

## ***Orthopraxis***

By Archpriest Basil Rhodes

### **House Blessings and Theophany**

On January 6th, Orthodox Christians attend the Divine Liturgy and the Great Blessing of the Water service to celebrate the great feast of Theophany, also called “Ton Photon” (“Feast of Lights.”) It was called the Feast of Lights from ancient times, since on this day many catechumens were “illuminated” by the light of Holy Baptism. The service commemorates the baptism of Christ and the revelation of God in three persons. That’s why the Feast is called “Theophany,” meaning “Revelation of God.” We attend church not only to celebrate the Feast and receive the Holy Eucharist, but we also hope to be blessed by and to receive the special holy water which is blessed following the Liturgy. Most parishioners bring their own bottles or jars from home in order to fill them up with the blessed water to take home. It is the pious practice of many Orthodox to take a little holy water and some of the blessed bread (antidoron) from church every morning before eating or drinking anything else, as a blessing for the day. In most churches in America the blessing of water is held indoors, in the temple itself, and the water is contained in a large urn. Some communities hold outdoor celebrations by a body of water.

#### **Blessing of the Home**

It is customary, to invite your priest to bless your home with holy water within the few weeks following Theophany and before the beginning of the Great Fast (Lent.). Prepare by cleaning the house and opening and lighting all the rooms.

What you need for the house blessing:

- \* An icon corner or wall, or at least an Icon of Christ and the Mother of God
- \* A small table, preferably covered, in front of your home icon corner.
- \* A candlestick with a new candle in it, placed on the otherwise cleared table

Using an aspergillum (a special horse hair sprinkler) the priest will go to each room and sprinkle it in the four corners blessing the home with the grace of the Holy Spirit which also protects you from evil spirits. If you were unable to attend the Theophany Liturgy, the priest will bring extra Holy Water so that you may keep some at home, near your icons. Please have a dedicated jar or vessel prepared for this water. It can only be used for Holy Water thereafter. For House Blessings, it is appropriate that all family members are in attendance, but if this is not possible, at least those who are home should participate in the service. All TV’s, electronics, music, etc., should be turned off. House Blessings are a yearly tradition.

#### **Personal Use of Holy Water**

According to Orthodox doctrine, holy water has the power to sanctify and heal. Have each family member drink a small amount of the holy water from Theophany. Keep the unused holy water in your home icon corner (krasny ugol) for future use: times of adversity, before starting a new venture or trip, to give thanks, or when someone is ill. You may drink it or anoint yourself when you feel spiritually afflicted. It should be taken when fasting, if at all possible. To rid the house of evil spirits, it should be sprinkled in the four corners of each room, so no one will step on it. In the countryside, the holy water is often sprinkled in the fields and on the animals.

If you would like to have your home blessed, please contact Fr. Basil or use the Sign-up sheet at the candle desk in the Narthex of the church.=

## ***Focus on the Faith***

### **The Value of Time**

By Metropolitan Avgoustinos of Florina, Greece (+ 2010 at age 103)

At midnight of 31st December, when the clocks reach exactly 12:00, one full year—with all of its joys and sorrows—is fully erased, and a

new year rises. The previous year becomes part of history; all of its 365 days are left behind, a simple memory.

My dear brethren, did you ever think, I mean truly contemplate, about the time period of these 365 days that on each 31st December becomes part of our own history? What have we truly accomplished during its duration? Let me assure you that all of us are immensely indebted for all of these days. In an effort to provide a notion of our responsibility as well as accountability for each year of our earthly lives, I will draw you a picture and provide you a comparative example; I will present a small parable.

There was a king with many subjects who carried great fondness and devotion for all of his kingdom's citizenry. He loved them all very much, every single one of them, without any exception. One day, he decided to give them all a gift. He prepared and distributed purses filled with gold coins, one to each citizen. The grateful subjects opened the purses up and begun counting the coins within. They each counted them, over and over, again and again... All of them had the exact same quantity of gold within their respective purse: 8,760 coins! This was a significant amount of gold. The good and loving king gave it to them out of his goodwill and love, so that they could each use it for their own benefit and the benefit of their fellow men. And do you know what each of them did with their respective small fortune? You could have never guessed it! Instead of using this blessed inheritance for their home, neighbor or society, they each went by the river bank, opened up their purses and began throwing the gold coins away into the deep river water, one by one, until all of their small fortune was completely gone and their purses stood empty. If any one of us had been there observing them, what might we have said? Surely all of us would have assumed that they had all gone mad.

My brethren, this is where my simple parable ends. Now who is this loving king? He is our God. Who are these senseless citizens? We are the King's citizenry. And what is this 8,760 number? Grab a pencil and paper and figure it out. Every day that passes by has 24 hours and all of the year has 365 days. If we multiply the 365 days with the 24 hours of

each day, we then determine that an entire year contains 8,760 hours; these are then the hours that each year of our life has to offer. From 1st January of each year to the next 31st December that follows 8,760 hours will have passed. I thus repeat my question: What have we truly accomplished during the duration of the year we are about to leave behind? Have we made it a worthwhile year? Did we add any value? Or, perhaps we are all like those foolish citizens that threw away all of their 8,760 gold coins. Let us then make an examination, each one of us on our own, and let us evaluate and estimate the usefulness of last year's 8,760 hours that are about to draw to a close.

Among all of these hours, was there any time set aside for listening to the Divine word of God and for the study of Holy Scriptures? Were there any days that we ran to a Church to listen to sermons or attend Church services? How about opening and studying the Bible? Did we do that? If the answer is yes, then we may consider ourselves blessed. This is how the Psalter begins. We read that "blessed" is the man, happy and with good fortune. Who does the Psalmist refer to? Is it the person that has lots of money, apartment buildings, businesses, limousines, and enjoys the finest of worldly entertainment? Not quite! The Psalmist says: Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night (Ps 1:1-2). Blessed is he who takes time to place the Holy Bible in his hands and read it. I thus ask all of us: During the year that is coming to an end, did our angel see us hold the Holy Gospel in our hands and read it on a regular basis? Christ Himself tells us: Blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it. (Lk 11:28).

We are coming to the close of this year's 8,760 hours. I ask another question: During this entire year, were there hours regularly devoted to prayer? During the earlier years of Christianity, the faithful would dedicate hours upon hours for the purpose of prayer. Does our angel ever "catch us" on our knees, in prayer to our Heavenly Father? Oh, if we only knew the great power of prayer and how much we truly lose by not making prayer a companion to our daily life. There would have

been so many unsolved problems (personal, family, professional, etc) that would simply find rapid solutions if, and only if, we used this invaluable key to unlock such solutions; the key of prayer is just another valuable gift granted to us by our God and Creator. What great comfort and consolation can be found when we whisper: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour, through the intercessions of the Holy Theotokos and all of Thy saints, have mercy upon me!

### ***Lives of Saints***

#### **January 19 - Our Holy Father Mark Eugenikos, Metropolitan of Ephesus and Confessor of the Orthodox Faith (1443)**

This holy defender of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church labored in the final days of the Byzantine Empire, when, pressed on all sides by the Turks, the Emperor in desperation sought union with (or rather submission to) the Papacy in hopes of obtaining aid from the West. It was St Mark who stood almost alone to prevent such a disaster to the Faith.

He was born in Constantinople in 1392 to devout parents. He received a thorough education and seemed destined for a secular career, but at the age of twenty- six he abandoned all worldly claims and became a monk in a small monastery in Nicomedia. Soon the Turkish threat forced him to return to Constantinople, where, continuing in the monastic life, he wrote a number of treatises on prayer and the dogmas of the Church. In time he was ordained priest, then, at the insistence of the Emperor John VIII Paleologos was made Metropolitan of Ephesus. The Emperor also prevailed on him to join the delegation which traveled to the Council of Florence to consider the reunion of the Orthodox Church and the churches under the Papacy. (Saint Mark went as exarch of the Patriarchs of Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria, who were unable to attend.)

The Greek delegation included the Emperor and the Patriarch of Constantinople. All, including Metropolitan Mark, began with great

hopes that a true union in faith might result from the Council, but as the sessions proceeded, it soon became clear that Pope Eugenius and his theologians were interested only in securing submission of the Eastern Church to the Papacy and its theology. The Metropolitan spoke forcefully against various Latin dogmas such as the filioque and Purgatory, but the Greek delegation, desperate for western aid, bowed to expediency and agreed to sign a document of Union which would have denied the Orthodox Faith itself. Saint Mark was the only member of the delegation who refused to sign. When the Pope heard of this, he said "The bishop of Ephesus has not signed, so we have achieved nothing!"

When the delegation returned to Constantinople, the signers of the false Union were received with universal condemnation by the people, while Metropolitan Mark was hailed as a hero. The churches headed by Unionists were soon almost empty, while the people flocked to the churches headed by those loyal to Orthodoxy. Saint Mark left the City to avoid concelebrating with the Unionist Patriarch. He was exiled by the Emperor to Lemnos, but was freed in 1442. He continued to oppose the Union until his repose in 1444. In 1452 the Union was officially proclaimed in Constantinople, but the hoped-for Western aid was not forthcoming, and the City fell to the Turks in 1453.

#### **January 24 - Our Holy Mother Xenia, Fool-for-Christ, of St. Petersburg (1800)**

She was born about 1730, and as a young woman married an army colonel named Andrei, a handsome and dashing man fond of worldly living. When she was twenty-six years old, her husband died suddenly after drinking with his friends, leaving Xenia a childless widow. Soon afterward, she gave away all her possessions and disappeared from St Petersburg for eight years; it is believed that she spent the time in a hermitage, or even a monastery, learning the ways of the spiritual life. When she returned to St Petersburg, she appeared to have lost her reason: she dressed in her husband's army overcoat, and would only answer to his name. She lived without a home, wandering the streets of the city, mocked and abused by many. She accepted alms from charitable people, but immediately gave them away to the poor: her only

food came from meals that she sometimes accepted from those she knew. At night she withdrew to a field outside the city where she knelt in prayer until morning.

Slowly, the people of the city noticed signs of a holiness that underlay her seemingly deranged life: she showed a gift of prophecy, and her very presence almost always proved to be a blessing. The Synaxarion says "The blessing of God seemed to accompany her wherever she went: when she entered a shop the day's takings would be noticeably greater; when a cabman gave her a lift he would get plenty of custom; when she embraced a sick child it would soon get better. So compassion, before long, gave way to veneration, and people generally came to regard her as the true guardian angel of the city."

Forty-five years after her husband's death, St Xenia reposed in peace at the age of seventy-one, sometime around 1800. Her tomb immediately became a place of pilgrimage: so many people took soil from the gravesite as a blessing that new soil had to be supplied regularly; finally a stone slab was placed over the grave, but this too was gradually chipped away by the faithful. Miracles, healings and appearances of St Xenia occur to this day, to those who visit her tomb or who simply ask her intercessions. Her prayers are invoked especially for help in finding employment, a home, or a spouse (all of which she renounced in her own life). A pious custom is to offer a Panachida / Trisagion Service for the repose of her husband Andrei, for whom she prayed fervently throughout her life.

Saint Xenia was first officially glorified by the Russian Orthodox Church outside Russia in 1978; then by the Moscow Patriarchate in 1988.