



The St. Nicholas Navigator

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Pastoral Epistle: The Holy Spirit and Love for Enemies

The Church is a mother who loves us, and tenderly cares for us. However, like all good mothers, She can be demanding when it comes to what is best for us. In particular, there is one area in which the Church is uncompromising: in her demand that we walk in love.

This is not a harsh demand. It is, in fact, the most wonderful demand that can be. It is the fulfillment of the purpose of our life: to love God will all our being, and to love our neighbor as ourself. By calling it a “demand” we do not mean that we are coerced — that it takes place against our will. No, our Mother calls us to choose freely to love. This is the whole point.

But when we act against love — when we choose self-love over love for God and love for our brothers and sisters — our Mother is stern with us. For then we are choosing against our own good, and failing to be our true selves. We live in a world that has not only forgotten love; it has never known genuine love. The world has not known love because it has not known God, as it says in 1 John 3:1. So it should

not be the least bit surprising to us that fires of hatred burn all around us.

Christians are the ones who must show the world the love of God. Christians — we, the children of the Church — are to be the light of the world, and the salt of the earth: that which opens up the eyes of those around us and preserves the beauty of life. To put it another way, Christians are meant to show the world

what love is. No one else will do it. In us, the world should come face to face with the genuine love of Christ. The Lord says, “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35) The world is desperately in need of this witness, and it is for us to give it.

If this seems impossible, it is because we are used to relying on ourselves. Nothing is

impossible for the Holy Spirit. We must not rely on ourselves. We must learn to rely on the Holy Spirit. If we cannot show the world genuine, divine love, then we are like salt that has lost its quality, and is therefore “good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.” (Matt. 5:13) These are the Lord’s utterly convicting words.



But let it never be so. St. Euthymios the Great says, "As salt is to bread, so is love to the other virtues." So let us cling to the love of Christ, that we might have salt in the bread of our lives, and be salt for those around us. For this to be possible, first we must know absolutely that we are loved by Christ. And we must choose to abandon all else as less dear to us than the love of Christ. Listen to these life-giving words of St. Silouan the Athonite, concerning the love of God (if you are reading this at home I encourage you to read these words aloud):

"The Lord loves us more dearly than we can love ourselves; but the soul in her distress supposes that the Lord has forgotten her, even has no wish to look upon her, and she suffers and pines. But it is not so, brethren. The Lord loves us without end, and gives us the grace of the Holy Spirit, and comforts us. It is not the Lord's desire that the soul should be despondent and in doubt concerning her salvation. Believe, and be sure that we continue in suffering only until we have humbled ourselves; but so soon as we humble ourselves there is an end to affliction, for the Divine Spirit discloses to the soul, because of her humility, that she is saved. Great glory be to the Lord that He loveth us so dearly, and this love is made known in the Holy Spirit!"

What words of comfort and consolation! What a God we have! What perfect love He has for us!

But for us to abide in such love, we must humble ourselves. If we do truly humble ourselves, and truly receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, and maintain that gift, do you know what happens in us? We are filled with God's love to such an extent that we can actually love our enemies — "not in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth." (1 John 3:18)

We talk about loving enemies as Christians. We know we are commanded to do so in the Gospel. We may try to do so. But to really do so is only possible with the grace of the Holy Spirit. St. Silouan, again, says not only can the Holy Spirit make this possible, but if we really

have the Holy Spirit abiding in us, we definitely will love our enemies. And if we refuse to love our enemies, we lose the Holy Spirit. The two things go together. Listen to how St. Silouan describes this:

"He who will not love his enemies cannot come to know the Lord and the sweetness of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit teaches us to love our enemies, so that the soul pities them as if they were her own children. There are people who desire the destruction, the torment in hell-fire of their enemies, or the enemies of the Church. They think like this because they have not learnt divine love from the Holy Spirit, for he who has learned the love of God will shed tears for the whole world."



It is to such love that our Father is calling us as His beloved children. It is to such love that our Mother, the Church, calls us when she tells us to reconcile ourselves with everyone, and then, "With the fear of God and faith and love" to draw near. Are we shedding tears for the whole world? If not, then we have not "learned the love of God" from the Holy Spirit. We are not behaving as children of our heavenly Father. If we have not learned such love, let us consider all other goals as secondary, and let us beg the Lord to give us the Holy Spirit, Who will bring the fire that burns away all egotism, all selfishness, all arrogance and pride, and who lights a flame within us more powerful than the flames of animosity in the world around us. This

fire will warm our hearts with love, teach us to weep for the world, give salt to our souls, and give light to those around us — the light of Him who said, “I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

With love in Christ,
Fr. Daniel

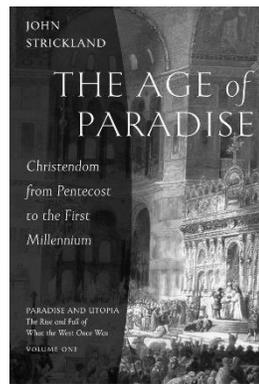
Book Review: *The Age of Paradise: Christendom from Pentecost to the First Millennium*

By Peter Filipek

Father John Strickland has written the first of a four-volume series on the history of Christendom and its influence upon the West. Rather than writing a standard history book on the history of the church, Fr. Strickland builds his book around the idea of Christianity as a subculture. Taking this idea of subculture, Fr. Strickland begins with four sources that can be traced back to the Evangelist Luke and the Book of Acts: doctrinal integrity, divine participation, spiritual transformation, and heavenly eminence. These four concepts are interwoven throughout the story of the first millennia of Christendom.

The book itself will appeal to a large number of readers. If the idea of a thousand-year time span seems overwhelming, the book, at less than 300 pages, moves quickly and does not bog the reader down in names and dates. For history fans, the book offers a sound overview of the first millennium for those well versed in the subject, as well as a great introduction to those less familiar with that time period.

Although the first volume, as illustrated in the title, deals with what some might see as the



halcyon days of Christianity, or at the very least a continual forward progression, albeit not without many struggles. The remaining volumes will tell a different story: beginning with the split between the East and West and ending in our current state, not necessarily worshiping secretly in catacombs, but in seeing ourselves not so much as a subculture, but as a counterculture. I am looking forward to the next volumes, as I think they represent an immensely important and time-appropriate subject matter.

This Uncertain Life

By Shamassy Monica Olsen

Nine years ago when I was pregnant with John, I was a high school teacher, a broken-hearted high school teacher. I had given so much time and love to my classes and theatre productions and debate team that I was missing the lives of my other two children. Each day (and many weekends) I gave the first of my energy, attention, and brain power to my students, and then after pouring everything out for eight or nine hours, I would come home and start the evening routine. Instead of snuggling on a couch sharing a good book, I had to fight the fifth grader through 2 hours of homework. Dinner. Baths. Bedtime. Then it was time to grade papers and get ready for the next day of school. I wanted to give more to my own children, and I begged God to give my husband a job that could support our family, so that I could stay home when the baby arrived.

Interview after interview, we lived in uncertainty, not knowing if I would be teaching or not the next year. God in his infinite knowledge and love allowed me to keep teaching, finding strength in the Cross that year. The lyrics of Gigi Shadid’s song would play through my head as I walked down the halls of Ruston High School: “The cross is a weapon of peace.” That year I

learned that it was possible to find peace in dying to one's own desires.

When John was one year old and started drinking dairy milk, he was attacked by a terrible reaction, a reaction so bad that everything we tried to give him for the next week became a new allergen. He could no longer eat cheerios, cheese, yogurt, graham crackers or any kind of plant-based milk at all. Imagine feeding a toddler without wheat or dairy! Grocery store lists changed, menus changed, old recipes were forgotten. As we poured his lemon-lime Gatorade over his rice Chex and gave him his fourth banana for the day, we wondered if he would ever grow out of such a restrictive diet. God gave us the strength to adapt and four years later, John grew out of his allergies.

Right about that time, Dn. Nicholas' company lost the grant that funded his position. We were stuck living in Detroit, an expensive city. Month after month I sat at the dining table and signed our rent check to mail the landlord, knowing that each time was moving us closer to emptying our savings account. We had no idea if a position would open up in Michigan or if we would move back to Louisiana.

When we did move back to Louisiana, we lived with my parents while Dn. Nicholas started a job search. For months, we waited. I threw myself on the bamboo floor of the guest bedroom and cried and begged God to help us. Every time I went to confession, it included, "I don't trust God to take care of us!"

Fr. Daniel suggested that God had something for me to learn during this time and it would be better to seek what that was instead of letting the opportunity pass me by. Because of my year of finding peace through the cross after John was born, I knew that something beautiful could be waiting under the darkness. I tried to seek it. Sometimes I sat on the deck with the light breeze in my face and thanked God for so much beauty, but often I felt numb inside. The worst part was living in the unknown, with no clue what was going to happen.

During each of these times, I would complain to my priest, "I hate not knowing what the future holds!"

Three different priests in three different states all told me the same thing: "No one knows what tomorrow will hold. Most of the time we think we do, but we are deluded."

For me, experiencing the Covid-19 pandemic play out was like watching a gigantic metaphor for the hidden parts of life, the parts that exist under the surface that we don't realize are there, the unknown parts.



When things are going smoothly, it is incredibly easy to slip into forgetting that this *unknownness* is a part of everyday earthly existence.

Quarantine shook me out of my stupor. No more did I know what tomorrow would hold.

One morning this past Spring, all the teachers and students and parents thought school would be open the next week. By that afternoon, we learned that schools were shut down, with no clue when they might open again. One week, we assumed that when we made a shopping list, all of those items would be at the store. Then, for the next six weeks in a row, empty shelves mocked us. Families had made plans for attending graduations, helping grandpa through "non-essential" hip surgery, and going on vacation. Many of those plans were canceled indefinitely.

One night during the shelter-at-home order, I realized that I had developed a strange habit. Each night I opened the weather app on my phone to see what tomorrow might hold. Ostensibly, I was looking to see what time in the morning the temps would rise above 70, so that I could take a walk before then. That might not seem strange. However, the truth is that each night I obsessively clicked on the weather app hoping for *some glimpse of what tomorrow might hold*. Not just weather, but life...anything. Of course I wouldn't find it in the weather – I often didn't even find accurate weather forecasts on that app - but the slight hope in my chest as I clicked on my screen revealed that I was not merely seeking the weather.

It is one thing to say “Lord willing” before stating a plan, but it is another all-together to really feel the reality of having no idea when a thing might happen or if it will ever happen.

The Covid-19 pandemic pulled the veneer off the false security of earthly existence. We were left, at least for a little while, with the reality that this earthly life is not secure. It will not take care of us. It does not have everything we need. It is, as this prayer in the canon to St. Paraskevi describes it, “degrading corruptibility and instability of this fleeting life.”

This fleeting life is degrading, yet we entrust our happiness to it. It is corrupting, but even so we put our hope in it. It is fleeting, but we treat it like it is permanent, like it is all that matters, really matters. In the canon, after the description of a fleeting and degrading and corrupting life, what is the prayer? The request is, “*enable us to disdain* the degrading corruptibility and instability of this fleeting life.”

I pray that prayer often, yet I do not disdain the things in this life. Instead, I try to use them to make me happy, fulfilled, secure. The problem with this is not merely that they will fail, though they will. The bigger problem is that in saying yes to one thing, I say no to another. In saying yes to the earthly, corrupting, unstable, fleeting things, I say no to God. Putting the effort put into seeking those earthly things is time and attention taken away from the only Source of true joy, fulfillment, and security. If a spouse gives special time and attention to another other than one's True Love, then that spouse is failing

to LOVE. When I give my time and attention to anything but God, seek anything else to satisfy me, I am failing to love Him.

Covid-19 - thank God! - has reminded me that the earthly things are unstable: they can't be trusted, they can't solve all the problems, they can't give me what I need, they can't even come up with a cohesive story about what is happening or how I should respond. I need this reminder.

Several years ago, when we were living jobless in the unknown, a miracle-working icon traveled through

Shreveport. One of the priests traveling with the icon was sitting in the sanctuary near me as I cried and cried, sniffing into Kleenex. Slowing to a mere silent trickle, the tears seeped down my cheek until the pain was jump-started with a fresh thought. That thought gave power once again to the full sobs.

Not merely crying because we were jobless, I was despairing because I was losing the light in my mind. As my trust in God left, so did my mental stability. My mind had always been my one strong thing and now I could no longer count on controlling it. I wept for all my



hopelessness. After a while the traveling priest, Fr. Benedict from Houston, asked me if I minded if he shared a story with me.

He pulled out his cell phone, opened the photos, and showed me an icon that was mostly dark black except for the top right corner, which was starting to become visible. Fr. Benedict explained that the icon had been recently discovered, hidden away in the dark, and nobody had known who the image portrayed. Experts had been consulted but were unable to figure out the mystery. The local priest set up the icon in the sanctuary and prayed and censed it for many months. Eventually, the darkness began to fade and one corner miraculously began to clear, a little at a time. They discovered that it was an icon of the Theotokos, and even still to that day it was gradually lightening. With a small shrug of his shoulders and a gentle smile, Fr. Benedict put his phone away, "I'm not sure why I even told you that story, but it's time for me to pack up and get back on the road."

The darkness would not last forever. Little by little over the next couple of days, the numbness and pain started to lift as I realized that the Theotokos had given me hope. Lost hope had been the worst of those dim days - not knowing if the darkness in my mind would ever end.

Fr. Daniel had told me that such times would not last forever and that I needed to use the opportunity to learn the thing God had for me to learn in it.

I feel like I should be asking God now to help me do the same thing.



On the Furnace of Conversion

By St. Sophrony of Essex

"When someone who is not Orthodox comes to the Orthodox Church he must go through a furnace of repentance, of change and regeneration of his entire way of thinking and living. This will take a long time. In order for someone's positive attitude towards Orthodoxy to become an experience of his heart, he must lead a life of asceticism and crucifixion for many years under the guidance of an experienced spiritual father. Otherwise the 'old self' will remain, with the result that unbelief and the inclination to go back to the old way of life will often occur."

On Overcoming Thoughts and Making Peace

By Elder Thaddeus (from *Our Thoughts Determine Our Lives*)

"What torments us most are our thoughts. Thoughts make us do all kinds of things, then we lose our peace and are tormented by our conscience. These pangs of conscience are nothing but the judgment of God within us. And so, we must make peace with our Heavenly Father and turn to Him from our heart, asking Him to forgive us and give us of His Grace and His Divine strength in order that we may always remain in peace and joy, like the angels and the saints. Amen.

"You must strive to have peace in your homes. Peace starts with each one of us. When we have peace in us, we spread it around to others. You can see for yourself that there are very few humble and meek souls on the earth -- but also that they are truly blessed."

June Birthdays

- 2 Alexander Galloway
- 3 Amelie Baker
- 6 Cristina Krudryavtseva, Lyubov Olenina, Elliot Meeker
- 7 Tylar Meeker
- 8 Irina Ballard
- 12 Molly Gouletas Free
- 18 Fr. Daniel Bethancourt
- 21 Erika Hand
- 22 Caitlyn Busada
- 29 Dorothy Gouletas

June Name Days & Memorials

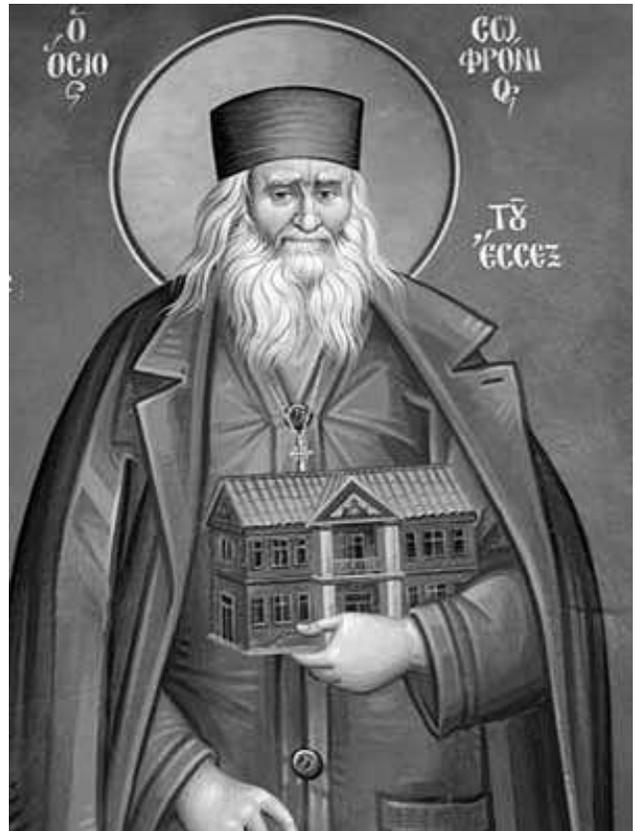
- 1 Justin Wise
- 10 Olivia Floyd, Olivia Bradfield
- 11 Nathaniel McCoy
- 19 Olsens (*anniversary*)
- 20 Beaux Kallistos Busada
- 27 Joanna Bethancourt
- 29 Gouletas (*anniversary*), Peter Bethancourt, Peter Filipek, Peter Katsufrakis, Paul Hand, John (Paul) Crichton
- 30 Venedict O. (*memorial*)

July Birthdays

- 1 Fransuaza Denison
- 5 Maximus Olsen
- 14 Joanna Bethancourt
- 18 Jonathan Davi
- 20 Maria Frank
- 27 Kristen Edmiston, Abby Stewart
- 29 Philip LaHaye
- 31 Barry Busada, Kael Floyd

July Name Days

- 2 John Olsen, Carter (John) Jones
- 5 Katie Jones
- 8 Bethancourts (*anniversary*)
- 13 Gabriel Floyd
- 14 Bruce & Denise Busada (*anniversary*)
- 18 Elizabeth Olsen
- 20 Elias Filipek, Ilias Bourdaras, Halim Aboufaycal
- 22 Fran Presley, Annaliese Floyd (Mary Magdalene)
- 24 Cristina Krudryavtseva
- 25 Anna Bloss, Eddie (Anna) Marsh, Anna Stewart, Nicole (Anna) Baker, Sharla (Anna) Shoemsmith



St. Sophrony of Essex



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