid interest in the suffering side of marriage -- that is a modern gloss put on the symbolism -- because in the service, the bride and bridegroom are promised

happiness and prosperity, not suffering. This is well brought out in the readings from scripture. The Apostle reading is from Ephesians 5:20-33 where St Paul puts the mystery of marriage on a par with the mystery of the Church. He aims to show the unity of Christ with His Church and he can think of no better simile than that of the marriage union. But it is not marriage which serves as a model for understanding Christ / Church relationships, but rather it is the other way round -- this relationship is said to be part of Christian experience which marriage is called to reflect ... very subtle and very interesting.

The Gospel reading is the story of the Wedding Feast at Cana from St John chapter 2.

Like most of St John's passages this has a double meaning. On the surface it tells a fact of Jesus' life but at a deeper level it points to man's salvation through its spiritual/sacramental aspect. The change of water into wine points to a transfiguration of the old into the new, a passage from death to life, and so, like the rest of the marriage service "it announces the possibility of changing the old, natural order of things into a joyful celebration of God's presence among men," claims Fr John Meyendorff. Also, the saving of the best wine until the last is an appropriate theme for a good marriage -- as the years pass, the couple become closer together and the wine of their love becomes better and better.

Throughout the wedding service then, the Church is presenting married life as the preparation for eternity. She is saying to the newly-weds:--"You have worn these crowns briefly in your earthly life together; now strive to win the heavenly crowns that you will wear for ever in Heaven." A high ideal, certainly, but it does underscore the truth that our life here and in eternity is all one, and we need every reminder of this truth.

Fr. John-Mark

Mind Your Language! **by Fr. Gregory (in controversial mode!)**

The Feast of Pentecost puts us in mind of the unifying force of the Gospel. St. Luke records for us in Acts that when the Holy Spirit was poured out those who heard the Apostles were greatly puzzled. *"How is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?" (Acts 2:8)*

This was especially remarkable in the light of how many nationalities were present in Jerusalem at the time. The Apostles were certainly not expert linguists ... not at least on this scale. We are not talking about a United Nations translation facility here but rather a miracle of the Holy Spirit. The Tower of Babel had divided humankind according to language but the fault line was pride ... the human pretension and arrogance of building to the heavens. Now, at Pentecost, the heavens come down to earth in the form of wind and tongues of fire. That which was formerly divided is now united in Christ. The Holy Spirit brings to understanding the message of Christ **WHILST AT THE SAME TIME** preserving the language and culture of the hearers. The capitalised portion here is crucial. The Holy Spirit is not limited by diversity of language. He respects that (and the culture) and makes use of that. So, I ask a simple question.

Why do some Orthodox Churches not use the contemporary language of the host culture? Why do these perpetuate a most strange fidelity to archaic linguistic forms under the guise of Tradition?

Indeed there is no warrant for this ... quite the contrary. Sts. Cyril and Methodios developed their mission to the southern Slavs by crafting a written form for the indigenous language. St. Nicholas of Japan laboured for years to translate the liturgical texts and the Scriptures into Japanese. None of these translators "dumbed down" the language, rather they used the highest and most refined forms ... but they nonetheless used forms understood by the people.

I know full well the arguments against using contemporary language. Frankly I don't regard the weight of these arguments as anything comparable to the responsibility we must accept for disinheriting generations from the gospel of Christ in worship. I have lost count now of the times that people from certain jurisdictions have come to me and said:- "That's marvellous. For the first time I have truly understood what was being said in the service." I ask you. Which practice is closer to Acts, closer indeed to the mind of the Apostles?

On the Glorious Ascension by Fr. Gregory

Most of our information concerning the Ascension of Our Lord comes from St. Luke's account in the Acts of the Apostles, thus:-

"... He went with His disciples to Bethany and stopped on the Mount of Olives. "While they beheld, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, 'Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who is taken up from you into Heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into Heaven'" (Acts 1:9-11).

The disciples then returned to Jerusalem to where the Virgin Mary and the myrrh-bearing women were in prayer. In the Gospel of Mark it is written that upon ascending to heaven, the Lord sat upon the right side of God the Father, that is, the human soul and body of Jesus Christ took on the same glory as His Divinity.

Ascending to heaven, Jesus Christ promised to be always on earth among those who believe in Him.

Early Christian belief affirmed that the Risen Christ stopped appearing physically at the point of the Ascension which seems consistent with the idea that when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost there was no need for Christ to be physically present in a limited (that is, geographical) fashion since He now dwelt in the hearts and lives of the faithful by the indwelling Spirit. Christ in body and soul was now with the Father in heaven, seated at his right hand, a symbolic expression for sharing in the Father's authority.

Later Christian reflection that had both the time and inspiration of the Holy Spirit to reflect further on the Ascension developed the doctrine in a most important manner by focussing on the humanity of Christ ascended as incorporating our own. Let's listen to the great St. John Chrysostom ...

That our flesh should be seated in the heavens and be worthy of worship by the Angels, Archangels, Seraphim and Cherubim is truly a great, astonishing and marvellous thing. On contemplating that, I am often struck with amazement, and I entertain exalted thoughts about mankind, for I see God's great and abundant care for our existence.

St. John Chrysostom

This is by no means an isolated witness as these teachings will show ...

O man, become a bit more sober; come to your senses. As a rational creature, recognize that God in the Highest has descended from Heaven for you, to raise you up from the earth and take you to Heaven.

St. Ephraim of Syria

By ascending to Heaven before [the eyes of] his holy disciples, Christ also showed all believers the way. Christ the Head ascended unto Heaven; His holy members, the true Christians, will ascend as well. The path had been closed to men, but by Christ's death, it was opened. In Christ's death, "the veil of the temple was rent in twain" (Matthew 27: 51), and the path and entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven was opened to the faithful (Hebrews 10: 19-20).

St. Tikhon of Zadonsk

So, in the Ascension our humanity is taken up in Christ's to the heavenly places. He came to earth that we might be raised up to heaven. This is the language of theosis, of worship, of transformative love, of our participation in the very divine life of the Blessed Trinity.

Our whole Christian life may therefore be seen as this Ascension. St. Gregory of Nyssa went further in the "Life of Moses" by emphasising that our ascent is infinite as God's measure knows no bounds and our growth is, therefore, continuous ... this side and the other side of death.

Sometimes people from other Christian traditions reject the Ascension or the life in heaven as either being the product of an early world view or an irrelevance ... after all who wants to wait around for all eternity ... even in ecstasy. Such comments can only arise from error or minds accustomed to dealing with spiritual truths in a most shallow and literal manner. The Ascension is a vital doctrine, (no, I should say "experience"), for Christians and our faith because it is God's intended future for our humanity. We shall never cease to explore Life, the Universe and Everything because all these are in God and the more we share in Him the more we shall share in them.

"I came that they may have life," Jesus said, "and have it abundantly," (John 10:10).

THAT is what the Ascension is about ... abundant life in God and our growth into that life. Our whole spiritual striving in God's grace and power is directed toward that end ... a new humanity in God. Christ is ascended and in Him, we shall ascend!

Family Friends and Monasticism

by Fr. Gregory

There are three different social vocations in the Orthodox Church ... family life, friendship and monasticism. In truth certain aspects of each of the three can be found crossing over into each other's domain. A monastery for example is an extended family. Friendship should typify all three. The ascetical restraint of a monk should characterise the allowances made for each other as part of a couple's sexual relationship. Nonetheless, these three are separate vocations and each has its own honour and dignity as a calling from God.

The family is called the "domestic Church" for good reason. If the faith is not lived out in the family; what chance has it of being lived out anywhere else? A strong qualification though needs to be made at the outset. We are talking about an *Orthodox* family here ... a situation where *all* family members are Orthodox; a situation where the family really is united in faith and practice. For those Orthodox married to a non-Orthodox partner the situation is made more difficult but the opportunities to live out the Orthodox life in the presence of a loved one is a great witness. This will take great sensitivity and mutual acceptance from both. In turning to the Orthodox family we can readily see how praying together at the icon corner, observing the fasts and feasts of the Church, working together in the name of Christ for the common good in the community all these help to make the family both a microcosm of the Church and a great strengthening to the of the wider body of the faithful. Moreover, if a child sees all this going on in the home he or she is much less likely to fall away from the faith when the temptations of the world distract it later on. Having said that the family must take care to ensure that

love and freedom are being nurtured in the Christian home; otherwise the family will become a suffocating thing and a travesty of the gospel.

Not everyone is called to married family life. The Orthodox Church has a long and honoured tradition of helping single people to develop deep and binding relationships through friendship ... something of course that is both good and open to all of us but which single people can pursue perhaps in greater depth. Jesus himself characterised friendship as the highest form of relationship a believer could have with Him.

"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead I have called you friends, for everything that I have learned from my Father I have made known to you." (John 15:12-15)

The Scriptures abound in references to consecrated friendship. Most famous of all perhaps is that of David and Jonathan.

"After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he love him as himself. And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt." (1 Samuel 18:1,3-4)

This deep abiding friendship has persisted in the life of the church ... a friendship so profound, the Church has seen fit to bless it. Saints Sergius and Bacchus were two soldier martyr saints at the close of the 3rd Century who were martyred under Emperor Maximilian. They were put to death for their faith of Christ. Their deep and abiding friendship sustained each other in their trials. From the time of their death their cult grew and inspired the later Christian Byzantine Empire to honour them as patrons of the army. There is a church dedicated to them in Constantinople. What is little known is that a service was later drawn up in the Middle Ages recognising and blessing such a covenant friendship modelled after their lives.

Finally, the Church blesses and is blessed by monasticism. Orthodox monasticism still has much more of the character of the "desert" about it for it was out of the Egyptian desert that monasticism first emerged as a movement toward the Kingdom and out of a potentially secularising mentality of the newly Christian Roman Empire. With this mind, monasticism in Orthodoxy has always functioned as a prophetic and enriching medium. It was towards the monasteries historically that Orthodoxy looked when oppressed by Arab and Turkish armies. It was the independent spirit of the monasteries that Christians in Russia took into the new catacombs under Soviet repression. Monasticism in Orthodoxy has never had a settled institutional character. Whereas in the west Orders developed based on Founders' Rules, (Benedictine, Carthusian, Cistercian etc.), Orders that were little societies within the Church; in Orthodoxy there have only been monks and nuns following the same simple rules of chastity, poverty and obedience in a life of prayer and charitable service. Out of this tradition has come a fearless sacrificial Christianity, a great source of strength and vision for the whole Church.

So, whether its marriage, friendship or monasticism, Orthodoxy has different vocations for different people. Each has its own blessing and rationale. Part of Orthodoxy's pastoral role is to help her faithful discover God's will and path for their own lives.

Hutton's Hunt

by Fr. Gregory

We all hope here in the UK that Lord Hutton will get to the bottom of the question as to why the MOD scientist Dr. Kelly apparently took his own life having been outed as Andrew Gilligan's source for the Weapons of Mass Destruction dossier. This is vitally necessary for some closure for his family and to develop some procedures and inculcate attitudes that will reduce the possibility of such a tragedy happening again.

Although the brief of the enquiry is quite limited, like a can of soft drink agitated, spillage over into other questions is assured and, indeed, this has already happened. However, some of these questions concern the mechanics of government and the probity of certain individuals. As such they miss a deeper question. This concerns the way we treat each other.

Dr. Kelly's daughter hit the nail on the head when she looked forward to a time when people could exercise more kindness. We all know that politics is a dirty, ruthless business but let us remember that it is PEOPLE who make it dirty and ruthless. It's power of course that has a tendency to corrupt. It is power ... or rather maintaining power, that twists human behaviour. Some people can handle power but it's not usually idealists unless they have a humility to match. It's not usually realists unless they can overcome their cynicism.

Ultimately Hutton's Hunt is a spiritual matter, a question of one's soul. Maybe this is why this new convert to Bahai died. He spoke in a language few understood and many despised; the language of service, integrity and a higher calling. Those who tread this path in such a position had better have their backs covered. For a Christian in politics this means Church before Party. For non believers also the lesson must be learned anew. Crown tarnish. Higher values judge us. Lord have mercy.

St. John of Damascus on the Theotokos



That the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God: an argument directed against the Nestorians.

from "The Orthodox Faith" by St John of Damascus.

Moreover we proclaim the holy virgin to be in strict truth the Mother of God. For inasmuch as He who

was born of her was true God, she who bare the true God incarnate is the true mother of God. For we hold that God was born of her, not implying that the divinity of the Word received from her the beginning of its being, but meaning that God the Word himself, who was begotten of the Father timelessly before the ages, and was with the Father and the Spirit without beginning and through eternity, took up his abode in these last days for the sake of our salvation in the Virgin's womb, and was without change made flesh and born of her. For the holy Virgin did not bear mere man but true God; and not mere God but God incarnate, who did not bring down his body from heaven, nor simply passed through the virgin as channel, but received from her flesh of like essence to our own and subsisting in himself. For if the body had come down from heaven and had not partaken of our nature, what would have been the use of his becoming man? For the purpose of God the Word in becoming man was that the very same nature, which had sinned and fallen and become corrupted, should triumph over the deceiving tyrant and so be freed from corruption, just as the divine apostle puts it, "since by man came death, by man also came the resurrection of the dead." If the first was true, the second must also be true.

Although, however, he says, "The first Adam is of the earth, earthy; the second Adam is the Lord from Heaven," he does not say that his body is from heaven, but emphasises the fact that he is not mere man. For mark, he called him both Adam and Lord, thus indicating his double nature, for Adam is, being interpreted, earth-born: and it is clear that man's nature is earth-born since he is formed from earth, but the title Lord signifies his divine essence.

And again the Apostle says: "God sent forth His only-begotten Son, made of a woman." He did not say "made by a woman". Wherefore the divine apostle meant that the only-begotten Son of God and God is the same as he who was made man of the Virgin, and that he who was born of the virgin is the same as the Son of God and God.

But he was born after the bodily fashion inasmuch as He became man, and did not take up his abode in a man formed beforehand, as in a prophet, but became himself in essence and truth man, that is he caused flesh animated with intelligence and reason to subsist in his own subsistence, and himself became subsistence for it. For this is the meaning of "made of a woman". For how could the very Word of God itself have been made under the law, if he did not become man of like essence with ourselves.

Hence it is with justice and truth that we call the holy Mary the Mother of God. For this name embraces the whole mystery of the dispensation. For if she who bore him is the Mother of God, assuredly he who was born of her is God and likewise also man. For how could God, who was before the ages, have been born of a woman unless he had become man? For the son of man must clearly be man himself. But if he who was born of a woman is himself God, manifestly he who was begotten of God the Father in accordance with the laws of an essence that is divine and knows no beginning, and he who was in the last days born of the Virgin in accordance with the laws of an essence that has beginning and is subject to time, that is, an essence which is human, must be one and the same. The name in truth signifies the one subsistence and the two natures and the two generations of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But we may never say that the Holy Virgin is the Mother of Christ, because it was in order to do away with the title Mother of God, and to bring dishonour on the Mother of God, who alone is in truth worthy of honour above all creation, that the impure and abominable Nestorius, that vessel of dishonour, invented this name for an insult. For David the King, and Aaron the High Priest, are also called Christ, for it is customary to make kings and priests by anointing; and besides every God-inspired man may be called Christ, but yet he is not by nature God: yea, the accursed Nestorius insulted him who was born of the virgin by calling him God-bearer. May it be far from us to speak or think of him as God-bearer only, Who is in truth God incarnate. For the Word himself became flesh, having been in truth conceived of the Virgin, but coming forth with God with the assumed nature which, as soon as he was brought into being, was deified by him, so that these three things took place simultaneously, the assumption of our nature, the coming into being, and the deification of the assumed nature by the Word. And thus it is that the holy Virgin is thought of and spoken of as the Mother of God, not only because of the nature of the Word, but also because of the deification of man's nature, the miracles of conception and of existence being wrought together, to wit, the conception of the Word, and the existence of the flesh of the Word

himself. For the very Mother of God, in some marvellous manner was the means of fashioning the Framer of all things and of bestowing manhood on the God and Creator of all, who deified the nature that he assumed, while the union preserved those things that were united just as they were united, that is to say, not only the divine nature of Christ, but also his human nature, not only that which is above us, but that which is of us. For he was not first made like us and only later became higher than us, but ever from his first coming into being he existed with the double nature, because he existed in the Word himself from the beginning of the conception. Wherefore he is human in his own nature, but also, in some marvellous manner, of God and divine. Moreover he has the properties of the living flesh: for by reason of the dispensation the Word received these which are, according to the laws of natural motion, truly natural.

Message in a Bottle (Tube)

Without getting into individual cases for legal reasons there have been in both the UK and US (and elsewhere no doubt) a number of high profile moral "dilemmas" recently arising from In Vitro Fertilisation, (IVF). Commonly called "test tube babies" this procedure involves fertilisation outside of the womb for infertile couples and this has now happened for some time in our societies. With the technology as it stands at present though this involves multiple conceptions from which one embryo is taken for implantation.

What happens to the rest? Well, it's commonly known now that these are "discarded" (killed) or "used" (harvested) for stem cell research (quite unnecessarily as there are other sources of stem cells) or "frozen" (arrested in development). No doubt to those who support these procedures the embryo, insofar as it is a "potential" human is not worthy of life and development if we so decide. This, of course, is the abortion mentality. The embryo is just a "blob" of cells and we can do what we like with it. Such a view is possible with those who only recognise a human life after birth or at a very late stage in pregnancy.

The traditional Christian doctrine of the soul infused at conception has now been comprehensively dropped. Many do not now believe that the soul exists let alone agree on the point at which it's appearance marks the true beginning of human life. Much of this is old ground and orthodox (lower case) Christians and the "pro-choice" lobby have been in strong disagreement over this for years now. We see a holocaust of the unborn ... they see women's rights.

What is emerging now is a well nigh impossible set of moral conundrums. When foetuses or embryos were killed that was the end of the matter *for some*. Now, however, we have estranged parents arguing over implantation rights and embryos being harvested as a by-product of IVF for bio-spare parts. Some don't see anything wrong or peculiar about this. As a Christian I am astonished. I am even more astonished that some Christians are now weakening and adopting the "end justifies the means" position. Of course nobody wants to see couples infertile; of course we want to see progress in the cure of killer diseases and debilitating genetic conditions; but what price are we prepared to pay for all of this? Any price?

It is important to stress that there are alternatives to the sanitised killings of IVF. Stem cells can be harvested from living humans or from the umbilical cord in new born infants. Existing IVF viable embryos can be adopted (as is happening now in the US to the great alarm of the pro-choice lobby). Fertility research should concentrate on improving its procedures to avoid unnecessary deaths.

And now an unpalatable truth. No one has a RIGHT to a child. The birth of a child is a blessing, a gift. To be childless is devastating, but, arguably to involve oneself in such a morally problematic procedure such as IVF with the present state of the technology is hardly a price anyone should have to pay ... not least the unborn.

Fr. Gregory

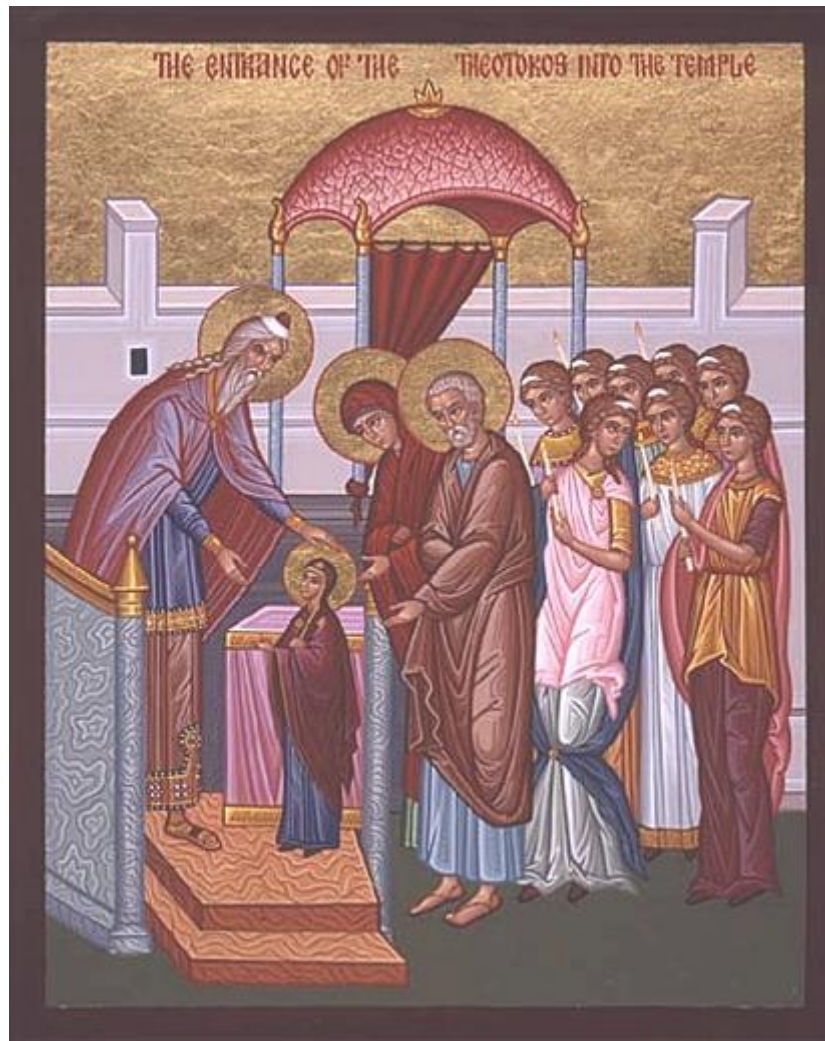
Council of Nicaea (7th Ecumenical,787 AD)



To make our confession short, we keep unchanged all the ecclesiastical traditions handed down to us, whether in writing or verbally, one of which is the making of pictorial representations, agreeable to the history of the preaching of the Gospel, a tradition useful in many respects, but especially in this, that so the incarnation of the Word of God is shown forth as real and not merely fantastic, for these have mutual indications and without doubt have also mutual significations. We, therefore, following the royal pathway and the divinely inspired authority of our Holy Fathers and the traditions of the Catholic Church (for, as we all know, the Holy Spirit indwells her), define with all certitude and accuracy that just as the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross, so also the venerable and holy images, as well in painting and mosaic as of other fit materials, should be set forth in the holy churches of God, and on the sacred vessels and on the vestments and on hangings and in pictures both in houses and by the wayside, to wit, the figure of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ, of our spotless Lady, the Mother of God, of the honourable Angels, of all Saints and of all pious people. For by so much more frequently as they are seen in artistic representation, by so much more readily are men lifted up to the memory of their prototypes, and to a longing after them; and to these should be given due salutation and honorable reverence not indeed that true worship of faith which pertains alone to the divine nature; but to these, as to the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross and to the Book of the Gospels and to the other holy objects, incense and lights may be offered according to ancient pious custom. For the honor which is paid to the image passes on to that which the image represents, and he who reveres the image reveres in it the subject represented . . .

(from the Holy Fathers)

Protoevangelium of St. James



The Protoevangelium of St. James ca. A.D. 125 is used as a non-canonical but informative text in the Orthodox Church and its traditions form the basis for the liturgical observance of the feast of the Entry of the Theotokos to the Temple, celebrated on 21 November.

1 In the histories of the twelve tribes of Israel it is written that there was one Ioacim, exceeding rich: and he offered his gifts twofold, saying: That which is of my superfluity shall be for the whole people, and that which is for my forgiveness shall be for the Lord, for a propitiation unto me.

2 Now the great day of the Lord drew nigh and the children of Israel offered their gifts. And Reuben stood over against him saying: It is not lawful for thee to offer thy gifts first, -forasmuch as thou hast gotten no seed in Israel.

3 And Ioacim was sore grieved, and went unto the record of the twelve tribes of the people, saying: I will look upon the record of the twelve tribes of Israel, whether I only have not gotten seed in Israel. And he searched, and found concerning all the righteous that they had raised up seed in Israel. And he remembered the patriarch Abraham, how in the last days God gave him a son, even Isaac.

4 And Ioacim was sore grieved, and showed not himself to his wife, but betook himself into the wilderness, and pitched his tent there, and fasted forty days and forty nights, saying within himself: I will not go down either for meat or for drink until the Lord my God visit me, and my prayer shall be unto me meat and drink. II 1 Now his wife Anna lamented with two lamentations, and bewailed herself with two bewailings, saying: I will bewail my widowhood, and I will bewail my childlessness.

2 And the great day of the Lord drew nigh, and Judith her handmaid said unto her: How long humblest thou thy soul? The great day of the Lord hath come, and it is not lawful for thee to mourn: but take this headband, which the mistress of my work gave me, and it is not lawful for me to put it on, forasmuch as I am an handmaid, and it hath a mark of royalty. And Anna said: Get thee from me. Lo! I have not done such things and the Lord hath greatly humbled me: peradventure one gave it to thee in subtilty, and thou art come to make me partaker in thy sin. And Judith said: How shall I curse thee, seeing the Lord hath shut up thy womb, to give thee no fruit in Israel?

3 And Anna was sore grieved and mourned with a great mourning because she was reproached by all the tribes of Israel. And coming to herself she said: What shall I do? I will pray with weeping unto the Lord my God that he visit me. And she put off her mourning garments and adorned her head and put on her bridal garments: and about the ninth hour she went down into the garden to walk there. And she saw a laurel-tree and sat down underneath it and besought the Lord saying: O God of our fathers, bless me, and hearken unto my prayer, as thou didst bless the womb of Sarah, and gavest her a son, even Isaac. III 1 And looking up to the heaven she espied a nest of sparrows in the laurel-tree, and made a lamentation within herself, saying: Woe unto me, who begat me? And what womb brought me forth for I am become a curse before the children of Israel, and I am reproached, and they have mocked me forth out of the temple of the Lord?

2 Woe unto me, unto what am I likened? I am not likened unto the fowls of the heaven, for even the fowls of the heaven are fruitful before thee, O Lord. Woe unto me, unto what am I likened? I am not likened unto the beasts of the earth, for even the beasts of the earth are fruitful before thee, O Lord. Woe unto me, unto what am I likened? I am not likened unto these waters, for even these waters are fruitful before thee, O Lord.

3 Woe unto me, unto what am I likened? I am not likened unto this earth, for even this earth bringeth forth her fruits in due season and blesseth thee, O Lord. IV 1 And behold an angel of the Lord appeared, saying unto her: Anna, Anna, the Lord hath hearkened unto thy prayer, and thou shalt conceive and bear, and thy seed shall be spoken of in the whole world. And Anna said: As the Lord my God liveth, if I bring forth either male or female, I will bring it for a gift unto the Lord my God, and it shall be ministering unto him all the days of its life.

2 And behold there came two messengers saying unto her: Behold Ioacim thy husband cometh with his flocks: for an angel of the Lord came down unto him saying: Ioacim, Ioacim, the Lord God hath hearkened unto thy prayer. Get thee down hence, for behold thy wife Anna hath conceived. 3 And Ioacim sat him down and called his herdsmen saying: Bring me hither ten lambs without blemish and without spot, and they shall be for the Lord my God; and bring me twelve tender calves, and they shall be for the priests and for the assembly of the elders; and an hundred kids for the whole people.

4 And behold Ioacim came with his flocks, and Anna stood at the gate and saw Ioacim coming, and ran and hung upon his neck, saying: Now know I that the Lord God hath greatly blessed me: for behold the widow is no more a widow, and she that was childless shall conceive. And Ioacim rested the first day in his house. V 1 And on the morrow he offered his gifts, saying in himself: If the Lord God be reconciled unto me, the plate that is upon the forehead of the priest will make it manifest unto me. And Ioacim offered his gifts and looked earnestly upon the plate of the priest when he went up unto the altar of the Lord, and he saw no sin in himself. And Ioacim said: Now know I that the Lord is become propitious unto me and hath forgiven all my sins. And he went down from the temple of the Lord justified, and went unto his house.

2 And her months were fulfilled, and in the ninth month Anna brought forth. And she said unto the midwife: what have I brought forth? And she said: A female. And Anna said: My soul is magnified this day, and she laid herself down. And when the days were fulfilled, Anna purified herself and gave suck to the child and called her name Mary. VI 1 And day by day the child waxed strong, and when she was six months old her mother stood her upon the ground to try if she would stand; and she walked seven steps and returned unto her bosom. And she caught her up, saying: As the Lord my God liveth, thou

shalt walk no more upon this ground, until I bring thee into the temple of the Lord. And she made a sanctuary in her bed chamber and suffered nothing common or unclean to pass through it. And she called for the daughters of the Hebrews that were undefiled, and they carried her hither and thither.

2 And the first year of the child was fulfilled, and Ioacim made a great feast and bade the priests and the scribes and the assembly of the elders and the whole people of Israel. And Ioacim brought the child to the priests, and they blessed her, saying: O God of our fathers, bless this child and give her a name renowned for ever among all generations. And all the people said: So be it, so be it. Amen. And he brought her to the high priests, and they blessed her, saying: O God of the high places, look upon this child, and bless her with the last blessing which hath no successor.

3 And her mother caught her up into the sanctuary of her bed chamber and gave her suck.

And Anna made a song unto the Lord God, saying:

I will sing an hymn unto the Lord my God, because he hath visited me and taken away from me the reproach of mine enemies, and the Lord hath given me a fruit of his righteousness, single and manifold before him. Who shall declare unto the sons of Reuben that Anna giveth suck? Hearken, hearken, ye twelve tribes of Israel, that Anna giveth suck. And she laid the child to rest in the bed chamber of her sanctuary, and went forth and ministered unto them. And when the feast was ended, they gat them down rejoicing, and glorifying the God of Israel. VII 1 And unto the child her months were added: and the child became two years old. And Ioacim said: Let us bring her up to the temple of the Lord that we may pay the promise which we promised; lest the Lord require it of us, and our gift become unacceptable. And Anna said: Let us wait until the third year, that the child may not long after her father or mother. And Ioacim said: Let us wait.

2 And the child became three years old, and Ioacim said: Call for the daughters of the Hebrews that are undefiled, and let them take every one a lamp, and let them be burning, that the child turn not backward and her heart be taken captive away from the temple of the Lord. And they did so until they were gone up into the temple of the Lord.

And the priest received her and kissed her and blessed her and said: The Lord hath magnified thy name among all generations: in thee in the latter days shall the Lord make manifest his redemption unto the children of Israel. And he made her to sit upon the third step of the altar. And the Lord put grace upon her and she danced with her feet and all tile house of Israel loved her. VIII 1 And her parents gat them down marveling, and praising the Lord God because tile child was not turned away backward.

And Mary was in the temple of the Lord as a dove that is nurtured: and she received food from the hand of an angel.

2 And when she was twelve years old, there was a council of the priests, saying: Behold Mary is become twelve years old in the temple of the Lord. What then shall we do with her ? lest she pollute the sanctuary of the Lord. And they said unto the high priest: Thou standest over the altar of the Lord. Enter in and pray concerning her: And whatsoever the Lord shall reveal to thee, that let us do.

3 And the high priest took the vestment with the twelve bells and went in unto the Holy of Holies and prayed concerning her. And lo, an angel of tile Lord appeared saying unto him: Zacharias, Zacharias~ go forth and assemble them that are widowers of the people, and let them bring every man a rod, and to whomsoever the Lord shall show a sign, his wife shall she be. And the heralds went forth over all the country round about Judaea, and the trumpet of the Lord sounded, and all men ran thereto. IX 1 And Joseph cast down his axe and ran to meet them, and when they were gathered together they went to the high priest and took their rods with them. And he took the rods of them all and went into the temple and prayed. And when he had finished the prayer he took the rods and went forth and gave them back to them: and there was no sign upon them. But Joseph received the last rod: and lo, a dove came forth of

the rod and flew upon the head of Joseph. And the priest said unto Joseph: Unto thee hath it fallen to take the virgin of the Lord and keep her for thyself.

2 And Joseph refused, saying: I have sons, and I am an old man, but she is a girl: lest I become a laughing-stock to the children of Israel. And the priest said unto Joseph: Year the Lord thy God, and remember what things God did unto Dathan and Abiram and Korah, how the earth clave and they were swallowed up because of their gainsaying. And now fear thou, Joseph, lest it be so in thine house. And Joseph was afraid, and took her to keep her for himself. And Joseph said unto Mary: Lo, I have received thee out of the temple of the Lord: and now do I leave thee in my house, and I go away to build my buildings and I will come again unto thee. The Lord shall watch over thee. X 1 Now there was a council of the priests, and they said: Let us make a veil for the temple of the Lord. And the priest said: Call unto me pure virgins of the tribe of David. And the officers departed and sought and found seven virgins. And the priests called to mind the child Mary, that she was of the tribe of David and was undefiled before God: and the officers went and fetched her. And they brought them into the temple of the Lord, and the priest said: Cast me lots, which of you shall weave the gold and the undefiled (the white) and fine linen and the silk and the hyacinthine, and the scarlet and the true purple. And the lot of the true purple and the scarlet fell unto Mary, and she took them and went unto her house.

And at that season Zacharias became dumb, and Samuel was in his stead until the time when Zacharias spake again. But Mary took the scarlet and began to spin it. XI 1 And she took the pitcher and went forth to fill it with water: and lo a voice saying: Hail, thou that art highly favoured; the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

And she looked about her upon the right hand and upon the left, to see whence this voice should be: and being filled with trembling she went to her house and set down the pitcher, and took the purple and sat down upon her seat and drew out the thread.

2 And behold an angel of the Lord stood before her saying: Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found grace before the Lord of all things, and thou shalt conceive of his word. And she, when she heard it, questioned in herself, saying: Shall I verily conceive of the living God, and bring forth after the manner of all women? And the angel of the Lord said: Not so, Mary, for a power of the Lord shall overshadow thee: wherefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of the Highest. And thou shalt call his name Jesus: for he shall save his people from their sins. And Mary said: Behold the handmaid of the Lord is before him: be it unto me according to thy word. XII 1 And she made the purple and the scarlet and brought them unto the priest. And the priest blessed her and said: Mary, the Lord God hath magnified thy name, and thou shalt be blessed among all generations of the earth.

2 And Mary rejoiced and went away unto Elizabeth her kinswoman: and she knocked at the door. And Elizabeth when she heard it cast down the scarlet and ran to the door and opened it, and when she saw Mary she blessed her and said: Whence is this to me that the mother of my Lord should come unto me? for behold that which is in me leaped and blessed thee. And Mary forgot the mysteries which Gabriel the archangel had told her, and she looked up unto the heaven and said: Who am I, Lord, that all the generations of the earth do bless me?

3 And she abode three months with Elizabeth, and day by day her womb grew: and Mary was afraid and departed unto her house and hid herself from the children of Israel. Now she was sixteen years old when these mysteries came to pass. XIII 1 Now it was the sixth month with her, and behold Joseph came from his building, and he entered into his house and found her great with child. And he smote his face, and cast himself down upon the ground on sackcloth and wept bitterly, saying: With what countenance shall I look unto the Lord my God? and what prayer shall I make concerning this maiden? for I received her out of the temple of the Lord my God a virgin, and have not kept her safe. Who is he that hath ensnared me? Who hath done this evil in mine house and hath defiled the virgin? Is not the story of Adam repeated in me? for as at the hour of his giving thanks the serpent came and found Eve alone and deceived her, so hath it befallen me also.

2 And Joseph arose from off the sackcloth and called Mary and said unto her O thou that wast cared for by God, why hast thou done this? thou hast forgotten the Lord thy God. Why hast thou humbled thy soul, thou that wast nourished up in the Holy of Holies and didst receive food at the hand of an angel?

3 But she wept bitterly, saying: I am pure and I know not a man. And Joseph said unto her: Whence then is that which is in thy womb? and she said: As the Lord my God liveth, I know not whence it is come unto me. XIV I And Joseph was sore afraid and ceased from speaking unto her (or left her alone), and pondered what he should do with her. And Joseph said: If I hide her sin, I shall be found fighting against the law of the Lord: and if I manifest her unto the children of Israel, I fear lest that which is in her be the seed of an angel, and I shall be found delivering up innocent blood to the judgement of death. What then shall I do? I will let her go from me privily. And the night came upon him.

2 And behold an angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying: Fear not this child, for that which is in her is of the Holy Ghost, and she shall bear a son and thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins. And Joseph arose from sleep and glorified the God of Israel which had shown this favour unto her: and he watched over her. XV I Now Annas the scribe came unto him and said to him: Wherefore didst thou not appear in our assembly? and Joseph said unto him: I was weary with the journey, and I rested the first day. And Annas turned him about and saw Mary great with child.

2 And he went hastily to the priest and said unto him: Joseph, to whom thou bearest witness [that he is righteous] hath sinned grievously. And the priest said: Wherein? And he said: The virgin whom he received out of the temple of the Lord, he hath defiled her, and married her by stealth (lit. stolen her marriage), and hath not declared it to the children of Israel. And the priest answered and said: Hath Joseph done this? And Annas the scribe said: Send officers, and thou shalt find the virgin great with child. And the officers went and found as he had said, and they brought her together with Joseph unto the place of judgement.

3 And the priest said: Mary, wherefore hast thou done this, and wherefore hast thou humbled thy soul and forgotten the Lord thy God, thou that wast nurtured in the Holy of Holies and didst receive food at the hand of an angel and didst hear the hymns and didst dance before the Lord, wherefore hast thou done this?

But she wept bitterly, saying: As the Lord my God liveth I am pure before him and I know not a man.

4 And the priest said unto Joseph: Wherefore hast thou done this? And Joseph said: As the Lord my God liveth I am pure as concerning her. And the priest said: Bear no false witness but speak the truth: thou hast married her by stealth and hast not declared it unto the children of Israel, and hast not bowed thine head under the mighty hand that thy seed should be blessed. And Joseph held his peace. XVI I And the priest said: Restore the virgin whom thou didst receive out of the temple of the Lord. And Joseph was full of weeping. And the priest said: I will give you to drink of the water of the conviction of the Lord, and it will make manifest your sins before your eyes.

2 And the priest took thereof and made Joseph drink and sent him into the hill-country. And he returned whole. He made Mary also drink and sent her into the hill-country. And she returned whole. And all the people marvelled, because sin appeared not in them.

3 And the priest said: If the Lord God hath not made your sin manifest, neither do I condemn you. And he let them go. And Joseph took Mary and departed unto his house rejoicing, and glorifying the God of Israel. XVII I Now there went out a decree from Augustus the king that all that were in Bethlehem of Judaea should be recorded. And Joseph said: I will record my sons: but this child, what shall I do with her? how shall I record her? as my wife? nay, I am ashamed. Or as my daughter? but all the children of Israel know that she is not my daughter. This day of the Lord shall do as the Lord willeth.

2 And he saddled the she-ass, and set her upon it, and his son led it and Joseph followed after. And they drew near (unto Bethlehem) within three miles: and Joseph turned himself about and saw her of a sad countenance and said within himself: Peradventure that which is within her paineth her. And again Joseph turned himself about and saw her laughing, and said unto her: Mary, what aileth thee that I see thy face at one time laughing and at another time sad? And Mary said unto Joseph: It is because I behold two peoples with mine eyes, the one weeping and lamenting and the other rejoicing and exulting.

3 And they came to the midst of the way, and Mary said unto him: Take me down from the ass, for that which is within me presseth me, to come forth. And he took her down from the ass and said unto her: Whither shall I take thee to hide thy shame? for the place is desert. XVIII I And he found a cave there and brought her into it, and set his sons by her: and he went forth and sought for a midwife of the Hebrews in the country of Bethlehem.

2 Now I Joseph was walking, and I walked not. And I looked up to the air and saw the air in amazement. And I looked up unto the pole of the heaven and saw it standing still, and the fowls of the heaven without motion. And I looked upon the earth and saw a dish set, and workmen lying by it, and their hands were in the dish: and they that were chewing chewed not, and they that were lifting the food lifted it not, and they that put it to their mouth put it not thereto, but the faces of all of them were looking upward. And behold there were sheep being driven, and they went not forward but stood still; and the shepherd lifted his hand to smite them with his staff, and his hand remained up. And I looked upon the stream of the river and saw the mouths of the kids upon the water and they drank not. And of a sudden all things moved onward in their course. XIX I And behold a woman coming down from the hillcountry, and she said to me: Man, whither goest thou? And I said: I seek a midwife of the Hebrews. And she answered and said unto me: Art thou of Israel? And I said unto her: Yea. And she said: And who is she that bringeth forth in the cave? And I said: She that is betrothed unto me. And she said to me: Is she not thy wife? And I said to her: It is Mary that was nurtured up in the temple of the Lord: and I received her to wife by lot: and she is not my wife, but she hath conception by the Holy Ghost. And the midwife said unto him: Is this the truth? And Joseph said unto her: Come hither and see. And the midwife went with him.

2 And they stood in the place of the cave: and behold a bright cloud overshadowing the cave. And the midwife said: My soul is magnified this day, because mine eyes have seen marvellous things: for salvation is born unto Israel. And immediately the cloud withdrew itself out of the cave, and a great light appeared in the cave so that our eyes could not endure it. And by little and little that light withdrew itself until the young child appeared: and it went and took the breast of its mother Mary. And the midwife cried aloud and said: Great unto me to-day is this day, in that I have seen this new sight.

3 And the midwife went forth of the cave and Salome met her. And she said to her: Salome, Salome, a new sight have I to tell thee. A virgin hath brought forth, which her nature alloweth not. And Salome said: As the Lord my God liveth, if I make not trial and prove her nature I will not believe that a virgin hath brought forth. XX 1 And the midwife went in and said unto Mary: Order thyself, for there is no small contention arisen concerning thee. And Salome made trial and cried out and said: Woe unto mine iniquity and mine unbelief, because I have tempted the living God, and lo, my hand falleth away from me in fire. And she bowed her knees unto the Lord, saying: O God of my fathers, remember that I am the seed of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob: make me not a public example unto the children of Israel, but restore me unto the poor, for thou knowest, Lord, that in thy name did I perform my cures, and did receive my hire of thee.

3 And lo, an angel of the Lord appeared, saying unto her: Salome, Salome, the Lord hath hearkened to thee: bring thine hand near unto the young child and take him up, and there shall be unto thee salvation and joy.

4 And Salome came near and took him up, saying: I will do him worship, for a great king is born unto Israel. And behold immediately Salome was healed: and she went forth of the cave justified. And lo, a

voice saying: Salome, Salome, tell none of the marvels which thou hast seen, until the child enter into Jerusalem. XXI 1 And behold, Joseph made him ready to go forth into Judaea. And there came a great tumult in Bethlehem of Judaea; for there came wise men, saying: Where is he that is born king of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east and arc come to worship him.

2 And when Herod heard it he was troubled and sent officers unto the wise men. And he sent for the high priests and examined them, saying: How is it written concerning the Christ, where he is born? They say unto him: In Bethlehem of Judaea: for so it is written. And he let them go. And he examined the wise men, saying unto them: What sign saw ye concerning the king that is born? And the wise men said: We saw a very great star shining among those stars and dimming them so that the stars appeared not: and thereby knew we that a king was born unto Israel, and we came to worship him. And Herod said: Go and seek for him, and if ye find him, tell me, that I also may come and worship him.

3 And the wise men went forth. And lo, the star which they saw in the east went before them until they entered into the cave: and it stood over the head of the cave. And the wise men saw the young child with Mary, his mother: and they brought out of their scrip gifts, gold-and frankincense and myrrh.

4 And being warned by the angel that they should not enter into Judaea, they went into their own country by another way. XXII 1 But when Herod perceived that he was mocked by the wise men, he was wroth, and sent murderers, saying unto them: Slay the children from two years old and under.

2 And when Mary heard that the children were being slain, she was afraid, and took the young child and wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid him in an ox-manger.

3 But Elizabeth when she heard that they sought for John, took him and went up into the hill-country and looked about her where she should hide him: and there was no hiding-place. And Elizabeth groaned and said with a loud voice: O mountain of God, receive thou a mother with a child. For Elizabeth was not able to go up. And immediately the mountain clave asunder and took her in. And there was a light shining alway for them: for an angel of the Lord was with them, keeping watch over them. XXIII 1 Now Herod sought for John, and sent officers to Zacharias, saying: Where hast thou hidden thy son? And he answered and said unto them: I am a minister of God and attend continually upon the temple of the Lord: I know not where my son is.

2 And the officers departed and told Herod all these things. And Herod was wroth and said: His son is to be king over Israel. And he sent unto him again, saying: Say the truth: where is thy son? for thou knowest that thy blood is under my hand. And the officers departed and told him all these things.

3 And Zacharias said: I am a martyr of God if thou sheddest my blood: for my spirit the Lord shah receive, because thou sheddest innocent blood in the fore-court of the temple of the Lord. And about the dawning of the day Zacharias was slain. And the children of Israel knew not that he was slain. XXIV 1 But the priests entered in at the hour of the salutation, and the blessing of Zacharias met them not according to the manner. And the priests stood waiting for Zacharias, to salute him with the prayer, and to glorify the Most High.

2 But as he delayed to come, they were all afraid: and one of them took courage and entered in: and he saw beside the altar congealed blood: and a voice saying: Zacharias hath been slain, and his blood shall not be wiped out until his avenger come. And when he heard that word he was afraid, and went forth and told the priests.

3 And they took courage and went in and saw that which was done: and the panels of the temple did wail: and they rent their clothes from the top to the bottom. And his body they found not, but his blood they found turned into stone. And they feared, and went forth and told all the people that Zacharias was slain. And all tile tribes of the people heard it, and they mourned for him and lamented him three days and three nights. And after the three days the priests took counsel whom they should set in his stead: and the lot came up upon Symeon. Now he it was which was warned by the Holy Ghost that he should

not see death until he should see the Christ in the flesh. XXV 1 Now I, James, which wrote this history in Jerusalem, when there arose a tumult when Herod died, withdrew myself into the wilderness until the tumult ceased in Jerusalem. Glorifying the Lord God which gave me the gift, and the wisdom to write this history.

2 And grace shall be with those that fear our Lord Jesus Christ: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

WITH AGE, WISDOM?

by Fr. John-Mark

When Fr Gregory sets me a subject to speak on, he usually adds an exclamation mark. For today's subject, very significantly, he added instead a question mark. The title he chose is "With age, wisdom?"

The short answer of the O. Church is that wisdom does not necessarily come with age: rather it comes through the cultivation and application of the contents of the Gospel book. This is twice displayed during the Liturgy with the solemn reminder to the congregation that herein lies wisdom and that it is necessary to stand upright and pay attention to its reading and its contents.

The longer answer is much more complicated simply because there are two different forms of wisdom, God's and man's. In the Bible, just as the original psalms are ascribed to King David, so human wisdom stems from his son, Solomon, with a whole raft of titles in the OT which are generally called "Wisdom Literature". This ranges from practical helps to virtuous living -- education, choice of friends -- which are often classed as "sanctified common sense" -- to the belief of the true Jew for whom wisdom meant a right attitude to God. Very often we are told that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." (Prov. 9.10). Ecclesiasticus begins: "All wisdom comes from the Lord" (1.1)

The other side of the coin, God's wisdom is, however, shown in Creation and the Providence which guides nation and individuals (Wis. 10 -19). This is more than just a mere quality, and, as the writings of the bible develop, increasingly, wisdom becomes a person. In the Book of Wisdom, we find this:-- "Does not wisdom call, does not understanding raise her voice. . . . To you, O men I call, and my cry is to the sons of men" (Prov.8v.1-14; see also Wis.7.22). The Incarnation of OBL Jesus Christ enabled St John in his Gospel, to see what he called the Word, the Logos, as the personification of wisdom and in this he was followed by other NT writers. It is interesting in passing to note that the Jewish rabbis had already come to personify the "Word of the Lord" with the Torah (the Law) and so absorb into the meaning of "Word" what their own religious tradition said about the Word and the Wisdom of God. Perhaps the ultimate personification of wisdom was in the dedication of the finest Church of Christendom, St Sophia, or Holy Wisdom, at Constantinople in the year 537.

Where St John had led in his prologue to the fourth Gospel, other NT writers soon followed. Generally, they saw wisdom as being incarnate in Christ whom St Paul designates as "the wisdom of God" (ICor 1.24) and in whom, he also says, "all treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden" (Col.2.3).

Side by side with this tradition there grows in the NT, another which connects wisdom with the Holy Spirit, and eventually the Church, with the help of the Greek fathers, decided that wisdom is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In his first letter to the Corinthians, St Paul says "God has revealed to us through the spirit (. . .) and we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom, but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit (ICor2.6-15).

If you think St Paul is out of this world over his view of wisdom, perhaps it is time to mention that in the NT, there is another view which could be dubbed more down to earth.

St James' epistle has been called "The NT Wisdom Literature" and is often seen as a sermon rather than a letter, but it is addressed to Christians who were suffering persecution and economic disadvantage. It is interesting in that the writer blends together ideas taken both from Jewish Wisdom Literature, and Jesus' own teaching.

"Who is wise and understanding among you?", St James asks, and he goes on to explain that there are two types of wisdom, God's and man's. The latter, the earthly type of wisdom, approached life from an humanistic point of view and ignores the Creator. This results, St James says, in bitter envy, strife, confusion and every evil work. He goes on to maintain that human wisdom comes from the lower nature, and sometimes from the Devil himself. Now we are living in what is supposed to be the most enlightened period of history, dominated as it is by human so-called wisdom with a baby aborted every five minutes; marriages quickly falling apart; increasing crime statistics; the poor countries of the world heavily in debt to the rich ones – all glaring examples of envy, selfishness and the lack of God's wisdom.

By contrast, divine wisdom has some important characteristics which are set out:--

" But the wisdom which is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy"(3.17).

It is interesting that St James puts "pure" first. It is evidently not unknown in modern psychiatric practice for patients to be advised to have sex with people other than their spouse. Such advice is obviously wrong because it is impure. Heavenly wisdom is based first on purity. Then it is based on being peaceable. Some have the right answers but the wrong attitude. A Christian in whom God's wisdom flows will have a serenity which marks them out as being "in" this world but not "of" it. God's wisdom, in other words, replaces the harshness of our basic human nature with qualities which make the faithful approachable, warm, understanding and kind. So St James.

All these writers, both OT and NT, have one idea in common: that "wisdom" is God's gift to men. Put the other way round they are saying:- "no connection with God, no real wisdom" By contrast we now live in a secular age where little thought is ever given to God. These end times were clearly foretold by the Prophet Amos:- "The days are coming" says the Lord God "when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water but, of hearing the Word of the Lord"(8.11). Those days have surely come. This means for us, that if we are to seek wisdom, we must ask God for this all-important gift and see to it that we ask, believing that we shall receive what God knows is good and right for us to have. The fear of the Lord is still the beginning of wisdom.

O Lord Jesus, the Power and the Wisdom of God, open our souls, and come and abide in them. To thee be glory and praise for ever. Amen.

Fr. Dn. John-Mark

The Hospitality of God

by Fr. Gregory

Any society that finds it expedient to control the helpless on the back of misinformation and not uncommon miscarriages of justice has got to cause genuine concern to all freedom loving and justice minded citizens. The tabloid newspapers in this country have largely decided that: "Foreigners ... we don't want them." They then dress this racism up in such words as "swamped" and "bogus."

It's useful to check some of these negative ideas against the facts. This extract from the OXFAM website (to which all the links are directed on new pages) helps to put the record straight.

Asylum seekers in the UK: Myths and facts

This section aims to explore some of the misconceptions surrounding asylum issues in the UK and look at how they have come about. It also outlines the work of the UK Poverty Programme in challenging these.

F	<u>Background: A deteriorating level of debate</u>
R	<u>Why should Oxfam speak out?</u>
O	
M	<u>Myth 1: "Britain takes more than its fair share of refugees"</u>
	<u>Myth 2: "Refugees should be deported back to where they came from"</u>
T	<u>Myth 3: "Asylum seekers receive massive state handouts"</u>
H	<u>Myth 4: "Asylum seekers are taking our housing and 'swamping' our public services"</u>
E	<u>Myth 5: "Only a handful of asylum seekers are genuine, the rest are 'bogus' or 'cheats'"</u>
	<u>Myth 6: Refugees come to the UK to abuse its generous benefits system because they know it is a 'soft touch'</u>
O	
X	<u>Myth 7: "Asylum seekers choose to use smugglers and traffickers to enter the country illegally"</u>
F	<u>Myth 8: "Asylum seekers should be locked up"</u>
A	<u>Myth 9: "Letting asylum seekers in means letting terrorists in"</u>
M	<u>Myth 10: "Nearly all asylum seekers are troublemaking young men"</u>
	<u>Myth 11: "The 1951 Refugee Convention is out of date"</u>
W	
E	<u>A quick glossary</u>
B	<u>What you can do</u>
S	<u>Other sources of information</u>
I	
T	<u>OXFAM WEB SITE</u>
E	

Few if any of these facts will find much circulation beyond the reach of the more liberally inclined news media ... and these do not print for mass sales in Middle England where most of these myths are circulated, reinforced and propagated.

Sir Winston Churchill said that all that is necessary for evil to flourish is for good people to do nothing. Perhaps it is now time for a different image of asylum seekers to be placed before the British people ... in better agreement with the facts.

The churches also need to contribute to this change of vision. We have so many resources at our disposal to do this. The difference for us is that these insights are mandated by God himself. They are not for debate. They are commands. Here they are ...

Biblical texts that might inform Britain's policy on asylum seekers and refugees

quote:

Numbers 15.15,16 The community is to have the same rules for you and for the alien living among you; this is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come. You and the alien shall be the same before the LORD: The same laws and regulations will apply both to you and to the alien living among you.

quote:

Deuteronomy 10.18-19 For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt

quote:

Deuteronomy 24.19-21 Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this. When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. Leave it for the alien, the fatherless and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again. Leave what remains for the alien, the fatherless and the widow.

quote:

Deuteronomy 27.19 Cursed is the man who withholds justice from the alien, the fatherless or the widow.

quote:

Isaiah 56.6,7 And foreigners who bind themselves to the LORD to serve him, to love the name of the LORD, and to worship him, all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant- these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations.

quote:

Matthew 28.18-19 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations

quote:

Galatians 3.28: There is no Jew nor Greek; there is no bondman nor freeman; there is no male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus

quote:

Colossians 3.11 Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

quote:

Revelation 5.9-10 And they sang a new song: [/\qb]You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.

quote:

Revelation 7.9-17 After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice:

'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'

All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying:

'Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!

Then one of the elders asked me, 'These in white robes--who are they, and where did they come from?'

I answered, 'Sir, you know.'

And he said, 'These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

In Conclusion

Let all Christian people mobilise on behalf of the weak and oppressed. By this we will be judged by God ... to seek mercy and justice; to care for widows and orphans. I will leave you with an account of the life of [St. Lawrence, Deacon and Martyr of the Church of Rome](#) in 258 AD, who, memorably, speaking of the poor said:- ""Behold the treasures of the Church."