

THE BURNING BUSH



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SUNDAY OF ALL SAINTS

Fr. John Konkle

Every human that has ever lived, or will ever live, from the time of Adam and Eve until the time of the return of our Lord, has only one calling. It is very simple. There is only one thing that God asks of us. To be holy. The Church sets before us all the saints, known and unknown, on the Sunday after the great Feast of Pentecost, the Descent of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes to make us holy. The word 'saint' means 'holy one'.

St. Peter instructs us in this way: "As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written: 'Be holy for I am holy' (1Pt 1;15-16; cf. 2 Cor 7:1; 1 Thes 4:7; Heb 12:14). St. Peter is referring us back to Leviticus when God told His people Israel: "For I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy" (Lev 11:44). Our Lord expresses a similar expectation to be like our heavenly Father: "Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mt 5:48). "Be merciful as your Father in heaven is merciful" (Lk 6:36). We are called to live a divine life, the life of our Father. That is our calling. It is very simple.

When I say that we are called to be holy, I do *not* mean that we are to *make ourselves* holy. It is easy for us to fall into the trap of getting things exactly backwards: that we need to become holy so that we will be acceptable to God *and only then* He will come be with us, live in us. This attitude, however passive it is, creates a burden too heavy to bear. We are not able to make ourselves worthy of God's healing presence. And if we try, we are likely to suffer from feelings of guilt and discouragement, even despondency, in our spiritual life that gradually infect our entire being.

God's approach is exactly the opposite. On the first and great Feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples in order to transform them. Even after the resurrection they were fearful and confused, uncertain and unreliable. Their final question to Jesus before His Ascension was: "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6); even up to the last moment of Christ on this earth, they are still looking for an *external* deliverance from political oppression instead of an *internal* salvation from passions and death. With the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of fiery tongues (Acts 2:1-4), they experience the Kingdom of God that is within (Lk 17-21) and then go out to preach what they have experienced. Like the Apostles, all the known and unknown saints, having believed through their word, are made holy by their volitional responsiveness to the work of the Holy Spirit in them. They all lived with the inner awareness of divine Life dwelling within them and transforming

them. We do not clean up our own lives; God cleans them up for us—if we let Him.

This is apparent in the prayers we say in the life of the Church, but we often do not notice the importance of the very words we are praying. Consider the prayer to the Holy Spirit we started praying again last Sunday for the first time since Holy Pascha; “O heavenly King, Comforter...” We affirm in this prayer that the Holy Spirit is “everywhere and filling all things.” But that is not sufficient for us, for the Holy Spirit to simply be present with us. We go on to beseech Him to come and abide in us, to dwell in us, to make his home in us. We want to be the tabernacle, the temple of the Holy Spirit. We want a *relationship*, not just a presence. Then what do we say immediately after asking the Holy Spirit to dwell in us? We pray: “cleanse us from every stain, and save our souls.” It is very important to be attentive to the words we say in the prayers. We do not cleanse ourselves from stains as to make ourselves ready, worthy, acceptable for the Holy Spirit to enter us. Rather we beseech the Holy Spirit to dwell in us in order to do what we are not able to do on our own, to cleans us from our sins that are incompatible with holiness. The Holy One enters and pushes out everything that is incompatible with His holy presence.

All of our prayers in the Church are of this form. It is *God* Who forgives, cleanses, heals, frees, enlightens, and He does so from the inside out—by transforming our hearts into which He has poured out His love (Rom 5:5). It is always God Who does the work, and the prayers we pray are always asking God to do what we are not able to do; what we need Him to do for us. “Apart from Me,” our Lord says, “you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). So when I say that every human being is called to be holy, I want to emphatically say that I am not saying we are called to make ourselves holy. I am asking us to beseech God to make us holy. For us to follow what all the saints from all time, known and unknown did—namely, to let God make them holy, to cooperate with His work in their lives when He responds to their prayers for holiness.

We had this morning, before the Divine Liturgy, beautiful images given us in the Akathist for All Saints. One such image is that the saints are like the stars in the heavens; they are the stars in the firmament of the Church. They are lights, luminous. When we recognize someone as a saint, we say that we glorify him. And this glory is of course a manifestation of the luminous glory of Christ. We do not create saints; we recognize them. And, in particular, the light that shines forth from their life even after their death as being the light of Christ, and not their own light.

In the imagery of the Akathist, the stars are not simply lights to be observed, but they are given to us as a *navigational* guide. We are a ship on the sea looking to the stars in order to know which way to point our vessel,

which way to direct our lives. The saints are living, navigational signposts in our Christian life. They have traveled this life before us, and they have done so successfully trusting in God instead of themselves.

The imagery of the Akathist continues by telling us we are sailing on the sea of our own passions. Maybe we have the image of a crystal clear and calm sea, but that is not our life. We are in a storm even as the disciples were on the Sea of Galilee. Fisherman accustomed to being on stormy seas found themselves afraid for their lives in a raging storm, and Jesus sleeping on a pillow in the back of the boat. He is calm; they are frenzied. The disciples go to wake Him up saying: “Lord, save us; we are perishing” (Mt 8:25). The storm of the passions in their souls is more fierce than the storm flooding their boat.

In the midst of being tossed to and fro by the turmoil of our passions, we often feel like God is distant, sleeping in the back of the boat. The question is, do we have the courage to go to Christ and say, with the disciples: “Lord, save me; I am perishing?” This is how we follow their navigational guidance. The saints help us precisely because they are the people who had the courage to go to Christ and say: “Lord where are You? Why are You not caring for me? Why are You not listening? I am perishing.” The saints are not people who pretended with God, who put on an air of piety in the face of the storms—looking good on the outside but being in stormed-tossed agony on the inside. And what does Jesus do in the face of this honesty? He arises and calms the storms, the inner storms, the storm of the passions.

When we keep our focus on the saint’s lives, we are given the strength to travel the same path. We are given the permission to be honest before Christ in the midst of our trials, in the midst of our inner turmoil, our passions. This honesty often takes the form of persistence in the face of God’s seeming unresponsiveness. The Psalmist relentlessly beseeches, “Hear me, O Lord, when I cry to You” precisely because it does not seem that God is listening. The Canaanite woman incessantly pleads for Jesus’s mercy in spite of His cool distance. Such examples can be multiplied countless times over in the lives of the saints.

Why God does seem distant, sleeping, hidden in our time of need? He is trying to get us to go deeper into the recesses of our hearts, beyond the superficial layers of a phony spirituality. God is not interested in our pretended selves; He wants us to go out into the depth of our heart and meet Him there. To cry out to Him from ever increasing depths, as the Psalm says, “Out of the depths I cry to You, O Lord” (Ps 129:1). In this way, we cease offering Him our own best efforts, and instead cry out to Him saying, “I have no hope other than You; apart from You, I can do nothing; I am

perishing without You.” This is the saints’ inner journey into the Kingdom within, and they invite us to follow them on this path.

In addition to this ‘navigational’ role the saints play in our lives, the Akathist is filled with reminders that they also intercede for us. St. Dorotheos of Gaza says that there are some passions in our lives that are so strong, so deeply rooted in us, that they could never be pulled out where it not for the prayers of the saints. You might say, what do you mean? Can’t God pull out our passions on His own? Why does He need the help of the saints? The answer is very simple: God does not act alone. God acts in community. God *is* community: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He leads and guides His Church by a community, the Holy Synod of Bishops. He calls us together in parishes and monastic communities. A priest is not permitted to serve the Divine Liturgy alone. Indeed, it is not god for us to be alone.

When we gather in church for Divine Liturgy, all of the saints that have gone before us, the great cloud of witnesses, are present—not just in the images on the walls. The images are a reminder of their presence, not substitutes. They are praying with us, interceding for us, helping root out those passions that constrain us and distract us from our God. They not only guide us but they themselves are weeding the garden of our souls by their prayers for us. So God does not act alone, but through His saints. He did not come to earth alone. He came to a young woman via the Archangel Gabriel so that she could say, “Be it unto me according to Your word” (Lk 1:38). So that she could say, I offer my will to You; You who do not act alone; You who do not force yourself on anyone; You who do not invade people’s lives without their free acceptance—I would like You to invade my life. And for this reason she has become the most pure intercessor for us to her Son and our God. By her prayers, and the prayers of all the saints, this is how we become holy—by letting God invade our lives.

Many years ago I was having a question and answer session with a group of students. When it was over, a hieromonk who happened to be visiting, asked me how it went. I told him, “Pretty well. The students asked good, substantive questions. They were serious about their faith.” Then he said, “Did you asked them any questions?” It had not occurred to me to ask them any questions, but I could tell he would have, so I replied, “what would you have asked them?” He said, “I would have asked them, ‘Do you want to be holy?’”

Do you want to be holy? We ask a lot of questions in life. Do I want to be a doctor, or an engineer? Do I want to be married or to be a monastic? Do I want to live in this or that type of house, make a certain amount of money, have an influence on society? The only question that matter is, ‘Do I want to be holy?’ May God through the prayers of all His saints, known and unknown, grant us the simple desire for Him to make us holy. ■

OUR FATHER IN THE HEAVENS

Fr. John Konkle

Father

We call God our *Father*. We do so with such familiarity that we may be surprised to hear that Jesus was condemned for calling God His Father. “‘My Father has been working until now, and I have been working.’ Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, *making himself equal to God*” (Jn 5:17-18). The reasoning is very simple. When we call someone our father we are making a claim not only about that person but about ourselves. The child of a human is a human. The child of God is a god. It is an audacious claim—like many of the truth of our faith with which we have become too accustomed. We have a human nature because we are begotten from human parents. Jesus has a divine nature because He is the only-begotten of His Father—begotten, as we say in the Nicene Creed, before all ages.

When we call God ‘Father,’ then, we are making a claim about ourselves—that we are His children, that we are not *merely* human but also divine. We, according to St. Peter, *share* or *participate* or *partake* of the divine nature of the Father (2 Pt 1:4). This participation in the divine life has its origins in a *spiritual* birth, language that is pervasive in the New Testament. St. John emphasizes it this way: “As many as received Him, to them He gave *the power to become children of God*, to those who believe in His name: *who were born*, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but *of God*” (Jn 1:12-13; see also Jn 3:1-8). Being born spiritually means that we are God’s children, we are “of God,” i.e., of His nature—by participation. “We become by grace,” St. Athanasius teaches, “what God is by nature” (On the Incarnation, I).

The boldness of these claims is expressed in the introduction to the Lord’s Prayer in the Divine Liturgy, “And make us worthy, O Master, that with confidence and *without fear of condemnation*, we may dare to call you, the God of heaven, Father and say, ...” It is daring to call God ‘Father’ precisely because of the claim that we are making *about ourselves*. We do well if we can say these words with humility and sobriety, not inattentively or carelessly.

The question arises, then, do we look like our Father? St. Cyprian of Carthage exhorts us in this way: “We should remember, therefore, dearest brothers, and realize that when we address God as Father we should act like children of God, so that just as we have pleasure in having God as our Father, so He should have pleasure in us. Let us act as temples of God (1 Cor 6:19), *so that it may appear that God dwells in us*. Let our conduct not

fall away from the spirit; rather, we, *who have begun to be* spiritual and heavenly, should think and perform spiritual and heavenly things” (Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Lord’s Prayer*, §11).

We should look like our Father, or, at least, be beginning to look like Him; a family resemblance should be emerging in us. When people look at Christ, they were to see his Father (Jn 14:9). When people look at Mary, they were to see Christ magnified (Lk 1:46). The icon of every saint is ultimately an icon of Christ—what Christ looks like in that person. So, if we—together with His Son, the Holy Theotokos, and all the saints—are to call God Father, then we have to ask: What do people see when they look at us?

Our

We pray “*Our Father*.” Since we often say this prayer in communal contexts it may not seem unusual to say ‘our,’ but consider how Jesus introduces this prayer: “When you pray, *go into your room and shut the door* and pray to your Father who is *in secret*. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly” (Mt 6:6). The implication is that we will be praying the prayer alone. Why, then, do we say ‘Our’ when we are alone?

When we go into our prayer closet to pray in secret, we discover that we are not alone. Christ is there praying with us. Indeed, only Christ may say ‘*My Father*.’ *We* call God ‘Father’ in virtue of being in Christ, and having Christ in us—in virtue of the spiritual birth that makes us not alone wherever we go. “Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father’” (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15-17). It is important for us to pray the Lord’s prayer alone, in our prayer closet, so we can learn *experientially* that Christ is Emmanuel, God with us, and thus we are not alone.

With practice, praying our Father in secret, we come to experience the Church’s deeper understanding of our Lord’s instructions, that we enter into the closet of our heart and close the door of our mouth and senses. It is here, in the ‘inner chamber,’ that we experience the rewards of encountering our Father. We will struggle to experience this spiritual communion, this ‘our’ which makes us inseparable from Christ, however, unless we cultivate it in times of solitude. In our prayer closet, in seclusion from the distractions of this world, we gradually learn how to commune with Christ in the closet of our heart. As St. John Climacus tells us, while at first we cannot be still even when we are all alone in our closet, in time—through vigilant practice—we can experience inner stillness in the midst of a bustling crowd. (Step 27).

When we become accustomed to entering the closet of our heart, together with Christ calling God ‘our Father,’ we gradually notice that

Christ does not come alone but brings others with Him. We are united to Christ, and so are many others. The body of Christ is made up of many members. In our prayers, we are not merely reminded of others but united with them. St. Cyprian puts it this way: “ We do not say: ‘*My* Father, who are in the heavens,’ nor ‘*Give me my* bread this day.’ Nor does anybody request that his debt be pardoned for himself alone, nor ask that he alone be not led into temptation and delivered from the evil one. Our prayer is common and collective, and when we pray, we pray not for one but for all people, because we are all one people together. The God of peace and master of concord, who taught that we should be united, wanted one to pray in this manner for all, as he himself bore all in one” (Cyprian of Carthage, On the Lord’s Prayer, §8).

Some of Christ’s companions that enter our heart may be easily received with joy; we count them among our friends. But He brings others too; people we are distant from, in tension with, angry toward, disappointed in, and so forth. In short, He brings our enemies with Him so that we might let them join us in giving voice to *Our* Father. If we reject them, we reject the Christ Who brought them to us.

In the Heavens

Our true Father is the Father in the heavens, our *heavenly* Father. In teaching us to pray this way, Jesus is redirecting our attention from our biological father to our heavenly Father, from our earthly relationships to our heavenly relationships. He emphasizes this point later in the Gospel of Matthew: “Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He Who is in heaven” (Mt 23-9). Jesus’ point here is not so much about language, but in whom we are placing our trust, on whom we are relying. Do we look to our earthly father, family, friends, our priest and bishop, for what only God can provide?

Jesus is aware that we are so often disappointed in our earthly relationships, and He is here telling us that this is because we look to them for what only God can provide us. If we learn to look to our heavenly Father for all our needs, we are free to love unconditionally those God puts in our life without expectations of what they can do for us. Jesus is consistently emphatic in the Gospels, as St. Paul is in his Epistles, that our true family is a spiritual family and we are to look to God our Father not only as the *source* of this spiritual family via our spiritual birth, but also as the *provider* for and *protector* of it.

Our heavenly Father is our *provider*. When Jesus is instructing us to pray relentlessly using the images of asking, seeking and knocking, He goes on to assure us how our heavenly Father will respond: “What man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he

asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!” (Mt 7:9-11). Our heavenly Father longs to give us everything we need, but he especially *delights* to give us the kingdom (Lk 12:32).

When we forget about the kingdom, however, forget that God is our provider, we become anxious, worried, fearful, judgmental and so forth. Jesus warns about this, and invites us to redirect our attention back to God as our provider. “Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ for after all these things the Gentiles seek. For *your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things*. But *seek first the kingdom* of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Mt 6:31-33).

Our heavenly Father is also our *protector*. St. Peter warns us, “Your adversary the devil walks about like a lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Pt 5:8). We live in a dangerous world, spiritually dangerous, but St. John comforts us with the assurance, “Greater is He Who is in you than he who is in the world” (1 Jn 4:4). If we are born in God’s family, we become Christ’s sheep and are comforted with these words: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, *and they shall never perish, neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand*. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and *no one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand*” (Jn 10:27-29; cf 6:37; Rom 8:31-39). It is a beautiful image to see ourselves as secure in the loving hands of our heavenly Father, and his Son, Jesus Christ.

The Church supplies a host of prayers to remind us to ask God for protection. We pray for the protection of our gardens from pests, of our safety when traveling, of our health when undergoing surgery, of our souls from temptation and demonic influences, along with countless other prayers. We do well to make these prayers our friends, inviting God into our every activity. For *our Father in the heavens* longs to shield us in the hollow of his hand.

Summary

We call God *Father* because He is the *source* of our spiritual life, making us children to grow into his likeness—to look like Him. We call God our Father because we are united to His Son, and through Him to all who are in Him. We call God our *Father in the heavens* because He is the loving *provider* for all our needs and our faithful protector from all dangers. ■

32nd ANNUAL PILGRIMAGE CELEBRATION
August 14-15, 2019

With the participation of
His Eminence Archbishop NATHANIEL

Guest of Honor
His Grace Bishop PAUL

PILGRIMAGE SCHEDULE

Wednesday, August 14

05:00 am Matins, 3rd, 6th, 9th Hour

05:00 pm Light Supper

06:00 pm Vigil of the Feast with Lamentations

Thursday, August 15

09:00 am Akathist, 3rd & 6th Hour

09:45 am Procession to the Pavilion

10:00 am Hierarchal Divine Liturgy

12:45 pm Lunch

02:30 pm Mystery of Holy Unction Service

05:30 pm Vespers Service

07:00 pm Supper

Bookstore will be open except during services.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

ORTHODOX WOMEN IN HEALING MINISTRIES
27TH Annual Fall Retreat at Dormition Monastery

October 4, 5, & 6, 2019

V. Rev. Dimitrie Vincent

*“My Grace is Sufficient for You,
My Strength is Made Perfect in Weakness”*

Clergy Wives Retreat
October 11-12, 2019

For information and registration call
Mat. Jeanine Frigerio at:
517- 554-0105

MONASTERY FALL WORK DAY

Saturday November 2, 2019
10:00 am to 4:00 pm

Please bring rakes and gloves

Liturgy will start at 8:00 am