

THE LIFE OF CHRIST
in Holy Tradition and the Writings of the Holy Fathers

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INTRODUCTION: THE OLD TESTAMENT

In order to understand the life of Christ as told in the Gospels, it is necessary first to understand something about the Bible and the most important events and persons in the Old Testament.

The Bible

What is the Bible? It is the Book of God. It is often called the written Word of God. We cannot know what God is like or how He made the world unless God tells us about it. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" He says (Job 38.4).

The Bible is in two parts, called the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is a history of the creation of the world and of the people of God up to the Coming of God to earth in Jesus. The first five books of the Bible were written by Moses. God asked Moses to come up unto a very high mountain, Mt. Sinai, and Moses stayed alone up there for 40 days and 40 nights. God the Son, Jesus Christ, spoke to Moses face to face and told him about the creation of the world. Moses wrote all this down in five books. They are the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

The New Testament begins with the Birth of the Lord Jesus until the end of time, when God will come back to earth with millions and millions of angels and saints, the Mother of God, St. John the Baptist, Moses, Abraham, all the patriarchs and prophets and good people who believe in God and love Him.

Why do we believe all that is written in the Bible, which is often called the scriptures? Because it comes from God and God is absolute truth. That is why we can trust the Word of God without any doubt. In this world in which we live we have to be careful. There are mean people who disappoint us, and bullies and murderers. Everyone can hurt us with unkind words or actions. Our brothers, sisters, friends and even our parents can make mistakes. No one is perfect except God. That is why we can trust Him with all our heart and with all our thoughts. Also we must not forget that we ourselves are not perfect and can also upset our family or friends.

When you are small you think that grown-up people know everything and that they understand everything. But then you discover that they make mistakes. Many grown-up people never think about God; they never think why we have been made by God and why we live on earth and what happens to us when we die. This is very sad because God has given us His Book, the Bible, in which He explains everything that we need to know while we are here on earth in time.

The Creation

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1.1). So God told Moses that He created first the heavens and then the earth. What does "create" mean? Only God can create because it means "making something out of nothing". Try to imagine making something out of nothing. For men it is impossible! When we draw something we need paper, colouring pencils, paints, etc. When we want to build a house we need stones or wood. When we want a nice dish to eat we need potatoes, meat and vegetables. God has given us several notes or sounds with which we can compose music on the keyboard. We compose music by using them. But we cannot create a new note or sound. The same with colours. God has created certain colours in this world and we have given names to them: blue, green, red, yellow, etc. Now we can mix these colours to get new colours like lilac, purple, etc. But we cannot think, we cannot even imagine a new colour which has nothing to do with the colours we know. But of course God can create new colours. Maybe when the Lord Jesus has created a new earth there will be colours there so beautiful and different from the colours we now know on the earth. God has given us gifts like being good at music or any of the arts or using our brains to invent trains, planes, ships, build towns, etc. We are imitating God and it gives us great pleasure. We love it when we make things or discover the secrets of the world with our minds. We learn about animals and plants, about the myriad of fishes in the oceans and rivers, about beautiful shells and corals, birds, and so on. God has made a very beautiful world for us to live in so that we can look and enjoy all the things God has made for us on earth. We can know a lot about God from nature. Nature is made by God and teaches us about God. When you have got someone in your class who draws very well you immediately recognize a painting or a drawing of that person from its style. God having created everything - the heavens full of angels, and the earth full of animals, plants, oceans, people, the starry skies - is so majestic and clever that we cannot imagine how He has done it. We can only admire Him and sigh: how wonderful and great is our God. We recognize in the whole of creation the same Creator behind it all. We recognize the Spirit of God by its majesty and wisdom. Therefore we say that God is wise and one of the many names for God is: Wisdom.

Why did God create everything? Was God feeling lonely or bored or did He have to learn from creating and become even more clever and more brilliant than He was already? God told Moses that He is neither lonely nor bored nor has to increase His knowledge by creating.

God is not lonely because our God is Three Divine Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They love each other so much that each Person only thinks and lives for the other Persons, and so They are One God. God being Three Persons who love each other totally is not lonely. Nor are They bored, because They have all the beauty and riches in themselves which we see displayed in

creation. God created the angels and men to share with Him the Glory He has. All the treasures are in Him. So the Church Fathers tell us that God created out of fullness of love, abundance of love. He wanted to share with us all his riches. And so God is True Love.

So His Name Wisdom expresses both knowledge and Love. He is all knowing, which means God knows everything. And He is all love. And that is why He has created us and given us Life. All life comes from God as He is the Source of Life. Life is the Mystery of God. We cannot make something out of nothing and give it life. So God is Life.

Now God has given us eyes, ears, smell, touch and taste. So we can see, hear taste, smell and touch this world of ours. But as you know, this world is very different for a blind person and who have eyes. A blind person cannot see people, animals, colours, the sea and the sky, He cannot see movements like the running of a dog or the rolling waves of the sea. He cannot even imagine what colours are. You try explaining to a blind person the colours red, blue, green or yellow. It is impossible. A person born deaf cannot imagine what sound is like. He cannot imagine what music is or the voice of people or the sound of waves against a rock .

Now you can imagine how different this world would be for us if we could see even more than we do now. If we could see, for example, angels. Angels do not have bodies like ours; they are made of light. We cannot see with our eyes tiny little bacteria. We need a microscope to see them. The same with our hearing. We can only hear a certain range of sounds. But you know a dog can hear a very high pitched whistle which we do not hear. If God expanded our hearing we could hear caterpillars walk on leaves, the sound of butterfly wings, the sound of a ladybird crawling on our arm or the sound it makes when it flies off. But we would also be able to hear loud crashing noises as when clouds touch each other. Now when we are in God's Kingdom He can give us eyes that can see more and further besides other senses that we do not have at the moment.

We cannot imagine a "new sense". It is like trying to imagine a new colour - it is impossible! In the same way it is impossible for us to imagine a "new sense" given to us by God which has nothing to with seeing, hearing, smelling, touching or tasting. But we can believe and understand that in God's Kingdom Life must be very great, fantastic, breath-taking. God Himself has promised this to those people who love Him. The Apostle Paul, the Prophet David in his psalms and all the saints over the centuries have told us about this. It will be far, far greater than anything you will ever see in "Star Wars" or any science fiction film or book. God does not need to create in order to improve His learning or understanding because God is perfect. He made us out of love and gave us life. Things we make like robots and computers are machines which can break down and have no souls. When they break down

they do not go to God. But when we die our souls which live inside our bodies are brought by angels to God. So the secret of life is God Who is Love.

The Bible says that when God finished creating He looked at His work and saw that it was very good. Think of it! He made strawberries, crunchy cucumbers, red tomatoes, apples, grapes, bananas, monkeys, bears, elephants, ladybirds, squirrels, all the beautiful trees, the oaks, the pines, the beeches, the plants and the flowers, the mountains and hills, the rivers, oceans and seas. He also made all the stars and planets. And He made angels and us men.

If we tried to write down all the wonderful things God has made, the world would not have enough room for all the books we would have to write about what He has made and done.

The Angels

The scriptures tell us that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. So the heavens were created before the suns (the stars) and all the planets, including our earth. The angels were created before the material universe, which means all the stars, planets, our earth and men. In the Book of Job we read that God told Job about the creation of the world, and that the angels watched Him as He was creating our universe and that they shouted for joy on seeing our world coming into being (Job 38.7). The angels marvelled at the beauty unfolding before their eyes. They praised God and were in awe of His Majesty and all His works. They saw plants and flowers coming into being, and then animals on land, in the water and in the air. They saw oceans and mountains and rivers being made. The creation of God was certainly a wonder of beauty and perfection.

Angels do not have bodies like ours, which are solid. They have very fine bodies, like light. There are nine ranks of angels. The very highest ranks are around the Throne of God in the Heaven of heavens. They are called the Cherubim, the Seraphim and the Thrones.

God allowed some of the prophets, like Ezekiel, to see the Cherubim. They are wonderfully beautiful, they look like burning coals of fire and have four faces and four wings (Ezekiel 1). They are the great angels of knowledge, and look into the mysteries of God.

The Prophet Isaiah was allowed to see the Seraphim. They are also very fiery, and they have six wings. With two wings they cover their eyes, with two wings they cover their feet, and with two wings they fly. They burn with love for God, and are the great angels of love. Isaiah heard them crying: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Sabaoth!" (Isaiah 6).

Apart from the Cherubim, the Seraphim and the Thrones, there are the Principalities, the Dominions, the Powers, the Authorities, the Archangels and the Angels.

God has let us know the names of the seven Archangels. They stand before the Throne of God, which means that they listen very carefully to what God asks them to do and then they do it very quickly. That is why the angels are called the messengers of God.

The seven Archangels are called Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, Salaphiel, Jegudiel and Barachiel. "El" means "God", so all these names have meanings to do with God. Michael means "Who is like unto God?" Gabriel means "The Strength of God". Raphael means "The Healing of God".

Now why did God create the angels before He made the earth, sun, moon, stars, plants, animals and men?

The angels serve God and serve man when sent by God. They also look after everything God has made. This is wonderful for them; they take part in God's beautiful creation and glorify God for having made everything so wonderfully. God has given angels tremendous powers which we do not have, and they are higher than us at the moment. Some angels have to look after countries, others take care of the winds, the seas and the animals. And in His plan God wanted guardian angels to take care of each baptized Christian. This guardian tries to guard you in life, and to lead you safely towards God's Kingdom. It tells you to follow your conscience and not do bad things. When you listen to your guardian angel, he is very happy and comes closer to you. It's like when two friends like to sit close together and share secrets and laugh together. If you don't like someone you stay away from him and do not want to sit close to him. In the same way, if we never listen to our guardian angel, he moves further and further away from us, which is very sad for us, because we need our guardian angel close by. We do not realize how many times our guardian angels have stopped us from having bad accidents.

So God created the angels before us. They live in the heavens, and we call them the heavenly hosts.

Adam and Eve

When God had made the hosts of heaven, the angels, He started to make our world. The angels looked on in admiration as God made the plants and the animals. And then on the sixth day God created man.

Now when God created the other things, He did this by speaking: "Let there be light," for example. And at that moment the mighty Word of God,

Who is our Lord Jesus Christ, brought whole worlds into being: stars and plants and animals and so on.

When God made Adam, the Bible says that He spoke, saying: "Let us make man in our image and after our likeness". However, He did something more than that - He also made man with His own hands. He took some earth, mixed it with water and made Him with His own hands, like a sculptor. Man was very special to God, because He made him in His own image and likeness, and because He made him with His own hands.

God has a great plan or vision for man. This plan is that man will one day become higher than the angels.

Now we are like the children of a king and queen who live in a palace. The servants are allowed to teach the children and tick them off when they are naughty. But one day, when the children are grown up, they will be higher than the servants because they are the sons and daughters of the king and queen.

Both we and the angels are called sons of God. And Jesus told us that when we live in God's Kingdom we will be like the angels. We will be able to do far greater things than we do now. But although we will be like the angels, that does not mean that we will be angels. We will always be different from them because God has made bodies for us. We have flesh and bones, and we will continue to have these in God's Kingdom.

Now when God made Adam's body from earth and water, He breathed into his nostrils (nose) and Adam became a living soul.

Our soul lives within our body as in a house. Our eyes are like the windows through which we look out and see everything. Our mouth is like the door. We speak by opening our mouths, and people get to know us by what we say and what we do. But in fact they never see our soul, which is hidden in our body. They see the bodies in which we live. It is only when we look in a person's eyes that it seems as if we see his soul.

Now when someone dies, his soul leaves his body and is brought by the angels to Jesus. The soul is in the shape of the body but is made of much finer matter that we cannot normally see. When the soul leaves the body, it can still think, see, hear, etc., and it does not need the body to do these things anymore. Only here on earth does the soul have to live in a body.

Just imagine a car with a driver in it. The car can move so long as the driver is inside steering it. When the driver leaves the car, the car stops. The driver can move without the car, but the car cannot move without the driver. The most important part of us is our living soul. The body is important as the

house of the soul, and if a person believes in God and has the Holy Spirit living within his soul, we call his body the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Another example. Think of a piano with a keyboard and a musician sitting in front of it and playing music from a music sheet. The piano is like our body, and the keyboard - like our brain. The music is our mind, and the player - our soul. When the player - that is, the soul - leaves, the piano - that is, the body - cannot play music anymore.

Now God told Adam to give names to all the animals. Giving names is something animals cannot do. They cannot give names to their puppies, kittens and baby birds.

This is a mystery man shares with God. He is able to give names. Giving a name to something means you understand it, you know it by its name.

However, God saw that Adam was lonely because he could not talk with the animals and share the joys of Paradise with them. So God said: "I will make a woman to share with man his life on earth." And she would be equal to Adam, so that he could talk to her.

And so while Adam slept, God took one of Adam's ribs, and made Eve from it.

Now God did not make Eve from Adam's head, or from his foot, but from a rib in his side. Why? Because Eve is not greater than Adam (which she would be if she came from his head), nor less than him (which she would be if she came from his foot). She is made from the side of Adam because she is equal to him.

Now when Adam saw Eve he was overjoyed and said: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2.23). And he said that she would be called woman because she was taken out of man.

So Adam and Eve were grown-ups from the beginning, they were never babies. They were made by the hands of God, as a man and a woman.

Lucifer

Now there an archangel whose name was Lucifer. The Bible tells us that he was the most beautiful of all the angels God made. The name "Lucifer" means "Light-Bearer" or "Bright Glory".

God gave angels free will, so that they can choose whether to obey and trust God and therefore be good angels, or to disobey Him, be self-willed and have a spirit of rebellion. Having a spirit of rebellion means that you think

you know better than God and you want to change the perfect order in which He has made things. You believe in God, but you go against Him. You know that God exists and that He is mighty and wonderful, but you do not love Him really, you love yourself more, and you wilfully do not listen to what God says.

The Bible says that Lucifer even wanted to be higher than God Who had created him. Lucifer wanted to be exalted and worshipped instead of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. He wanted to have the glory that the angels and man gave to Jesus. He wanted to steal this glory for himself, like a thief. Instead of being grateful to God that He had made him one of the most beautiful and high-ranking of the angels, he was filled with pride and thought that he should be the highest of all.

Now when Lucifer was filled with pride and jealousy, he decided to fight against God. And he persuaded one-third of the other angels to go with him. From this time Lucifer was called Satan, the devil or the dragon.

However, at that point Michael, who was also an archangel, rose up in indignation against Lucifer. Since he loved God above all, he refused to go along with Lucifer's plan to take the place of God. "Who is like unto God?" he said. Of course, no one is like God. He is far, far higher and greater than all the angels and men. Two-thirds of the angels agreed with Michael, and so there was a war in heaven between Michael and his angels and Lucifer and his angels (Rev. 12.7).

Michael and his angels won the war, and so Lucifer and his angels were thrown out of heaven towards the regions of the air near the earth. Jesus mentioned this moment when He said: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10.18). The name "Satan" means "enemy" or "accuser".

So now you can understand that Satan, or the devil, is our greatest enemy. He wants our souls to belong to him rather than to Jesus, our God. He wants man to worship him instead of God, and he does not want us to know that Jesus is God.

The Fall

Now how did the devil manage to steal us from God?

He disguised himself as a snake and told Eve three lies. For, as Jesus told us, the devil is a liar and a murderer from the beginning.

God had warned Adam and Eve not to eat of one of the trees in the Garden of Eden. He told them that they could eat of all the trees except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God warned them that if they ate of that tree and

disobeyed God, they would die. Adam and Eve had to prove that they loved and trusted God because He had created them.

The devil first put into Eve's mind doubt in the goodness of God, because his first lie was: why are you not allowed to eat of the fruit of all the trees in Paradise? Eve quickly corrected him and said that they were all to eat of the fruit of all the trees except one. But although she corrected the devil's lie and defended God's Word, she started to doubt in the goodness of God. Was it good of God that He had forbidden them to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Was God really good? You see how the devil had started to sow doubt in her mind and heart, and her love and trust for God became less.

The devil then slyly told another lie. He knew that Eve was thinking: "Why am I not allowed to eat of the fruit of one tree?" So he hissed to her that the reason why she was not allowed to eat of it was that God was afraid that it would make her as clever as God. He was trying to take away her humble spirit and give her a spirit of pride, making her think that she did not need God to teach her and that she could do it all herself by disobeying Him. But God had warned her that she would die, and this made her unsure what to do and what to believe.

Now the devil told her the third lie, that she would not die if she ate the forbidden fruit. At this point Eve stopped loving God with all her mind and all her heart. She still believed in God, but she did not believe His words anymore. So she took the apple and began to eat it.

As soon as she had done this, she felt awful. Suddenly she felt fear, loneliness, sadness and sorrow. She did not feel God close to her anymore. She had never before known all those horrible feelings, so she rushed to Adam and told him a lie. She persuaded him, too, to eat of the apple, because she was so lonely and was afraid to be alone without Adam. Eve had become selfish. She wanted Adam to share in her misery instead of her feeling it alone. Of course, she did not tell Adam how miserable she felt. She said that it was wonderful to eat the apple. Adam wanted to keep obeying God's word and warning, but he loved Eve very much and was afraid of losing her by not sharing with her what she had done. Adam loved Eve more than God at that moment and forgot that God had given him Eve and that his first love should be God. Eve was a gift from God, but the Giver is greater than the gift.

So Eve was tempted by the devil by means of three lies, and Adam was persuaded by Eve by means of another lie.

After this both Adam and Eve felt awful. And they saw for the first time that they were naked. They felt ashamed and took fig leaves to cover themselves. Then God asked them where they were. Of course, God knew where they were, He knew that they were hiding behind a tree. But when

God said: "Where are you?" He meant: "What has happened between you and Me?" And Adam and Eve understood this.

God first spoke to Adam, who blamed both God and Eve for his falling away from God's word. He said that it was God's fault for giving him Eve as his wife because she had persuaded Adam to stop believing God and to disobey Him. God then spoke to Eve, and she blamed the devil-serpent because he had told her three lies. God did not speak to the devil as He did to Adam and Eve. He just told him his punishment, that he would slither along the ground forever. And He said that Adam and Eve would die, and that their bodies would go back to the earth from which He had made them. But their souls would continue to exist until the Son of God, Jesus Christ, would be born of a woman, and would crush the head of the serpent. For the way to kill a snake is to crush his head. So God promised Eve that His Son Jesus would be born as a man and would defeat the devil for man.

The moment Eve stopped believing the word of God, and believed the voice of the devil instead, she lost God. We say that she fell away from Him, as did Adam. We call this moment *the Fall*.

You know what happens when you have a really good friend and you have a quarrel with him. Then suddenly a wide gap opens up between you and him and you don't feel close anymore. That is what happened at the Fall. A wide gap opened up between God and man, and he didn't feel close to Him anymore.

After the Fall, God put cherubim with fiery swords at the gates of paradise to stop Adam and Eve returning to Paradise. And then everything began to go wrong on the earth. The trees and plants began to die, the animals began to attack each other, and men began to attack each other.

In Paradise everything had been wonderful because Adam and Eve had been in harmony with God, which means that they loved God and were friends with Him. When God and man are in harmony, then men are in harmony with each other, and the animals and nature are in harmony with men. But when Adam and Eve fell away from God, they began quarrelling with each other. And then the animals became fierce and started to growl and attack and kill each other. Thorns and thistles started to grow, we began to feel pain and illness, and everything began to go wrong. It was as if the devil had smashed a mirror on the ground.

We had chosen to believe the devil rather than God, and so we belonged to him. When we died, our bodies went into the earth, and our souls went to hell. Everyone who died before the Coming of Jesus - Adam, Abraham, Moses, David and all the holy men and women of the Old Testament - had to go to hell, or hades, which is the kingdom of the devil.

That is why, thousands of years later, God, the Lord Jesus Christ, came to the earth to restore the harmony between God and man. He became man and gave His life for us in order to take us out of hell, the kingdom of the devil. Since He is God, when He entered hell He conquered it and led the souls of all those who believed in Him into Paradise.

Moses

Now we've all heard of Moses, who was put into an ark, a small basket, and floated on the Rive Nile in Egypt. An Egyptian princess found him and had pity on him. She decided to protect and keep him so as to bring him up as her son. She gave him the name "Moses", which means "drawn out of water".

Pharaoh had ordered that all Hebrew male babies should be killed by their Egyptian midwives. So Moses' parents were afraid to have another child in case it was a boy. But Moses' parents had a daughter called Miriam who rebuked them for their lack of faith in God. She told them that if they got a boy and prayed to God, He would protect him. So Moses' parents prayed to God about it and put their trust in Him. When Moses was born, his parents and Miriam had the idea of getting a little basket and making it water-proof. Then they put Moses into it and pushed the little ark towards the place where the princess was bathing with her attendants.

You see how Moses' family "rested" in the Word of God, which is why Moses was saved. As we know from the Noah story, Hebrew has the same word for "ark" and "word". The Ark built by the Word of God saves those who rest in it. It was the faith that Moses' parents and Miriam had in the Word of God that saved Moses. Perhaps an angel told them to use a basket as an ark and push it towards the Egyptian princess. Perhaps an angel whispered to the princess: "Look how beautiful the little boy is! How nice it would be to look after him and bring him up as your own child...!" God can either harden or soften the hearts of people through angels suggesting good or bad things to them. We don't know how God works, but we do know that the princess had pity for the baby. We also know that God created the angels before us and that he uses them to give us messages and look after many things in nature: the winds, the stars, countries, animals, plants and people.

The life of Moses is very long and exciting. Let us look at some of the most important moments in it.

Moses was 80 years old when God told him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt towards the Promised Land. Now he had already tried to save his people several years before, when he was a young man. But then his people had turned against him, and he had had to flee because he had killed an Egyptian who had been acting cruelly towards the Israelites. We often make

the same mistake as Moses, thinking that we can work for God and save His people before He has given us the command and before we are ready. In order to be a doctor, you have to work for many years and pass many exams. It's the same if you want to be a concert pianist. Nobody is going to listen to you if you haven't practised a lot and become very good. So Moses had to wait and study the Word of God and pray every day before he could become ready to serve God and His people by leading them out of the slavery of Egypt.

However, when he was 80 years old, he was ready. And he received so much grace from God that he alone was counted worthy of going up Mount Sinai and speaking to Christ, the Son of God, face to face for 40 days and 40 nights. And when he came down from the mountain, his face shone so brightly that he had to cover it with a veil because the people could not bear to look at it. The grace of God which was on his face shone like the sun and hurt their eyes.

When Moses was still preparing to lead the people, God spoke to him out of a burning bush. The burning bush was an ordinary bush that was on fire with the Fire of God. This Fire burned the bush without consuming it, and it was a symbol of the Mother of God, Who would carry God the Son under her heart without being consumed by His Divine Fire.

When God called to Moses out of the burning bush, Moses asked him: "How do I know that I have found grace with You?" Moses understood that he could not possibly lead the Israelites out of the slavery of Egypt by his own strength, but only by the grace of God. God gave Moses two proofs that he had found grace with him. First, Moses' hand became leprous and it was healed when he put it inside his coat. And secondly, the staff in his hand became a snake and then turned back into a staff.

Now Pharaoh would not let Moses lead the Israelites out of Egypt, because they were cheap labour. So God sent a series of terrible plagues upon Egypt. But Pharaoh still wouldn't give in.

Then God told the Israelites to kill a spotless white lamb, the firstborn of a ewe, and sprinkle the blood of the lamb on the lintels of their door-posts. Then they had to roast the lamb and eat it without breaking the bones. Each family had to eat one lamb in one house. If the Israelites ate the lamb in this way, they would be saved from the Angel of death who was going to fly through the streets of Egypt that night. In this way God was teaching us that the Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is the spotless first-born lamb, will save us from death if we sprinkle it on our lips (lintels) and mouths (doors). We must also eat the Flesh of the Lamb, our Lord, and not share it with outsiders who do not belong to the Household of God. The lamb's bones were

not broken because when the Lord Jesus was on the Cross they did not break His bones, as they did the bones of the criminals on His right and left.

That night the Israelites had to stay in their houses and be ready to leave in a hurry, fully dressed, and taking unleavened bread with them. That night God sent the Angel of death through the streets of Egypt to kill all the first-born sons, including Pharaoh's. The next morning there was great weeping among the Egyptians, and Pharaoh finally gave in - he let the Israelites leave.

Seven days later, the Israelites arrived at the Red Sea. But Pharaoh hardened his heart and came after the Israelites with all his chariots and charioteers. What were the Israelites to do? They couldn't go back and they couldn't go forward. What a nightmare! But God gave Moses the answer. He told him to stretch out his rod in a vertical movement over the water. In this way a dry path was made through the sea, with huge waves piling up on either side. When the Israelites had passed through, and when the pursuing Egyptians were still in the middle of the sea, Moses stretched out his rod in a horizontal movement and the waves rolled back, drowning the Egyptians. God had saved the Israelites from the Egyptians, and Miriam, Moses' sister, now led the Israelites in a great song of thanksgiving to God.

The Red Sea signifies the water of Baptism. By means of His priests (like Moses) who baptize us, God makes a way for us out of the world (Egypt) and the power of the devil (Pharaoh) and into Paradise (the Promised Land). Moses made the sign of the Cross over the water to teach us that it is through the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ that a way is made for us out of the world and into Paradise. The arms of the Cross signify the love of God, Who wants to bring all of us into His embrace. But for those who reject Him, the Cross is a "Halt!" sign, meaning: "Stop! Come no further!"

When the Israelites had passed through the Red Sea they spent forty years wandering through the wilderness. The time in the wilderness signifies this present life, when we struggle hard to keep the commandments of God. During this time God fed the Israelites in a miraculous way with manna from heaven. Manna is a kind of bread. The Lord Jesus Christ said that He was the Manna which came from heaven. When we eat the Body of Christ we are given strength to struggle.

When Moses and the Israelites came to Mount Sinai, God told Moses to go up the mountain because He wanted to speak to him. God said that the animals were not allowed to touch the mountain while he was going up it. Then a cloud of fire came down on the mountain and angels started blowing on trumpets. The Israelites were so frightened that they ran into their tents. Then Moses went up the mountain and received from God the first five books of the Old Testament written on tablets of stone.

God told Moses that the Israelites should travel through the wilderness in the shape of a Cross, with the three tribes on the north, three tribes on the south, three tribes on the east, and three tribes on the west, with the tribe of priests in the centre.

After forty years wandering through the wilderness Moses and the Israelites came to the River Jordan, on the other side of which was the Promised Land. The word "Jordan" means "judgement", and crossing the River Jordan means signifies the Last Judgement which we all have to go through in order to enter Paradise.

Moses died before the crossing of the Jordan. When he had died, the devil wanted to take his body, so that the Israelites should worship it as if he was a god. But the Archangel Michael appeared and stopped the devil from taking the body.

After Moses' death, God chose Joshua to be the leader of the people. The name "Joshua" is actually the same as "Jesus" and means "Saviour". Just as Joshua led the Israelites through the River Jordan and into the Promised Land, so Jesus will lead us, the Christians, through the Judgement and into Paradise if we keep His commandments.

David

David was the youngest son of Jesse and his family lived in Bethlehem. He was chosen and anointed by the Prophet Samuel as King of Israel. The recipe for the holy oil used in the anointing was given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai. You can find it in Exodus 30.42. God told Moses that the oil could be used only for the anointing of kings, prophets and priests. Much later, God told the Apostles that all those who believed in Jesus Christ as their God and Saviour should be anointed with this oil, which is called Chrismation, immediately after Baptism. The word "Christian" means "anointed one".

David was anointed king of Israel while King Saul was still alive. Saul had been anointed king, but had lost the grace of God because he disobeyed God's order to kill all the Amalekites, who were very bad people. Saul spared the lives of some of the Amalekites because they were good-looking and he wanted to use them as slaves. The Prophet Samuel rebuked Saul for this, and Saul started to feel depressed because he felt the loss of the grace of God.

Once when David was still a young boy, he came to help the Israelites, who were fighting against a pagan people called the Philistines. One of the Philistines was a giant called Goliath. Goliath wanted to have a duel with one of the Israelites, but none of the Israelites dared to take him on. However, David volunteered to do this. Now Goliath was clothed in heavy armour, and had an iron helmet and sword. so the Israelites put a heavy harness onto

David. But he took it off, saying that he didn't need it - he would defeat Goliath with the help of God. Then he took a sling and three small round stones with which he used to kill wild animals, and challenged Goliath. Goliath laughed to see a mere boy challenge him and walked towards him with giant strides. Then David prayed to God to help him, put a stone into his sling and aimed it carefully at the soft spot just above Goliath's nose and between his eyebrows. The stone hit its mark, and the giant fell dead. Then David went up to him, took his sword and cut off his head. Seeing this, the Philistines were terrified and fled. So the Israelites were saved by a young boy who put his faith in God!

Saul was filled with jealousy against David and tried to kill him on several occasions. Once David had the chance to kill Saul, but he did not do it because Saul had been anointed by God. David understood that God could kill Saul at any moment if He wanted to.

Now David could play the harp, and God the Holy Spirit inspired him to write some beautiful psalms and sing them to the music of the harp. When Saul was depressed, he would ask David to play on his harp and sing the psalms. This helped his depression to go away, because the words inspired by the Holy Spirit drive away the passions inspired by the demons: anger, anxiety, depression, bitterness, resentment, self-pity, lust, etc.

However, Saul was not grateful to David for healing him, but became more and more jealous. In this way he was like Cain, who became jealous of Abel. Eventually Saul killed himself by falling on his sword after being defeated in battle.

Then David was proclaimed king. He suffered greatly in his life because of one great sin which he committed. He fell madly in love with Bathsheba, the wife of an army captain called Uriah. He wanted to have Bathsheba as his wife, so he plotted to have Uriah killed by sending him to the most dangerous part of the battle front. When Uriah had been killed, David married Bathsheba and had a child from her.

Then the Prophet Nathan came to David and told him that since he had sinned, God had decided that his little child would die. David bowed his head and repented. He asked God to forgive him and let the little boy live. He fasted and wept, but still the little boy died. David did not get angry with God because of this, but accepted God's justice.

And so God loved David very much. For God saw that David was truly humble, and loved God and believed in His Goodness, Wisdom and Justice. And He promised David that from his descendants would be born the Messiah, Jesus Christ. That is why, when the angel came and announced the Birth of the Lord Jesus, he called Him "the Son of David".

Elijah

Elijah is a prophet. A prophet is a friend of God with whom God shares His secrets and plans for humanity. Through prophets God gives warnings to His people and reminds them how godless they are becoming. There are also false prophets, who pretend they are true prophets of God but who are in fact inspired by the devil. When Elijah was on the earth there were very many false prophets and priests.

Elijah was very angry with the people of Israel, who were putting their trust in false prophets and priests. They were worshipping, not the true God, but a false god of the pagans called Baal. David says in the Psalms that all the gods of the pagans are demons, so we know that Baal was actually a great demon.

Elijah used to say: "I am zealous for the Lord God of Hosts" - that is, for the true God. And he said to the people: "If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal is God, follow him. You can't worship both at the same time - you have to choose. Our God is the only true God, and He is holy. He does not allow us to worship both Him and demons like Baal at the same time."

Elijah thought that he was the only one who still worshipped the true God in Israel, but actually there were 7000 others whom God had hidden.

Elijah got so exasperated with the people and their false prophets and priests, that he prayed to God that there should be no rain. He knew that if people began to get thirsty, and their animals began dying, they might start praying to the true God again. God answered Elijah's prayer, and there was no rain in Israel for 3 years.

A bad woman called Queen Jezebel got very angry with Elijah because of this. She sent soldiers to kill Elijah. But Elijah escaped and stayed in a cave near a little stream called Cherith. There was no food there, and gradually even the stream began to dry up. But Elijah did not worry, and put all his trust in God. And God sent a raven who gave Elijah food.

Then God told Elijah to go to a place called Zarepath, where He had told a widow to look after him. He saw the woman gathering wood and asked her to feed him. She said that she had only just enough food for one more day for herself and her son. However, Elijah reassured her that if she let him stay in her house and gave him some of her oil and meal, she would never run out of the oil and meal. She took him in, and her oil and meal did not run out. Since she looked after the true prophet of God, Elijah, God looked after her.

One day the widow's only son died, and she ran to Elijah in despair. He lay seven times on the boy and prayed to God. And then a great miracle happened: the boy came back to life.

Towards the end of the 3 years of drought, Elijah invited 400 of the false prophets and priests of Baal to come with him to the top of Mount Carmel. He suggested that they build an altar to Baal, and lay a sacrifice on it, and ask Baal to send down fire from heaven to burn up the sacrifice. And he would build an altar to the Lord, the true God of Israel, and lay a sacrifice on it, and ask the Lord to send down fire from heaven. Then they would all see which God was the true God.

The priests of Baal accepted this idea, and a large multitude of people came to watch. All through the day the priests of Baal prayed to their god, and danced, and did magic, and cut themselves with knives. But nothing happened. Then Elijah started to mock them. Perhaps Baal was sleeping, he said. Or perhaps he had gone on a journey.

Now it was Elijah's turn. After pouring water on his sacrifice, he knelt down and prayed. There was a deathly silence. Suddenly fire came down from heaven and burned up the whole sacrifice. The people then understood that the false priests of Baal had deceived them. So they killed the 400 false prophets and priests. And then Elijah prayed again to God, and a little cloud appeared on the horizon - the promise of rain. God answered Elijah's prayer and sent rain in great torrents. In this way God showed through His true Prophet Elijah that He is the only true God and all the other gods are demons who can do nothing without His permission.

Jesus Christ

Now God Who has no beginning and is eternal and infinite decided to become a man like us so as to help us in this world and defeat the devil for us. When He became Man God took on a beginning. Since He is the God-Man, Jesus is called both the Son of God and the Son of Man. As the Son of God He has always existed in eternity with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. As the Son of Man He took on a beginning in time when He was born in Bethlehem.

The Name of God as a man is Jesus, which means Saviour because He came to save us. His second title is Christ, which means anointed because He was anointed by God the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament we read that prophets, priests and kings were anointed with Holy Oil (anointing or chrismation). It was a mystery of God given to man. This anointing gave the prophet, priest or king the Grace of the Holy Spirit. In Exodus 30.22-34 one can read the recipe for this Holy Oil given by God to Moses. God warns that He will punish severely any person who misuses this Holy Oil.

In the Old Testament anointing was given by pouring the Holy Oil over the head of the person. Since the Ascension of Christ to Heaven the Early Church started giving every Christian anointing after his Baptism. Why?

First, because a Christian is called to be a prophet, sharing with God some of His Thoughts and Plans for mankind. The more a man is empty of himself and the riches of this world, the better he can hear the Voice of God speak within his soul. A prophet is a friend of God, and through his life he walks with God sharing with Him His thoughts and feelings. A prophet is aware of God's Presence within his soul and around him. God is literally "at hand". He is our Invisible Friend.

A Christian is also called to be a priest, which means that he must sacrifice himself for God and other people. He can help people by making sacrifices of time or effort or money. A Christian is also called to be a king. This means he must be king over his passions. He should not be ruled by his passions but control them like a king. So a Christian is called to be a prophet, a priest and a king, just as Jesus is the Prophet Who gave the prophets their prophecies, the High Priest Who sacrificed Himself for all of us, and the King of all the ages.

The Christian Kings and Queens of Old England were anointed with Holy Chrism, as were the tsars of Russia. The last king of England to have been anointed with Holy Chrism was St. Edward the Confessor (and perhaps his successor, King Harold), whose body lies in Westminster Abbey. The Old Great Church of England had the Holy Chrism, but the present Church of England does not have it. When the present Queen of England was anointed, olive oil, not Holy Chrism, was used.

This Holy Oil of Chrismation is prepared once a year during Holy Week by a Patriarch or an Archbishop, together with his fellow bishops. Herbs and spices are put in a cauldron and boiled for many hours while prayers are said. Afterwards the Chrism is sent in small containers to all the churches under that Patriarch or Archbishop.

The mysteries of God are also called Sacraments. In a sacrament God acts upon water or oil or bread and wine, and a change takes place in it. It is God the Holy Spirit Who produces the change, but as the Holy Spirit is One with the Father and the Son, all Three Persons are taking part in the sacrament. Although our eyes cannot see the change, nor can we taste the difference in the bread and wine, God tells us that a change has taken place and we believe His word because He is the Truth and knows everything. So blessed water is different from water which has not been blessed. And when we receive communion we partake of the Most Holy Mystery of God which is united to the Holy Fire of God.

Think of a piece of burning coal. The coal is like the Body and Blood of Jesus and it expresses His human nature, while the fire of the coal is like His Divine nature. So a burning piece of coal shows us two natures united in one piece of coal. In the same way, Jesus is One Person in Two Natures. He is the God-Man.

Think of the door to a house. A door has two sides, an inner side which faces the inside of the house and an outer side which faces the world outside the house. But it is one door with two sides. In the same way Jesus is both God and Man in One Person. As God He faces inwards towards the Father and the Holy Spirit. And as Man he faces outwards towards us and our world. The outside of the door faces the world.

Jesus calls Himself "the Door" of the sheep. Now a door can open or close to let someone into the house or stop him entering. The Lord Jesus promises us that if we have faith in Him and believe Him, we must follow Him like little lambs. For He Himself is The Way Who leads us into the Kingdom of God which is the House of God. Jesus is The Way to the Door. To get to this Door is a secret Path. This Path is the Way of God. We give streets and roads names. Jesus said that many people will try to find this secret Path to God's Glorious Kingdom and they will not find it. The Lord warned us that there are many roads which are broad and vague going in all directions. but they do not lead us into the Kingdom of God but lead us astray. We get lost and we land up in the kingdom of the devil and his fallen angels. The Lord Jesus is our Shepherd Who is Himself the Way and the Door and He tells us that the Way is narrow and straight. It is like the Truth which is also straight and not full of twists and bends. Lies are crooked but the truth is straight. Of course God the Son knows the Way to His own Kingdom. We must be like little sheep following our Shepherd. He leads the Way in front of us. He is the Way.

Many people believe in God. Even the devils do so and they tremble, so the apostle James tells us ([James](#) 2.19). Believing in God is not the same as believing God. To believe God is to do what He tells us to do and not to do what He forbids us. Thus if you live in a town and I say to you: "Don't go to the next town because there is a monster on the way", and you say: "I believe you," but you promptly get on your cycle or walk to the other town and meet the monster, then it means that you still believe in me but you do not believe me. That is why you disobeyed. The devils believe in God but they do not believe God. Jesus said: "If you love Me you will do as I tell you". So it is not enough to believe in God: you must also do as He tells you to do. You must follow Him and know all the Words which He has spoken to us. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God which we call sinning they still believed in God but they had stopped believing God's Word above the Devil's voice.

The Lord Jesus Christ who is our God and Saviour is the Good Shepherd and the Way to His Kingdom, which He shares with His Father and The Holy Spirit.

The Church of Christ

One of the things God us to do was be baptized, that is, immersed three times “in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”. We have to receive a true Baptism in the way God has shown us if we want to belong to His family of Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles, Martyrs, Confessors and Saints.

The bible calls this family the household of God, or the Church. The Lord founded His Church on earth and gave it to His Apostles. You can only belong to God’s Family if you have been received into the Church founded by Christ. In the time of Noah there were many ships besides the ship, or ark, which Noah built, but only those who were in Noah’s ark were saved. Why? Because Noah’s ark was built on the instructions of God. The Church founded by Christ is the Ship He built to save us. We must belong to the Church if we want to be saved. The Church is often called the Ark.

Jesus said: “Many are called, but few are chosen”. Noah called many people to enter his Ark while he was building it, but only 8 believed and entered his ship. Noah warned people for 120 years. (Before the flood people lived for many hundreds of years. God shortened the lives of men after the flood.)

Why is that “many are called, but few are chosen”? Because now, as in Noah’s time, very few people respond to God’s calling. Even when they know about the Church of God and perhaps belong to a church built on the instructions of men rather than God, they do not want to leave their own ship and enter God’s Ship, the Church. Many make excuses of all sorts and time passes by. When God calls you, do not let Him wait. After all, He is not a mere man, but God, Who has made you and is calling you. When you are a soldier you do not the general wait on you, but you adjust to his timing. When you are a minister in the British government, you do not expect the Queen to see you when it suits you. No – a minister has to adjust to the timing of the Queen.

At the end of the world, the King of the universe, the Lord Jesus Christ, will come to judge all the people in the world. After the Great Judgement, He will create a new heaven and a new earth (Isaiah 65.17), and there will be no more sickness, death, tears, pain or sorrow. The new earth will be full of love and joy. It will be so beautiful, so great, far more wonderful and exciting than we can imagine. If we want to be with the Lord Jesus Christ in the Kingdom of heaven, we must listen to His words and respond to them before it is too late.

1. JOACHIM AND ANNA - THE PARENTS OF THE VIRGIN MARY

Joachim and Anna were a pious couple who loved God very much, praying to Him and going regularly to the Temple to worship and offer sacrifices. They were very rich people, but they were also very generous and loved the poor, rejoicing to do good works to the glory of God. However, they were very unhappy because they desperately wanted to have a child, but no child came.

For the Jews it was vitally important to have a child, because they hoped that the promised Son of God, or Messiah, would be born from their family. But if no child came, this meant that the Messiah could not be born from their family. They also believed that childless couples were not blessed by God.

One feast day, Joachim went to the Temple to bring his offering to God. Issachar was high priest at that time; he refused to accept Joachim's offering because he was childless. As if that were not enough, a Jew from the tribe of Reuben also reproached Joachim.

Joachim fled to the wilderness to beseech God to grant him a child, although he and Anna were about sixty years old. He thought of Abraham and Sarah, who got their son Isaac when they were very old. In the meantime, Anna was beseeching God for a child at her home in Nazareth. She knew how much Joachim had been reproached, and that he had gone to the wilderness to pray. An angel appeared to Anna and told her that she would bear a child who would bring salvation to the world. And she was told to call her name Mary.

Anna went to the Temple in Jerusalem to thank God. In the meantime, an angel gave Joachim the same joyful tidings and told him to go to the Golden Gate in Jerusalem, where he would find Anna. So Joachim hurried to the city and found Anna at the Golden Gate. There they embraced each other with joy. There is an icon representing this joyful embrace of Joachim and Anna.

In this story we see the importance God gives to names. Anna was told that her daughter was to be called Mary. Zachariah, the father of St. John the Baptist, was told that his son was to be called John. And Joseph was told in a dream that the Child of Mary was to be called Jesus.

2. THE BIRTH OF THE VIRGIN MARY

The Virgin Mary was born on September 8th according to the Orthodox Church's calendar. What a great feast this was for Joachim and Anna and all their household!

God had promised Eve that one day the Holy One of God, who is called in the Old Testament the Messiah and in the New Testament Jesus, would be born in the world to fight against the devil and crush him in the head. Now God had warned Eve that the devil would wound Him in the heel, which means that the devil would stir up the people to kill Jesus on the Cross. But it is the last battle that counts. If you win the last battle, then you have won. Jesus came back from the dead alive and with a Body of flesh and bones. So He won the last battle over death, crushing the head of the devil.

But the Holy One of God, Jesus, could not come to earth to fight the devil until his mother Mary had been born. When she had been born, He could be born of her, taking flesh from her body. Do you remember how God made Eve from the side of Adam while he was asleep? Now God reversed the process, making a new creation out of Mary.

In the old creation God made Adam with His two hands: Christ and the Holy Spirit. God made Eve out of Adam's side, so that Adam said: "This is now flesh of my flesh, and bone of my bones." Now Mary becomes the new Eve, and God makes from her flesh a new creation: God become man. The new creation is the God-man: Jesus Christ.

The Prophet Isaiah said: "A Virgin shall give birth to a Son, Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us'" ([Isaiah 7.14](#)). This Virgin was the Virgin Mary, whose Son, Jesus, is God with us, although He is also a man. So from now onwards Mary is called the Mother of God.

3. THE ENTRY OF THE MOTHER OF GOD INTO THE TEMPLE

When the Virgin Mary was only three years old, Joachim and Anna decided that she should be brought to the Temple and brought up there.

It was possible to get an education at the Temple only if you were of a good family. Mary was descended from King David, so she was of the royal line. Moreover, her father Joachim was very rich and could afford to pay for her to get the best education. In the Temple she would learn all the Old Testament Scriptures: the five books of Moses, the books of History, the Prophets, the Psalms. And she would also be taught how to weave and make robes.

Joachim and Anna were elderly people and they didn't know how much longer they would live. But we know that when the Archangel Gabriel told the Virgin Mary that she would become the mother of Jesus, they were no longer alive. If Anna, her mother, had been alive, she would have rushed to her to tell her the good news, but instead the Virgin sped to the house of Elizabeth, who was Anna's niece and her cousin.

Now Joachim and Anna were afraid that Mary would be too sad to say goodbye to her mother and father. So they asked the older virgins to take torches in their hands when they arrived so that the little girl Mary would look at the beautiful flickering torches and forget about her parents. When they arrived, the other girls lined up with torches and the High Priest Zechariah himself, Elizabeth's husband, came to receive Mary into the Temple. She let go of her parents' hands and went happily with him into the House of God.

According to tradition, she went up the steps to the Holy of Holies and Zechariah did not stop her. Now the High Priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies only once a year. But Mary used to enter it during the years she was growing up and was taught by angels there. In this way God prepared her spiritually to become the Mother of His Son on earth.

It was the custom that when the Temple girls became old enough to marry, good husbands would be found for them. However, when they asked Mary about this, - she was about fourteen years old at the time - she said that she wanted to remain a Virgin and not be married like all the other girls. Now Zechariah knew that Mary was special, so he announced to the men who wanted to get married that if any of them wanted to marry Mary it would mean that she would look after his house and cook for him, but that she would remain single and not become his wife. There were several pious elderly men who agreed to this. Zechariah asked them to give him their walking-staffs and told them to return the next day to the Temple, when they

would learn which of them God had decided would be the husband and protector of Mary.

The next day Zechariah found that one of the staffs had budded during the night. He asked to whom it belonged. It was Joseph's staff. So God had chosen Joseph to be like a husband to Mary. According to tradition, Joseph was an elderly widower who had had several children from his wife, who had died. They were all grown up except for James, who was about six years old.

So Mary moved into the house with Joseph and looked after him and James.

4. ZECHARIAH AND ELIZABETH - THE PARENTS OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

(Luke 1.1-25)

Zechariah and Elizabeth were an elderly couple, and were very sad that they had no child. Elizabeth was the niece of Anna, the Virgin Mary's mother, who had died some years before. One special day, when it was Zechariah's turn to serve as high priest in the Temple, the Archangel Gabriel suddenly appeared on the right side of the altar and told Zechariah that Elizabeth was going to have a son and that his name should be John. Gabriel told him that their son would be a great prophet who come in the spirit of Elijah to prepare the way for the Coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Zechariah could not believe that such an old couple as he and his wife Elizabeth could have a child. The Archangel was angry with Zechariah for not believing his words, and said that from that moment he would become dumb and therefore unable to speak.

This is a warning to us that God will punish us if we do not believe His words. If Zechariah had been doubting whether it was really the Archangel Gabriel who was talking to him, that would have been a different matter. He was not doubting that it was the Archangel Gabriel, but that two old people could get a child. He did not have enough faith that what is impossible for men is possible for God. With God all things are possible.

5. THE ANNUNCIATION OF THE VIRGIN MARY

(Luke 1.26-56)

Six months after the Archangel Gabriel had appeared to Zechariah, and Elizabeth had conceived a child, John, the same Archangel came to the Virgin Mary as she was living in Nazareth with Joseph.

The Virgin was reading the words of Isaiah: "A Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, Whose name shall be Emmanuel, God with us." In her great humility, the Virgin was thinking how wonderful it would be to be the servant of this Virgin, little realizing that she herself was that Virgin! At that moment the Archangel appeared to her, greeted her with great reverence and said these beautiful words: "Rejoice, thou full of grace, the Lord is with thee!" Then the Archangel gave her the message from God that she would become the Mother of His Son on earth. The Virgin was cautious, because she remembered how Eve had been deceived by the most beautiful angel Lucifer, who had disguised himself as a snake. So she asked how it was possible for her to become a mother since she wanted to remain a virgin and not be married to Joseph. The great Archangel explained that first the Holy Spirit would descend upon her, and the Power of the Most High would overshadow her. So the Holy One born of her would be called the Son of God. Mary questioned the Archangel, not because she doubted that for God all things are possible, but because she wanted to remain a Virgin. When the Archangel told her that Jesus would be born of her through an act of God alone, she immediately replied: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord, let it be to me according to thy word." She believed that God could let her have His Son without an earthly father. So God had proposed marriage to the Virgin Mary through his Archangel Gabriel, and the Holy Virgin had freely and joyfully accepted His offer.

The Virgin now ran to her cousin Elizabeth to tell her the great news. Just at the moment she entered the house, the baby who was in Elizabeth's womb jumped with joy. Then, filled with the Holy Spirit, Elizabeth cried out: "Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. But why is this granted to me that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?" So Elizabeth was the first person to know that the Child whom Mary was bearing was God Himself. That is why we call her the Mother of God.

Then the Virgin, the Mother of God ("Theotokos" in Greek), said these beautiful words: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour. For He has regarded the lowliness of His handmaiden. For behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For He Who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is His name." This is the song of the Bride expressing her exultant joy at having been chosen by the Bridegroom. There is no pride in it. Every bride understands this joy, when

the man she loves asks her to become his bride. The heart of the Mary the Virgin belonged only to God, and she was overjoyed to become His Bride.

Mary stayed at Elizabeth's house for another three months and then returned to Nazareth. The great mystery of Mary's calling and vocation is praised by the Church in hymns: "Truly it is meet to bless thee, who didst bring forth God, ever-blessed and most pure, and the Mother of our God. More honourable than the Cherubim, and more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim, who without corruption didst bear God the Word, and art indeed the Birth-giver of God, thee do we magnify."

On icons we see Mary with one star on her forehead, and one on each of her shoulders. This has two meanings. First it means that she was Virgin before, during and after the Birth of Jesus. And secondly it forms a triangle and expresses the idea that the new Creation she received in her womb was an act of God the Holy Trinity. Just as at the first creation the Holy Spirit moved over the face of the water before the Word spoke with the consent of God the Father, so it was at the moment of the new Creation. First the Holy Spirit descended upon Mary, and then the Power of the Most High (the Son of the Father) overshadowed her and took flesh in her.

When God made Adam and Eve, He used virgin soil for their bodies. It was an act of God alone, God the Holy Trinity. Similarly with the new Creation: when God became man He used a virgin womb. However, this new Creation is not an act of God alone, but of God and the Virgin Mary together. Without her consent it could never have taken place. God proposed to her and she accepted: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to thy word." That is why she is called the unwedded Bride of God.

6. THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

(Luke 1.57-80)

The time came for the birth of John. The Jews had the custom of giving the child his name on the eighth day after birth, when he was circumcised. (Circumcision was a ritual for male children.) The family wanted the child to be called Zechariah after his father, but Elizabeth said that he had to be called John. They did not believe her and asked Zechariah about it. Since he could not speak, he took a writing tablet and wrote: "His name is John." At that moment his tongue was loosed and he could speak. Everyone was amazed that Zechariah could speak again. Then he was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied that John would be the prophet of God and go before the Lord Jesus to prepare His ways. He said that John would tell the people about the forgiveness of sins which God would give them through Jesus. John would prepare them to receive this forgiveness by exhorting them to repent.

Repentance means a change of thinking and acting. When we repent we see and understand that we have sinned against God and we try to live in a different way. Instead of living away from God, we want to live with God. We rethink our lives and listen to our conscience, which is like a compass in our hearts that tells us what is the way to God and what is not the way to God.

7. THE NATIVITY OF JESUS

(Matthew 1; Luke 2.1-20)

The Roman emperor, whose name was Caesar Augustus, had decreed that everyone had to be registered in his family town. Now both Joseph and Mary were of the house and family of David. So they went to David's town, Bethlehem. When they arrived in Bethlehem, there was room for them only in a stable in a rock cave. The Prophet Isaiah had prophesied that Jesus would be born among animals - an ox and an ass.

During that holy, silent night, the Glory of God shone over a field nearby, where shepherds were guarding their sheep. Suddenly a host of Angels appeared to them, singing: "Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace, God's good will among men." "Glory to God in the Highest" was referring to God the Father. "Peace on earth, God's good will among men" is Jesus Christ His Son. The Prophet Isaiah prophesied that this Child would be the Prince of peace and Almighty God (9.6).

Then an Angel of the Lord stood before the shepherds and announced: "Do not be afraid, for I bring you great tidings of joy which will be to all people. For today is born to you in the city of David [Bethlehem] a Saviour, Who is Christ the Lord." And then the Angel continued: "And this will be a sign to you: you will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling-clothes, lying in a manger."

So as soon as the host of Angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds went to Bethlehem to look for the Baby. They understood that He had been born in a stable because the Angel had said that He would be lying in a manger, which is a feeding-trough for animals. There were many caves around Bethlehem where animals were kept at night, but this stable in a cave had to be in Bethlehem, and there was only one mother who had given birth there during the night. So they found the cave and the Babe wrapped in swaddling-clothes lying in a manger. And they worshipped Him, for the Angel had told them that He was God the Son, Who was to bring us great joy as our Saviour.

They brought Him a little white lamb as a present, because Jesus is the Lamb of God. And they found Him in Bethlehem, because Bethlehem means "House of Bread" and Jesus is the Bread of Life.

So the shepherds were the first people to be told about this heavenly present of God the Father to Man. They were close at hand and were told by angels, not through books. So they signify the simple, good people of the earth who are close to God and who are told the mysteries of God directly from Him. They also signify the Jewish people.

Now the three wise kings were told about the Birth of Christ by a star. They had knowledge and represent the clever people of the world. They also represent the Gentile nations. The clever people can also find Jesus, but they have to travel a long way to find Him. When the three kings saw the star they knew from the prophecies that a great king had been born. The star was most likely an angel who took the form of a star and showed them the way, because when they came to Jerusalem it suddenly disappeared. So they went to the palace of King Herod to ask about the Birth of the King. There they were told that according to the Prophet Micah (5.2) He would be born in Bethlehem. Herod asked them to tell him when they had found the King.

As soon as they left the palace they saw the star again and joyfully followed it to Bethlehem. There the star stopped and stood over the stable where Jesus had been born. Going into the stable, they saw Mary with the Child Jesus, and fell down and worshipped Him. Then they offered the treasures which they had brought: gold, because Jesus is the King of all the ages; frankincense, because of the prayers which are offered up to Him as God; and myrrh, because He was going to die for us on the cross and be buried before rising from the dead as the Immortal One.

Then the kings were warned in a dream not to return to King Herod, because he did not actually want to worship Jesus, but wanted to kill Him. So the kings returned to their countries by a different way.

That night Joseph was warned by an angel in a dream to wake up Mary and flee with her into Egypt. According to tradition, Joseph's youngest son, the seven-year-old James, came with them. He later became the first bishop of Jerusalem. He is often called the Brother of Jesus because in the Middle East one's cousins and nephews and step-brothers and step-sisters are also called one's brothers and sisters.

8. THE MEETING OF THE LORD IN THE TEMPLE

(Luke 2.21-40)

Now when Jesus was forty days old, Mary and Joseph brought Him to the Temple as an offering to God. The Jews always brought their first-born sons to the Temple as offerings to God because when God had saved the people of Israel in Egypt, He had sent the Angel of death to kill the first-born sons of the Egyptians but had spared the Jews. So in gratitude for their deliverance, the Jews used to bring their first-born male children as an offering to God. Only God commanded that "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons" be offered instead of the male children. Also, the mothers were commanded to present themselves to the Temple forty days after the birth of their child, a custom still followed in the Orthodox Church.

So Mary came with Jesus to the Temple, where they were met by the High Priest Symeon. Symeon was a very old man who had been one of the 70 learned Jews who had translated the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek. One day, while he was doing this translation, he came across the passage in Isaiah where the prophet says that a Virgin shall conceive and bear a Child (7.14). Thinking that this was a mistake, and that a virgin could not possibly bear a child, Symeon was about to change the word "virgin" to "young woman". But at that moment an Angel appeared to him and told him not to change the text, because by God's grace he would live to see the fulfilment of this prophecy - he would see the Virgin and her Child, Emmanuel. So for many years he lived in Jerusalem waiting for the fulfilment of the prophecy. Then one day God the Holy Spirit told him to go to the Temple - and there he saw the Virgin Mary with Jesus in her arms.

Then Symeon lifted up his eyes to God the Father and thanked Him for having given him the honour to hold God the Son and his Saviour in his arms. And Symeon is called the God-bearer because He was counted worthy to cradle God in his arms. And then he uttered these beautiful words which are sung every evening in the Orthodox Church: "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before all peoples, a light of revelation for the Gentiles and the glory of Thy people Israel."

Then Symeon prophesied that for those who believed in Jesus He would be a "precious stone", and their faith in Him would not be ashamed. But he warned that for other He would be a stumbling block, and that those who rejected Him as their God and Saviour would "fall". Symeon also warned the Virgin that a sword would pierce her heart. This prophecy was fulfilled when she stood at the foot of the Cross and suffered to see her holy Child, Her Son and God, dying for us in such a humiliating way, as if He were a criminal, although He was in fact the Creator Who stretched out the heavens in beauty.

According to tradition, Symeon did not, as was the custom, accept the two doves and sacrifice them instead of the Lord Jesus. Instead he let the two doves fly out of the cage. For this time God was accepting the sacrifice of the first-born Son of the Virgin. The Lord Jesus was going to sacrifice Himself in order to take away our sins.

Also present in the Temple at that time was a prophetess called Anna. She had been a widow for 84 years after having lived for seven years in marriage. She did not leave the Temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. On seeing Jesus in the Temple, she thanked God and told everyone that He was the Messiah Who would redeem His people.

God has taught us in the Law of Moses that we need two or three witnesses to prove a case. Here the two witnesses were Symeon, who represented the priesthood of the Temple, and Anna, who represented the prophets. They both loudly proclaimed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah and the Saviour of the world.

9. THE HOLY INNOCENTS

(Matthew 2)

When King Herod heard that the three wise kings were not going to come back to him to tell him where to find the newborn King, he was very angry. After questioning the three kings when they had first seen the star, he had worked out that the Holy Child could not be more than two years old. So he ordered his soldiers to go to Bethlehem and the district round it and kill all the baby boys who were two years old or younger.

These little boys were the first martyrs for Christ. They are called the Holy innocents. In this way the prophecy of the Prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled. He had said that there would be weeping and crying, Rachel crying over her children.

Rachel was the second wife of Jacob. She died in childbirth after giving birth to two sons, and her tomb is near Bethlehem. Jacob's first wife was called Leah, and she is a symbol of the Old Testament Church and the Jewish nation. His second wife, Rachel, is a symbol of the Christian Church.

The Holy Innocents were killed through the instigation of Satan and his fallen angels. Whenever a great act of God takes place, the fallen angels are at hand, trying to stop it. Now the Annunciation and the Virgin Birth of Jesus were hidden from the devil - he did not know that God had become man in the womb of Mary. It was a secret. However, he carefully observed the behaviour of the shepherds and the wise kings and probably worked out that something very important was taking place. So he stirred up the heart of Herod against the newborn King. He made him brood while he waited for the return of the three kings. And when they did not return, Satan filled him with fear and jealousy.

This often happens in the lives of the saints. Satan and his fallen angels constantly stir up evil men against Christians. However, God and His good Angels are always present to strengthen and protect us against the attacks of the fallen angels.

10. JESUS IN HIS FATHER'S HOUSE

(Luke 2.41-52)

It was the custom of the Jews to go to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When Jesus was twelve years old, He and His family went up to Jerusalem for the Feast. They travelled in a group of families, and on the way back Mary and Joseph presumed that Jesus was in the group. However, after one day's travelling, they noticed that He was not in the group, so they went back to Jerusalem looking for Him.

After three days' anxious searching, they found Him in the Temple listening to the teachers and putting questions to them. And "all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers." You can imagine the surprise of Mary and Joseph on seeing their twelve-year-old Son putting questions to the teachers of the Temple. His Mother said: "Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought you anxiously?" But Jesus replied: "Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?"

Here Jesus tells them that God is His Father, and that it is right that He should be in the Temple, His Father's House, questioning the teachers. Here in the Temple, His Father's House, Jesus shows His authority at the age of twelve. Then He went to Nazareth with Mary and Joseph and showed them humble obedience.

11. THE HERALD OF THE KING

(Matthew 3.1-12; Mark 1.1-8; Luke 3.1-18; John 1.6-28)

When King Herod ordered the killing of the Holy Innocents, Elizabeth fled with her son John into the wilderness. Meanwhile, the soldiers came to John's father, Zechariah, as he was serving in the Temple, and asked him where his son was. But Zechariah did not know where his wife and son had fled to. So the soldiers killed him in front of the altar. So John lost his father when he was about six months old, and his mother, being elderly, must have died when he was still a young boy.

John lived in the wilderness, eating locusts and wild honey. He was being trained by God the Holy Spirit for his great mission, which was to prepare the way for Christ, Who would bring forgiveness to His people. Then came the moment when the Word of God came to John to start his ministry.

To be forgiven one has to repent first. The great work of John was to bring people to an awareness of how sinful they were. The people flocked to him in the wilderness and he said to them: "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." And he told them that they had to be baptized by him in order to be able to receive the great Baptism of Christ at a later stage. So the baptism of John was a preparation for the Baptism of Christ. John gave people an awareness of their sins and water baptism in preparation for Christ's Baptism by water and the Spirit, which gave them the forgiveness of sins.

The Prophet Isaiah had prophesied that God would send the Prophet John to prepare the way for Christ (Isaiah 40.3-5). People mistook John for the Messiah Himself, but he rejected this firmly, saying: "I indeed baptize you with water, but One mightier than I is coming Whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire"

Now by the Baptism with the Holy Spirit John was referring to the Day of Pentecost, when God the Holy Spirit would descend upon the Church, the Apostles and the holy women. And by the Baptism with fire he was referring to the fire of the Last Judgement. John was warning the people that Christ was not only the Saviour of the world: He was also its Judge. Therefore they had to bring forth fruits worthy of repentance. "The axe is laid to the root of the trees," he said. "Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And again: "His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire".

What are the good fruits that a Christian should bear? They are repentance and a change of life towards God. John pointed to the sins we suffer from, the bad fruits we bring forth: greediness, selfishness, dishonesty, pride, jealousy,

envy, etc. The fruits of true repentance, however, are: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

We get the warning again and again from the prophets and apostles and Christ Himself: if there is nothing of God in a man, he is a hollow person, like a husk, and he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. Faith is not enough: it must be expressed in good works, good fruit.

12. THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

(Matthew 3.13-17; Mark 1.9-11; Luke 3.21-22; John 1.29-34)

John was told by God that he would be given a sign to know who the Messiah was. "Upon Whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining upon Him, this is He Who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." But when Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John, John tried to prevent Him, saying: "I need to be baptized by You, and You are coming to me?!" So John already knew who Christ was, even before receiving the promised sign.

Jesus told John to baptize Him "to fulfil all righteousness". Then John with a trembling hand touched the Divine Head of Christ to baptize Him Who would baptize men with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Jesus was sinless and did not need to be purified through Baptism. But the Lord identified Himself with fallen humanity, and wanted to show men the way to salvation by His own example. And as man can be saved only through Baptism, which is the first work of faith, He Himself was baptized.

St. Gregory of Nyssa writes: "Jesus enters the filthy (sinful) waters of the world and when He comes up He brings the entire world up with Him." In His Baptism the Lord purified the waters, so that we might be purified through them. Thus the Baptism of Christ was the first step towards the salvation of mankind, which was completed by His crucifixion, resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven. The work of redemption had begun.

When Jesus had been baptized, as He was coming up from the water, the heavens were opened and the Spirit of God descended like a dove upon Him. And suddenly the voice of the Father came from heaven, saying: "This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased." So in the Baptism of Jesus the great Mystery of the Holy Trinity is revealed. The Father speaks; the Holy Spirit descends; the incarnate Son is baptized and anointed! At this Theophany (or manifestation of God), humanity receives the first public witness to the Divinity of Christ by God the Father and God the Holy Spirit.

In the Law of Moses God decreed that we should always have two or three witnesses to prove a case. God the Father and God the Holy Spirit are the two Divine Witnesses that Christ also is God. He is the Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Spirit hovered over the waters at the first creation (Gen. 1.2). Now the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove anoints the Messiah, the Son of Man, at the beginning of the new creation. Christ as God the Son has never been separated from the Holy Spirit. But here the Holy Spirit's visible presence reveals the Divinity of Christ by descending and remaining upon His Humanity. Adam lost the Holy Spirit in the Garden of Eden through disobedience to God. Now God is revealing that in the Person of Christ the Holy Spirit has been restored to mankind.

The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove reminds us of the time when a dove returned to the ark of Noah with an olive twig in its beak. Here the Holy Spirit is revealing that Christ is the Ark of Salvation and that He is bringing healing (the olive is a symbol of healing) to all nations. The next time Noah sent the dove out of the ark it did not return. This was a symbol of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Church and remained and rested in her.

When John saw Jesus coming to him he said: "Behold! The Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world!" For Christ was going to be killed like a lamb on the Cross in order to cleanse us from all our sins. And then John said: "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. I did not know Him, but He Who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'Upon Whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He Who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."

13. THE TEMPTATIONS IN THE WILDERNESS

(Matthew 4.1-11; Mark 1.12-13; Luke 4.1-13)

Immediately after His Baptism, Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, was led by Him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

In the Lord's prayer we pray: "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." In the Old Testament the people of God under Moses were delivered from Egypt, which is a symbol of the world, by an act of God leading them through the Red Sea, which is a symbol of Baptism. But they were then led through the wilderness, which is a symbol of the whole of our earthly life with its temptations, before they could cross the Jordan into the Promised Land. In the same way, the people of God in the New Testament are delivered from the world through Baptism, and then follow Christ into the wilderness of temptations.

Satan comes to tempt Christ in His Manhood. Of course, Satan could not tempt Christ in His Divinity. How can a created being, however exalted, tempt his Creator?!

Satan tempted Christ in three ways, just as he had tempted Adam in three ways. Only Christ resisted the temptations. The New Adam reversed the fall of the Old Adam.

Eve had doubted in the goodness of God; she didn't trust Him implicitly anymore. She satisfied her hunger (the food looked "good to eat"); in her disobedience she lost the fear of death. She was motivated by ambition, fed by pride. Eve believed Satan's lying words that she could become equal to God by her own efforts, by eating the forbidden fruit.

After Jesus had fasted for forty days in the wilderness, and was hungry, the tempter came to Him and said: "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread" (Matt. 4.3). But Jesus answered: "It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." Again, as in the Garden of Eden, the temptation is hunger. But Christ is not controlled by the hunger of the flesh; rather, He controls the flesh.

The forty days are symbolic of a trial period, like the forty years that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. The wilderness signifies our time on earth after Baptism and until our death. During this time, we must not "change stones into bread", which means satisfy our hunger in ways contrary to God's will. Christ points out that we must live "not by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." We have to continue to be hungry if God so wills.

This applies to all carnal desires. The hunger of the flesh can refer to sexual desire, or the longing to have a child, etc. If one hungers for a loving relationship in marriage but it is not given to one, then one has to accept this in obedience to the will of God and not rebel by entering into various "affairs" to satisfy this hunger. If one is not blessed with a child in the manner that God has ordained, it is not right to use all the unnatural and sometimes clearly adulterous methods of modern technology to get a child: in vitro fertilization, mother surrogates, etc. All this is changing stones into bread. It is disobedience to the will of God.

Then the devil took Christ up to Jerusalem and set Him on the pinnacle of the Temple and said to Him: "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: 'He shall give His angels charge over You. In their hands they shall bear You up, lest You dash Your foot against a stone.'" But Jesus answered him: "It is written again, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"

Here for the second time the devil is challenging Jesus' relationship to the Father: "If You are the Son of God..." He is angling for information, because he is suspicious of Him: is He really the Holy One of God? However, Christ did not confirm his suspicions; He kept His Divine Origin and Status concealed. And He did not fall for the temptation of vainglory by proving that He was the Son of God in some spectacular way. Rejecting all such spectacular signs, He chose instead the path of persecution, humiliation and death in accordance with the Father's will. He waited until His Resurrection before demonstrating both to the devil and to the whole world that He was God.

In the third temptation, the devil took Christ up an exceedingly high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him: "All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me." But Jesus answered him: "Away with you, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve.'" Then the devil left Him and angels came and ministered to Him.

Here Christ was being tempted by ambition; He was being asked to choose worldly power over the Kingdom of God. The devil is "the ruler of this world" (John 12.31; 16.11) and "the god of this age" (II Cor. 4.4), because the whole world is in his power (I John 5.19). But the Lord tells us that we cannot serve two masters: God and the devil, because the devil opposes the will of God and is the enemy of God and man. By refusing the kingdoms of this world from the hands of the devil, the Lord set Himself on the path of suffering and death for the redemption of the world.

In each of the temptations the devil tempted Christ by quoting from the Bible, and Christ answered him from the same Bible. But the devil quoted them as heretics like the Jehovah's Witnesses do, out of context and without

understanding their real meaning, while Christ quoted them in the right way, revealing their true meaning. In this way He showed us how we should fight the devil - by knowing the Bible and its true meaning. Being the Word of God Himself, He showed us by His own example that we have to live from every word that comes from the mouth of God.

14. "SEEING, THEY WILL NOT SEE, HEARING, THEY WILL NOT HEAR"

These words describe a severe judgement of God, that comes upon people for two reasons.

First, they prefer the lie to the truth. In St. Paul's second epistle to the Thessalonians (2.10-12), we read that people are given many chances to see the truth, which is Christ, the Truth incarnate. It is only through the truth that we can be saved. God is very longsuffering, but if people stubbornly prefer the lie to the truth, He withdraws the Holy Spirit from them and sends them a "strong delusion". The devil and his fallen angels offer many unrighteous deceptions, e.g. occultism, false healings, psychic powers, etc. Those who fall for these deceptions will perish "because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved." "And for this reason God will send them a strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness." So when people come under a strong delusion, it is a sign of the judgement of God on them because they prefer the truth to the lie.

Secondly, they care more for the honour of men than for the honour which comes from God. In St. John's Gospel (9.6-44), we read that a man born blind was healed by Christ, Who spat on the earth and out of the clay made new eyes for him. St. Irenaeus sees here a type of the creation of man from the earth (Gen. 2.7). Christ reveals His Divinity by creating eyes for the man in the same that He created man in the beginning - from earth and water. However, the establishment refused to believe that the man had been born blind. When they asked his parents about it, they admitted that he had been born blind, but out of fear of being thrown out of the synagogue they did not confess that Christ had done the miracle. So they care more for the honour of men than for the honour that comes from God. Instead of glorifying Christ, they refused to honour Him and left it to their son to honour Him. Sadly Jesus said: "For judgement have I come into the world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind".

The man born blind is symbolic of the whole of humanity. We all need illumination by Christ. This man acquires spiritual eyes as well as physical ones, because he sees who Christ is and worships Him as the Son of God. His physical eyes see a man standing before him, but the eyes of his heart see His Divinity behind the humanity. The Pharisees, however, in rejecting a great act of God, refused to see the Divinity of Christ and were plunged into darkness. The more often they rejected the truth, the harder it was for them to see, and the deeper became their darkness. Thus when they ask Jesus: "Are we blind also?", Jesus replies: "If you were blind, you would have no sin, but now you say 'we see', your sin remains".

They see the Son of Man, they observe His miracles, they hear His words - and they reject Him. What is hindering them? Sin: wilful stubbornness, pride, hardness of heart, vainglory.

When Christ stood before Pontius Pilate, and Pilate asked Him whether He was a king, Christ answered that His Kingdom was not of this world. When Pilate pursued the same question: "Are you a king then?" Jesus answered him: "You say rightly that I am a King. For this cause was I born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." (John 18.33-38).

The truth is that God is the Truth and the devil is a liar. The truth is that God loves us truly, while the devil pretends to do so while enslaving us by the lie. The truth is that God like a true King died for His subjects, so that they would be free and not enslaved by the devil, but have eternal life in His Kingdom. Pilate asked: "What is the truth?" while looking the Truth in the face.

15. MIRACLES OF HEALING

What is a miracle? It is an act of God that overthrows the law of nature. Now the Lord healed thousands of people and the Apostles recorded three raisings from the dead. But the Lord made it clear that the purpose of His Coming was not to heal the sick and raise the dead. These were acts of mercy, but they were secondary to His Mission.

The root of all sickness, death and evil in the world is the loss of God. Jesus came to preach the Gospel (Luke 4.43) and to restore the communion between God and man, to close the chasm that had opened up between them since the fall. Once He had restored this communion, Jesus' work on earth would be accomplished. It was accomplished by His death on the Cross, when He said: "It is finished" (John 19.30).

Now Jesus healed in many different ways, sometimes by touch, sometimes by rebuking the demon or a fever (Luke 4.39). Distance did not matter to Christ. In the healing of the centurion's servant He just gave the command and instantly the dying servant was healed. The centurion was a Gentile, not a Jew. But he had such great faith in Jesus that the Lord said about him: "I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel". And he had great humility, for he did not go in person to the Lord, but sent friends to Him, saying: "Lord, do not trouble Yourself, for I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof. Therefore I did not even think myself worthy to come to You. But say the word and my servant will be healed". Also, the centurion had great love for his servant. So the Gentile centurion had love, faith and humility. (Luke 7.1-10).

The man covered with leprosy fell on his face and implored Jesus, saying: "Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean" (Luke 5.12). Then Jesus touched him, saying: "I am willing, be cleansed", after which the leprosy immediately left him. Here again we see humility in the person being healed. Moreover, he knew that God has free will and is not obliged to heal anyone, which shows faith as well as humility.

Jesus' mission was to preach the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, but He knew that for the majority of people all that matters is that they get rid of pain and sickness so as to enjoy life fully again. Their thoughts run: "Come on, make me better. Never mind about the Kingdom of God - that's a long way ahead, after death. But we live now, in this life!"

They are like Esau, who sold his spiritual birth-right to satisfy his physical hunger with a delicious bean stew prepared by Jacob. Esau represents the man of the world, who never thinks about death or the Kingdom of God, but lives only for a good, satisfying life on earth. His flesh and all his earthly passions have to be satisfied, he refuses to go hungry. Jacob, however, whose

name was changed to Israel ("he who sees God"), represents the man who realizes that a spiritual inheritance and riches are far greater than material possessions.

Christ healed multitudes of the people in the plain. He would also teach them there, sitting in a boat and facing the crowd. But when He wanted to give them deeper teachings, He would go up a mountain, where only those who loved God for Himself, and not only to be cured by Him, would follow.

When He wanted to give even deeper teaching, He would choose to be alone and away from everyone with His closest disciples. The greatest manifestation of His Divinity was on Mount Tabor in the presence of only three disciples: Peter, James and John.

On one occasion a paralytic was healed in an unusual way. His friends opened the roof of the house in which Christ was teaching and lowered him down on a bed in front of Him. When Jesus saw the faith of his friends, he said to the paralytic: "Man, your sins are forgiven you" (Luke 5.20). At that moment Christ was talking to some Pharisees and teachers of the Law. They began to reason, saying: "Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Of course, if Jesus were only a man, He could not forgive sins. But here He was showing them that He was more than a man. "The Son of Man," He says, "has power on earth to forgive sins." And then He said to the paralytic: "I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house." First Jesus forgave the man his sins, and then he healed his paralysis. In this case sin was the cause of illness, and it was in response to the faith of his friends that Jesus healed the paralytic.

Near the sheep gate in Jerusalem there was a pool, which in Hebrew was called Bethesda. There lay a multitude of sick people, blind, lame, paralyzed, all of whom were waiting for the water to move in a special way. For an angel went down at a certain time into the pool and stirred the water. And whoever stepped first into the pool after that was healed of whatever disease he had.

Now by the pool there lay a man who had been paralyzed for thirty-eight years. Jesus saw him and asked: "Do you want to be made well?" The sick man answered Him: "Sir, I have no man to put me into the pool when the water is stirred; but while I am coming, another steps down before me." Then Jesus told him to take up his bed and walk.

Later, Jesus found the man in the Temple and said: "See, you have been made well. Sin no more lest a worse thing happen to you." So sin had been at the root of his 38-year illness. It is interesting to see how in this case Christ first heals him physically, and then opens his eyes to an understanding of the condition of sin which caused his illness. (John 5.1-15).

Not all illness is the direct result of sin or is given to us for our chastisement, although it is true that in a general sense there would be no illness or death if there had not been sin. In the case of the man born blind (John 9), Jesus reveals to us that his blindness was not caused by sin, "but that the works of God should be revealed in him" (v. 3).

One Sabbath day, Jesus healed a man of dropsy (Luke 14.1-6). The Gospel says that "He took him and healed him and let him go." Now on that day Jesus was in the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees for a meal, and He knew that in their hearts they were accusing Him of breaking the Law on the Sabbath by "working", that is, healing. Jesus explained to them that according to the Law they were allowed to save an animal who had fallen into a pit, or loose it from a stall, or water it, etc. So He was allowed to do healings on the Sabbath day because "the Son of Man is Lord also of the Sabbath" (Luke 6.5). The Sabbath day was a rest day according to the Law. But this was no reason not to do good or relieve suffering, whether of men or animals.

On another Sabbath day, the disciples were walking through the fields and plucking and eating the grain. One of the Pharisees rebuked them for this, but Jesus reminded him how David had taken the showbread from the Temple which was meant only for the priests and had given it to his men when they were hungry. So in God's eyes David was justified in taking the showbread to still the hunger of his men. Mercy overrules ritualistic observance.

Once, as Jesus was passing through Samaria on his way to Jerusalem, ten lepers met him. They stood afar off and cried: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" Jesus saw them and said: "Go, show yourselves to the priest". So in this case He did not touch them. Instead, He tested their faith to see whether they would obey and go to the priests to get a certificate of healing even before they had been healed. They obeyed and were healed.

And one of them returned and with a loud voice glorified God and fell at His feet, giving Him thanks. He was a Samaritan. And Jesus said: "Were there not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Were there not any found to give glory to God except this foreigner?" And Jesus said to him: "Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well." (Luke 17.11-19). The Samaritans accepted Christ as the Messiah and became Christians, while the Jews rejected Him.

The Fathers of the Church see a lesson in this for us. The ten lepers signify mankind. We are all leprous, but only one in ten give thanks to God for the salvation He has brought to us. In the same way, only some of the seed sown by God (in the Parable of the Sower) brings forth good fruit. We can all be cleansed by Him, but if we do not return to Him in gratitude and to glorify Him, we cannot be saved.

Most healings done by Jesus were immediate, but there is one case of gradual healing. Jesus took a blind man by the hand and led him out of the town. And when He had spit on his eyes and put his hands on him, He asked him if he saw anything. The man looked up and said: "I see men like trees, walking." Then Jesus put His hands on his eyes again and told him to look up. Now he saw everything clearly. This man is healed in two stages. It is as if God sometimes opens our eyes and we "partly" see. Then, after directing our eyes to heaven, we see things clearly, as they really are. (Mark 8.22-25).

Again, they brought to Him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. Jesus took him aside from the multitude and put His fingers into his ears, and spat, and touched his tongue. Then, looking up to heaven, He sighed and said to him: "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened". Immediately his ears were opened, and the impediment of his tongue was loosed, and he spoke plainly. (Mark 7.32-36).

There was a woman who had had a flow of blood (haemorrhage) for twelve years. When she heard about Jesus, she came behind Him in the crowd and touched His garment. For she said: "If only I can touch His clothes, I shall be made well." Immediately, she was healed. Jesus, knowing that power had gone out from Him, turned around in the crowd and asked: "Who touched My clothes?" His disciples were surprised at this question, because the people were all jostling around him and touching Him. The woman came in fear and trembling and, falling down before Him, told Him how she had been healed by touching His robe. He said: "Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your affliction." (Mark 5.25-34).

Here we see how only those who touch Christ with faith are healed. If one touches God with faith, power flows out to heal him. This power came from the garment of Jesus, but the Source of the power is within, in Christ Himself. In the same way, the power of Christ works through many physical things in the Church: the wood and paint of an icon, the metal of a cross, holy oil and water. Those who approach these objects with faith, believing in the power of God that works through them, are healed.

Once Jesus cast out a mute demon, after which the man could speak (Luke 11.14-16). Jesus always called the demons by their name: "unclean spirit", "mute spirit", etc. In the case of the Gadarene demoniac, He asked: "What is your name?" and He receives the answer: "Legion", because many demons had entered into him. Jesus ordered these demons to go into some pigs, because the demons begged Him not to command them to go into the abyss. The whole demonic world knows that at the Last Judgement they will be cast into the abyss. These demons did not want to go into the abyss before their time, so they entered the pigs, and the herd of pigs ran violently down a steep place into the lake and drowned. Perhaps the Lord granted their request so as to prove to us that demons are real things, and that when they possess a man

he goes out of control just as the pigs went out of control, became violent and drowned (Luke 8.26-39).

The spirits or demons vary in strength. Once a desperate father knelt in front of Jesus pleading for the healing of his epileptic son, whom the disciples had been unable to heal. In the Scriptures epilepsy is often connected to demonic activity. The demon in this child was very strong and stubborn. Christ rebuked it and it came out of the child, who was healed from that moment. Christ explained to the disciples that they had been unable to cast out the demon because of their insufficient faith, adding that "this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting". Christ also told them that if their faith had been as small as a mustard seed, they would have been able to cure the boy. "If you have faith, if you say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there', and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you." If we have faith we will not only be able to move physical obstacles: spiritual obstacles, difficulties in our lives, will also disappear.

Once Jesus healed a woman who had had a spirit of infirmity for 18 years. She was bent over and could in no way raise herself. Jesus called her and said: "Woman, you are loosed from your infirmity." Then He laid His hands on her and she, being healed of her infirmity, stood up straight and glorified God (Luke 13.10-18). In most cases, people came to Jesus or were brought to Him by friends. But here was a case of God's choosing: He called the woman to Him and she obeyed.

16. THE CAUSES OF SUFFERING

The root of all suffering, illness and death is the loss of God. God came to us not primarily in order to heal our physical illnesses. He came in order to reunite God and man, to bear witness to the Truth, that the Truth is a Person, that the devil is a liar, and that He, Christ, is God Himself, Who has come to save us from deception and darkness and lead us towards the Truth and the Light, which is Life eternal.

For years Christ taught about the Kingdom of God, so that the souls of men should long to be at one with God again and share for eternity the Glory of His Kingdom.

Suffering can have many different causes. It can be sent by God as chastisement for sin, e.g. drug abuse, adultery, pride. It can be sent not as a direct chastisement for sin, but in order to root out certain passions in us and teach us certain virtues, such as patience, forgiveness of those who maltreat us. It can also be sent for the sake of others, so that they should take pity on us, or learn from our example. In the cases of the great saints and martyrs, such as Job, Stephen, or the Lord Himself, - as in the case of the man born blind (John 9), - suffering is sent in order that God should be glorified.

In all cases, suffering should be accepted with gratitude from the Hands of God. For, as Job said: "Should I only receive the good things from God, and not the evil as well?" If we accept suffering in this spirit, then what seems to be evil will unfailingly turn out to be for our good.

It is only natural to try and relieve suffering. However, certain means of relieving suffering are strictly forbidden by God. Thus we are forbidden to go to faith-healers or mediums to relieve our suffering.

17. THE PSYCHIC REALM

Many people make the mistake of thinking that the psychic realm is the realm of the Spirit. This is wrong. The psychic realm is the realm of the devil and his fallen angels, the demons.

Faith-healers, mediums, witches and diviners all work through demons. They receive their information, not from God or the good angels, but from the fallen world which has rebelled against God. It was through demons that men learned to do abortions, and demons inspire unnatural sins, such as homosexuality, and all kinds of false teachings and heresies.

That is why the apostles and the saints were so strict with those who had communion with demons. For example, we read in Acts (16.16-19) that a certain girl in Philippi had a gift of clairvoyance, but from a "pythonical spirit". So St. Paul forbade her to practise her gift and cast this demon out of her.

The devil can give us all kinds of "gifts", but these gifts are counterfeit, they are not to be trusted. We are warned that in the last days the devil will perform many signs and wonders (II Thess. 2.9-10). But we must dismiss them, praying to God to give us the gift of discernment of spirits. For it is only through God the Holy Spirit that we can discern which spirits and gifts are of God and which are from the devil.

There are, and will continue to be, people who cast out demons in the name of Jesus, and do various healings and prophecies in His name. But Christ warns us: "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'" (Matt. 7.23; Luke 13.27).

What terrible words, what a judgement! These people use the name of Jesus, which they know has power, unlawfully. That is, although they use His name, they have not entered on the narrow path of His commandments.

Among those who use the name of Jesus unlawfully are the heretics and schismatics who do not belong to His One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church but belong to the so-called "World Council of Churches". This unlawful assembly includes all kinds of heretics, including the Jehovah's Witnesses, who do not believe in the Divinity of Christ. In recent years these heretics have even begun praying publicly with Jews and Mohammedans and pagans, and conducting spiritualistic séances.

Thus at the last General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra in 1991, a Korean priestess publicly "called up" dead spirits,

including "Martin Luther King" and "the spirit of Jesus"! Such blasphemy! Again, at the same General Assembly the "Christian" representatives were asked by the Australian Aborigines to pass through a "purifying smoke" which would unite them with the pagans. How many martyrs have suffered terrible torments rather than participate in such pagan ceremonies. And yet these "Christians" did not refuse, even though no torments were threatened!

St. Paul says that believers cannot be united with unbelievers; for Christ has nothing in common with Belial (II Cor. 6.15). And he warns that there are false apostles, deceitful workers, who pretend to be true apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end, he says, will be in accordance with their works (II Cor. 11.13-15).

St. Paul also says: "The hardworking farmer must be first to partake of the crops". In other words, in order to be a true worker in God's vineyard, which is His One, True Church, you must first partake of its fruits - that is, the sacraments. Otherwise, you are not working lawfully - and, as in an athletics contest, no one who does not run according to the rules will be crowned. (II Tim. 2.5-7).

18. THREE RAISINGS FROM THE DEAD

1. Jairus' daughter (Matt. 9.23-26; Mark 5.22-24, 35-43; Luke 8.49-56).

Jairus was a ruler of the synagogue who fell at Jesus' feet imploring him to save his 18-year-old daughter, who was dying. "If you put Your hands on her, she will be saved," he said, showing his faith. Jesus agreed to come to his house, but on the way there the woman with the issue of blood held him up. Also, the crowd prevented Him from reaching the house before the girl had died.

While Jesus was speaking to the woman with an issue of blood, some people came from Jairus' house and told him: "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?" But Jesus said to Jairus: "Do not be afraid; only believe." God in His mercy wanted to increase the faith of Jairus.

When He came to the house, everyone was weeping. But Christ said: "Why all this commotion and weeping? The child is not dead, but sleeping." They ridiculed Him. But then Jesus told everyone except the parents of the child, Peter, James and John to leave the room, took the girl by the hand and said: "Little girl, I say to you, arise." And she arose from the dead.

Raising the girl from the dead was an act of Christ's Divinity. Taking her by the hand and telling her to arise was an act of His Humanity. The two operations are, however, inseparable, because He is One Person in two undivided natures, the Divine and the Human.

2. The Widow of Nain's Son (Luke 7.11-17).

When Jesus was near the gate of the city of Nain, He saw a dead man being carried out, the only son of his widowed mother. Jesus had compassion on the widow, and told her to stop weeping. Then He touched the open coffin and said to the dead man: "Young man, I say to you, arise." Then he who had died sat up and began to speak. And Jesus returned him to his mother.

3. Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha (John 11.1-44).

The sisters Mary and Martha sent a message to Jesus, telling Him that their brother Lazarus was very ill. But Jesus said: "This sickness is not unto death, but for the Glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it." And he delayed going to Bethany, saying to His disciples: "Our friend Lazarus is sleeping, but I am going to wake him up." Then the disciples said: "Lord, if he is sleeping, he will get well." But Jesus said to them: "Lazarus is dead," adding: "I am glad for your sakes that I was not there, that you may believe. Nevertheless, let us go to him."

Now Bethany is on the eastern slope of the Mount of Olives, about two miles from Jerusalem. When Jesus arrived, Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Martha went to meet Him, saying: "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give You." Jesus said to her: "Your brother will rise again." Martha replied: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." Then Jesus said the magnificent words: "I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, yet he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" Martha replied: "Yes, Lord, I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, Who is to come into the world."

Then she hurried back to Mary, who was sitting mourning in the house. Mary immediately came to Jesus, and, falling at His feet, said: "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." Then Jesus groaned in His spirit and asked: "Where have you laid him?" They took Him to the tomb. Jesus wept. This shows that in His Humanity Jesus shared the grief of losing a beloved friend, even while in His Divinity He knew He was going to raise him from the dead.

Then the Lord said: "Take away the stone." The tombs in those days had enormous stones laid against them. Martha objected: "Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her: "Did I not say that if you believed you would see the Glory of God?" Then they took the stone away from the tomb.

The taking away of the stone means the removal of that which blocks the working of God's grace in our lives. At first men refuse to take away the stone, so the Lord has to repeat: "Take away the stone!" What is impossible for me is possible for God, Who can instantaneously make a rotting corpse completely whole. Everything we do requires time; whether we draw a painting, or compose music, or write a book, or work for any goal, we need time. But God does not need time in order to bring a corpse to life; He does it immediately.

Then He cried with a loud voice: "Lazarus, come forth!" And Lazarus came out bound hand and foot with grave clothes, and his face was wrapped in a cloth. Then the Lord said: "Loose him and let him go."

Lazarus was raised in his corruptible body. At a later stage, he would have to die again. However, the raising of Lazarus took place six days before the Crucifixion of Christ and eight days before His Resurrection, when He came back from the dead in an incorruptible Body. So the raising of Lazarus is a foreshadowing of our own resurrection from the dead at the Second Coming of Christ, when we will all be given incorruptible bodies that are not subject

to decay or age. It was this resurrection that Martha was referring to when she said: "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

Then Jesus lifted His eyes to the Father and prayed: "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I said this, that they may believe that You sent Me."

Here Christ gives us an example, teaching us that we must always thank the Father for all His miracles and kindnesses to us. Even though He, as God the Son, worked the miracle Himself - with the consent of the Father and the operation of the Holy Spirit, - nevertheless He thanks the Father. For, as the Apostle James says, "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights" (James 1.17).

In the raising of Jairus' daughter, we see a father/daughter relationship and only the first stage of death - the girl was still lying in her house when the Lord resurrected her.

In the raising of the widow of Nain's son, we see a mother/son relationship and the second stage of death - the young man was already on his way to burial when the Lord resurrected him.

In the raising of Lazarus, we see a brother/sister relationship and the third stage of death - Lazarus had already been four days dead and was decomposing and stinking when the Lord resurrected him.

In this way Christ proved that He has power over all the stages of death, which is possible only for God. He is the Resurrection and the Life. We also see that God has compassion on us in all our human relationships, and has come to save and resurrect all of them.

"Lazarus" means "helpless" or "God helps"; some say it means "dependent on God". This is why many hospitals are called by his name.

Now shortly before performing this great miracle, the Lord told the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16.19-31). Lazarus was a beggar who was full of sores which the dogs licked. He lay at the gate of a rich man and longed for the crumbs that fell from his table. However, the rich man never gave him a thing. Then both of them died, and Lazarus was carried by angels to Abraham's bosom, while the rich man landed up in the torments of hell. The rich man asked Abraham to send Lazarus to give him some relief, but Abraham told him that there was a great gulf fixed between paradise and hell, so that those who wanted to pass from the one place to the other could not. The rich man then pleaded that Lazarus be sent to his five brothers who were still alive so as to witness to them that there is life after death, there is

heaven and hell. But Abraham said: "They have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them." The rich man said: "No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." But Abraham replied: "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead."

Now it was not the wealth of the rich man nor the poverty of Lazarus which decided where they went to after death. The rich man went to hell because of his hardness of heart, while Lazarus went to heaven because of his humble faith. The Lord told this story shortly before He raised Lazarus from the dead, warning that some people would reject His Divinity in spite of the fact that He would resurrect Lazarus. And in fact the Jewish chief priests wanted to kill Lazarus because he was living proof of the Divinity of Christ and many of the Jews were believing in Him because of the miracle (John 12.9-12). Like the brothers of the rich man in the parable, they did not believe even when someone came back from the dead.

19. HEALINGS FROM SIN

As we have seen, we need to remove the stone which blocks the way to a living relationship with God. That stone is sin. There are various kinds of sin: pride, covetousness, lying, anger, impatience, fornication, adultery, unfaithfulness, idolatry, etc. The saints struggled to purify themselves from sin through prayer, fasting and good works. Only when we have been healed from sin can we restore our relationship with God and receive the Holy Spirit. For the aim of the Christian life, as St. Seraphim said, is to acquire the Holy Spirit.

1. Levi (Luke 5.27-33).

Once Christ called a tax-collector called Levi, and said to him: "Follow me." Levi responded with love and gratitude, and gave a great feast in his house. This showed that Levi understood that a great moment had come in his life - God had called him! He understood, however, that this would mean a complete change in his life, a complete change of values. Instead of being deceived by the vanity of life and accumulating worldly riches, Levi would begin to die to this world and make himself empty so as to receive God and the wealth of the Holy Spirit. For as long as our heart and mind are cluttered up with worldly ambitions and possessions, there is no room for God in us. We cannot serve two masters, God and Mammon. Levi decided to serve the living God, and not money, and so became the Apostle Matthew.

Now the scribes and Pharisees complained against Christ's disciples, saying: "Why do you eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus replied: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." Christ came to call only those who know they need Him. Repentant sinners know that they need Him, but the proud scribes and Pharisees did not. We cannot be cured by a physician unless we admit that we are ill and call on Him to cure us. When Christ spoke of "the righteous", He was referring to those who think they are righteous, who think that they do not need forgiveness from God.

2. Zacchaeus (Luke 19.1-10).

Zacchaeus was a rich tax collector. He was rather small, so he had to climb into a sycamore tree in order to see Christ as He was passing by. In Zacchaeus there was a desire to see who Christ was. And when Jesus passed by He looked up into the tree and said: "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house. So to the great joy of Zacchaeus the Lord invited Himself to his house. What joy it is that the Lord visits us although we are such sinners!

Of course, people again criticized the Lord for eating in the house of a sinner. But Zacchaeus was aware of his sinful state, for he stood up during the meal and said: "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore it to him fourfold." Then Jesus said: "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham" - meaning that Zacchaeus, too, had become a faithful son of God. "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

So Zacchaeus is an example of the man who brings forth "worthy fruits of repentance". He did not only want to stop living a sinful life, he also wanted to put right what he had done wrong. He became compassionate towards the poor and gave half of his wealth to them. So Zacchaeus added alms-giving to correcting the injustices he had committed.

Now the voice of St. John the Baptist calls out to us: "Bear fruits worthy of repentance" (Matt. 3.8). He warns us that if we do not bring forth good fruits, we are like a bad tree and the axe of judgement is read to cut us down. Through prayer and spiritual warfare and with the help of the Holy Spirit, we get rid of the bad fruits - fornication, adultery, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, jealousy, anger, selfish ambition, dissension, heresy, envy, murder, drunkenness, revelry, etc. - and acquire the good fruits that lead to eternal life. These fruits are also called the fruits of the Spirit. They are: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. They are acquired through prayer and spiritual warfare.

3. The adulterous woman (John 8.3-11).

The scribes and Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman who had been caught in adultery. They set her in the middle and asked Him: "Now Moses in the law commanded us that such people should be stoned. But what do You say?" They asked Him this because they wanted to test Him, and to find something to accuse Him of. Would Jesus uphold the law of Moses, or would He dismiss it?

Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger as if He had not heard them. Then, when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself and said to them: "He who is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone." And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. Some of the Fathers believe that Christ was writing down the sins of the scribes and Pharisees who were present. They read it, and then, being convicted in their conscience they all left, one by one.

Then Jesus was left alone with the woman. "Woman," He asked, "where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." Then Jesus said: "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more."

The Pharisees were testing Christ to see if He would refuse to condemn the woman. If He refused, they could accuse Him of being a law-breaker; while if He approved of her being stoned, they could accuse Him of contradicting His own teaching on being merciful to sinners. Jesus did not reject the law of Moses. But since only one who had not committed adultery had the right to stone the adulteress, He revealed to the Pharisees their hidden adultery and therefore showed that they had no right to stone her according to the laws. Only He, being sinless, had the right to stone her. But He did not insist on this right; He preferred mercy to sacrifice, saying: "Neither do I condemn you." And so He did not let her die in her sins, but gave her a chance to live a new life in God. And at that moment the adulterous woman died to her sinful nature and became a new creature in Christ.

4. The anointing of Christ's feet by a sinful woman (Luke 7.36-50).

Jesus was eating in the house of one of the Pharisees when a woman in the city who was sinner came inside with an alabaster flask of fragrant oil. She stood at His feet and began to wash His feet with her tears and wipe them with the hair of her head. She kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil.

Jesus' host, who was called Simon, criticized the Lord in his heart for allowing such a sinner to touch Him. But Jesus knew his thoughts and said: "Simon, I have something to say to you." Simon answered: "Teacher, say it." Then Jesus said: "There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed 500 denarii, and the other 50. And when they had nothing with which to repay him, he freely forgave them both. Tell me, therefore, which of them will love him more?" Simon answered: "I suppose the one whom he forgave most." Jesus said that he was right, and then, turning to the woman, said to Simon: "Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in. You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has anointed My feet with fragrant oil. Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little." Then He said to her: "Your sins are forgiven - your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

It was the great love of this woman for God, and her faith flowing from a penitent heart, that saved her. She believed that He, being God, could forgive her, she expressed her penitence in the great humility with which she washed His feet with her tears and dried them with her hair, and she loved Him for His forgiveness and mercy towards her. Does this mean that only great sinners can love God a great deal? No, because there are those, like the Mother of God and John the Baptist, who are righteous and love God through their purity and constant spiritual striving towards Him. But without

humility it is impossible to love God. And this woman, by her deep consciousness of her sinfulness, acquired humility and the love of God.

5. Saul's persecution of the Christians (Acts 9.1-9)

Saul persecuted the Christians, and was present at the stoning of the holy deacon Stephen. But then the Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus and asked: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" The Lord said that Saul was persecuting Him, because when we do good or evil to a Christian we do it to Christ.

From that moment Saul was converted, and after his baptism he became an apostle of Christ, changing his name from Saul to Paul, which means "little". He suffered many things in his life, but accepted everything meekly, seeing in his suffering a way of putting right what he had done wrong as a persecutor of Christ. Although he knew that the Lord had forgiven him, he continued to bring forth fruits of repentance. And although we know that God washes away all our sins, even the most terrible, we can never be sure that our repentance is as deep as it can and should be. That is why we pray for repentance, a contrite heart and tears.

6. Peter's apostasy (Mark 14.66-72).

Peter denied the Lord three times, but wept in bitter repentance. Then after the Resurrection the Lord asked him three times: "Peter, do you love Me?" And when Peter three times confessed: "Lord, You know that I love You" (John 21.17), he received forgiveness, and was reinstated as a member of the Body of Christ and an apostle. The Lord did not say: "Since you denied Me, you cannot be My apostle any longer." He accepted Peter's repentance, forgave him, and gave him another chance.

For the rest of his life Peter remembered his fall, and struggled to overcome the effects of his denial on his soul. St. Ephraim the Syrian says that forgiveness of sin is only the beginning of salvation: we then have to struggle to "work out" the effects of sin, just as the effect of drugs on our bodies has to be worked out even after we have stopped taking them.

Peter and Paul were martyred on the same day in Rome. Peter was crucified upside down, and Paul was beheaded.

20. THE STORM AT SEA

(Matt. 8.23-27; Mark 4.35-41; Luke 8.22-25).

Once the disciples were in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, and the Lord fell asleep in the stern on a pillow. A storm arose and the disciples were trying to cope, but the boat was covered with waves caused by the tempest. In despair they woke up the Lord and said: "Lord, save us, we are perishing!" The Lord rose and with quiet authority said to them: "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith!" Then He rebuked the winds and the sea: "Peace! Be still!" and at once there was a great calm.

The Lord revealed how even the winds and the sea, and the whole of nature, obeys Him. And since He rebuked them, this seems to indicate that the storm was caused by fallen angels, demons, who were trying to kill Him and His disciples. There is a constant battle in our hearts and in the world as a whole between the good and the bad angels. Now the Lord also rebuked the disciples for their little faith. We often say that we believe in Christ, in the Power of God, but He is "asleep" in the back of our soul. When a storm arises in our lives, we try to manage on our own strength, and only when we think we are "going under" do we turn to God and "wake Him up", crying: "God, help me, don't you see I am perishing?" We have a dormant Christ-consciousness in us instead of an awakened Presence of God.

God the Father is like the Captain of the ship, while we are all drowning in the water, which is a symbol of time. The Captain has thrown a life-belt to us, which is attached to the ship. Those who get hold of the life-belt can be hauled into the ship. The life-belt is the Son of the Captain, Christ. The currents in the water are the demonic powers preventing us from reaching and getting hold of the life-belt. The wind, however, is the Holy Spirit, Who pushes the drowning souls towards the life-belt, Christ. But the people themselves must make the effort to try and swim towards their salvation.

We must get hold of God while there is time. And having got hold of Him, we must not let go, but must remain faithful to Him until death. And this means that we must not only believe in Him, but believe Him - that is, obey all His words and teachings and commandments.

21. THE MIRACLE OF THE FIVE LOAVES AND TWO FISHES

(Matt. 14.13-22; Mark 6.30-44; Luke 9.10-17; John 6.1-14)

Once the Lord, after speaking about the Kingdom of God and healing a multitude of people, went up into a mountain, where the people followed Him. When it was evening His disciples came to Him, saying that He should send the people home, since it was a deserted place and it was already late. "Send the multitudes away," they said, "that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food." But the Lord had compassion on the people, who had been listening to His words forgetting all about hunger and human needs. So He said: "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat." Then Philip said that they had only 200 denarii worth of bread, which was not enough for all of them to have some. And then Andrew said: "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two small fish. But what are they among so many?" For there were about 5000 men, together with women and children. But then the Lord commanded that the five loaves and two fishes be brought to Him. "And when He had taken the five loaves and the two fishes, He looked up to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to His disciples to set before them. So they all ate and were filled."

By suggesting to the disciples that they feed the multitude, the Lord elicited from them a confession of their poverty, of the fact that they could not do it themselves. Then He told them to bring their poverty to Him, so that He could turn it into abundance. In the same way, during the storm at sea the Lord first elicited from His disciples a confession of their helplessness before working the miracle and calming the tempest. For as He told the Apostle Paul: "My strength is made perfect in weakness" (II Cor. 12.9). It is when we confess ourselves to be weak that the Lord can reveal His strength in us. When we are weak or desperate, we take away the stone that prevents God working in our lives, and in answer to our prayer of desperation God acts. The stone is our lack of faith in God, which comes from our proud belief in our own ability to manage without God. It blocks the way to the working of God's grace. Therefore the first step is the removal of the stone, and the confession of our weakness. Then our prayer acquires power, in response to which the Power of God descends and acts.

In this miracle we also see the working of the Holy Trinity: the Son of God looks up to God the Father, and with His consent and blessing God the Holy Spirit descends and multiplies the food.

But then the Lord gave each of His disciples a basket with which to gather the crumbs from the meal. By this He shows that while God works the miracle, man must work with Him to share out the fruits of the miracle and gather the remains. For "gather up the fragments that remain, so that nothing is lost," He says. And if we cooperate with Him, putting the Kingdom of God and His righteousness first, everything else will be given in such abundance,

far beyond our expectations. So each of the twelve disciples gathered up a whole basket full of fragments from the feast.

This miracle of the feeding of the 5000 was a foreshadowing of the Eucharistic miracle by which God feeds us with His Body and Blood. Just as in the feeding of the 5000 Christ first "gave thanks" (John 6.11 - the Greek word is eucharisto) and blessed the food, then gave it to His disciples, and then they gave it to the people, so in the Eucharistic meal of the Divine Liturgy, there is first the giving thanks and consecration of the bread and wine, then the priests partake of it, and then the priests give it to the people.

22. THE WALKING ON THE WATER

(Matt. 14.22-33; Mark 6.45-52; John 6.15-22)

After feeding the multitude physically and spiritually, the Lord sent His disciples to the other side of the lake, dismissed the crowd and went up into a mountain to pray. Again and again we read that the Lord withdraws to pray alone to God the Father. Here he gives us another example how we should act. Being God Himself, the Lord had no need to pray to God the Father. But as man He prays to God, for humanity has a constant need to be in communion with the Source of Life.

While He was praying, a storm arose on the lake. Knowing that the disciples were in trouble, at about the fourth watch of the night (6 a.m.), the Lord came to their help, walking on the water. And He seemed to be passing by, but the disciples cried out in fear, thinking He was a ghost. Then He said: "Take courage; it is I, do not be afraid." The Greek words translated by "it is I" here literally mean: "I am". This is the name of God as given to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3.14). Only God is self-existent and uncreated; He is the only Being whose Existence depends on no other being; which is why He can truly say: "I AM".

Then Peter said: "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." Jesus said: "Come." When Peter got out of the boat, he walked on the water towards Christ. But when he became aware of the strong wind, he became afraid and began to sink. "Lord, save me!" he cried, and immediately the Lord caught him by the hand, saying: "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" And when they got into the boat the wind ceased and immediately they were on the other side. As long as Peter was filled with longing to be with Christ and looked only at Him, He was safe. But as soon as he looked at the stormy waves and wind, he began to lose faith, forgetting Who it was towards Whom he was walking - the Lord of creation.

The boat with the disciples was in trouble just before dawn. The Lord came to their rescue, and as soon as He entered the boat they arrived. This is a foreshadowing to the state of the Church in the last times, when the Lord will come and rescue His elect just when they look like going under.

23. THE BREAD OF LIFE

(John 6.14-71)

After the miracle of the multiplication of the bread and fish, the multitude said: "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world," whom Moses prophesied (Deut. 18.15). And they wanted to make Him a king by force, because they knew that a leader who could miraculously produce food even in the wilderness would be very useful to them. However, the Lord did not approve of this worldly motive, which is why He sent His disciples across the lake to Capernaum while He Himself first went into the mountain to pray and then followed after them, walking over the water. The next day, the multitude, finding Him in Capernaum in amazement asked Him how He had got there, because they knew that He had not been in the boat with His disciples. He replied: "Verily, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not seek for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him."

Here the Lord is repeating, in different words, that which He said to the devil in the wilderness: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Father." The people had pursued the Lord in the hope that He would solve all their earthly problems and desires, just as He had miraculously provided them with food. But He tries to turn their minds away from earthly and towards spiritual concerns; for man does not only have a body which needs material nourishment, but also a soul, which needs spiritual nourishment, which the Son of Man will provide. He has fed their hearts and minds with teachings about the Kingdom of God, and by His compassionate healings and miracles He had proved His Divinity. But now the Lord is going to make the final step, which is to lead them to Himself, telling them that they have to feed on Him, Who is the Bread of Life.

The people asked Him: "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" And He answered: "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him Whom He has sent." So the work of God that we must do is to have true faith in Christ.

This means that we must believe all the words that He has spoken, without "picking and choosing" among them as the heretics do, who give their own interpretations contrary to apostolic teaching. There is a great difference between believing in God and believing God. If I tell you not to go to a certain town because you will meet a monster on the way, and you say: "I believe you," but you go nevertheless and meet the monster, then you are not believing me. After Adam and Eve fell away from God, they still believed in God, but since they had failed to believe God, they were separated from Him

and became dying people. They lost the Holy Spirit, Who returned to man only with the Coming of Christ.

So the work of God is, first of all, not to feed the hungry, and build schools and hospitals, etc., but to believe in Christ. The Lord showed by His miracles that He can look after the physical needs of people if they first seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt. 6.33).

Then the people asked Him: "What work will You do? our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat'." Here they were referring to the fact that, after Moses had led the Israelites through the Red Sea and into the desert, they were fed daily with manna which God sent down to them from heaven.

Now the Lord reveals to them the mystery that He is the Bread of Life, which came down from heaven just as the manna did in the time of Moses. The Christian first leaves the world (Egypt) and receives baptism (the Red Sea). Then he struggles against various temptations during his earthly life (the forty years in the desert), during which time he receives strength and life from Christ (the manna from heaven). When he reaches death and the Judgement (the Jordan), the Church with the Mother of God and the saints (the ark carried by the priests) goes before him, making a path for him through the water. In this way he safely reaches the Kingdom of Heaven (the Promised Land).

The Lord begins to reveal this mystery in response to the people's request: "Lord, give us this bread always." "I am the Bread of Life," He replies. "He who comes to Me will never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet you do not believe. All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. For I have come down from heaven [to become man), not to do My own will, but the will of Him Who sent Me. This is the will of the Father Who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lost nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. This is the will of Him Who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day." Here the Lord reveals His Divinity, for He says that He will raise the Christians up at the last day. He also reveals the close link between receiving the Bread of Life and being the resurrection from the dead in glory.

Then the Jews murmured among themselves, saying: "Is this not Jesus, the Son of Joseph, Whose father and mother we know? How is it that He has come down from heaven?" They did not know about the Annunciation, the Virgin Birth, the adoration of the shepherds and the worship of the three wise kings. The Lord knew that they were murmuring and said: "No one can come to Me unless the Father Who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at

the last day. It is written in the prophets: 'And they all shall be taught by God' [[Isaiah](#) 54.13]. Therefore everyone who hears and has learned from the Father comes to Me."

So when God became Man in Jesus Christ, this prophecy of Isaiah was fulfilled. For the Lord, being God as well as man, taught the multitudes. And all the words of Holy Scripture are the words of God teaching us. For as the Fathers say: when we read the Bible, God speaks to us, and when we pray, we speak to God.

And the Holy Spirit was sent by the Father to explain the teachings of Christ. For, as the Apostle Paul says: "The Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God... No one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit Who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God" ([I Cor.](#) 2.10-12). We have been taught by God the Son, and His teachings are explained to us by God the Holy Spirit.

The Lord continued: "Not that anyone has seen the Father, except He (Christ) Who is from God; He has seen the Father. Verily, verily, I say unto you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life. I am the Bread of Life. Your fathers ate manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the Bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living Bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this Bread, he will live forever; and the Bread that I shall give is My Flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world."

The Jews quarrelled among themselves, saying, how can this Man give us His Flesh to eat? To them it seemed like cannibalism. But the Lord explained that if we partake of Him Who is the God-Man, we shall have eternal life in us. St. Ignatius the God-bearer explains that the Flesh and Blood of Christ are like medicine, an antidote given against the poison in our corrupt souls and bodies. And in old English churches we see Christ symbolized as a pelican feeding her young on the blood of her breast.

Then the Lord said: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, unless you eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood has eternal life, and I will raise Him up at the last day. For My Flesh is food indeed, and My Blood is drink indeed. He who eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me." He said all this in the synagogue of Capernaum.

Many even of His disciples could not take this. They said: "This is a hard saying, who can understand it?" The difference between true believers and false believers is that whereas false believers will only accept that which they

comprehend with their minds, true believers accept all the words of God even if they do not understand them. The true believer says in his heart: "What is impossible for me is possible for God." He accepts and obeys. He does not worry how the words of God are to be fulfilled; he knows that this is beyond the understanding of man. He only knows that all the words of God are true, and that we must believe in, and live from, every one of them.

Then the Lord said to those who were about to leave Him: "What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before? It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit and life. But there are some of you who do not believe." The Lord is here referring to His ascension into heaven, which the disciples would see with their own eyes, although it was no less inconceivable that God should ascend in His Body to heaven than that He should give His Body to those on earth. But all is possible through the Spirit that gives life.

From that moment, the Scripture says, many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more. To reject the Lord's teaching on the sacramental eating of His Body and Blood is to go back spiritually, to walk with Him no more, to fall away from His true faith and life. These are the Christians who believe in the moral teachings of Christ, and perhaps also in His miracles, but who stop short at the threshold of the Divine Mysteries. For them the Eucharist is simply a memorial service. And yet history proves that the early Church firmly believed that the bread and wine of the Eucharist become the Body and Blood of Christ. And this is confirmed by the Apostle Paul, who says that those eat and drink the Eucharist unworthily "will be guilty of the Body and Blood of the Lord... For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgement to himself, not discerning the Lord's Body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep [i.e. have died]." (I Cor. 11.27, 29-30). These words would make no sense if the Eucharist were a mere symbol, nothing more than a memorial service. Some of the saints have even seen the Eucharist in the form of the Body and Blood of Christ. Moreover, at the Last Supper the Lord Himself offered His Body and Blood to the disciples, saying: "This is My Body" and "This is My Blood" (Matt. 26.26, 28). The grammar of the original Greek text indicates that what the Lord was referring to had already been transformed into His true Body and Blood.

Then the Lord said to the twelve Apostles: "Do you also want to go away?" And Simon Peter replied: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." This is the attitude of the true believer. He does not understand all the words of God, but He knows that they are the words of eternal life, He accepts them in faith.

St. Hilary of Poitiers writes: "What we say concerning the reality of Christ's nature within us would be foolish and impious were we not taught by His

very words... There is no room left for doubt about the reality of His Flesh and Blood, because we have both the witness of His words and our faith. When we eat and drink these elements we are in Christ and Christ is in us."

The Orthodox Church teaches that in the Eucharist we partake of the deified Body and Blood of the Lord, that is, of Flesh and Blood which is united with the Divine Fire, with the Spirit that gives life. This mystery was revealed to the Prophet Isaiah, when he saw a vision of the Lord of Sabaoth and one of the seraphim brought a burning piece of coal to his lips and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sins are forgiven" (Isaiah 6.6-7). It was not the coal alone which purified him, but the coal united with the fire. In the same way, it is not the Flesh and Blood of Christ alone that purifies us in the sacrament, but the Flesh and Blood united to the Divine Fire. Since we are made of flesh as well as spirit, we need to be fed on the Flesh of the God-Man. But it is the Spirit that gives life to the flesh.

Now what happens on the altar at the Eucharist is an extension of the Mystery of the Annunciation. The Archangel Gabriel said to the Virgin Mary: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; so that Holy One Who is to be born will be called the Son of God." (Luke 1.35). In the same way, at the Eucharist the Holy Spirit descends upon the bread and wine (the body of the Virgin) and transforms it into the Body and Blood of Christ.

The Apostle says: "Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the Blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His Flesh" (Heb. 10.19-20). When the Lord died on the cross, the veil of the temple was rent from top to bottom. This was a sign that the Lord has now opened "a new and living way" into the Kingdom of heaven for us, by our partaking of His Body and Blood...

24. THE WEDDING AT CANA

(John 2.1-11)

The Lord arrived as a guest on the third day of the feast. In the Old Testament marriage served as symbol of the union between God and His Bride, Israel. In the New Testament, Paul compares the Mystery of Christ and His Church to the union in marriage between the man and the woman.

According to Jewish custom, there were several stages preparatory to the wedding itself: (1) the legal stage, in which the bridegroom signed a document accepting responsibility for his bride; (2) the betrothal, when the best man of the bridegroom went to the house of the bride with gifts from the bridegroom so that she could prepare herself for the wedding; (3) the one-year waiting period, during which the guests would be invited and the father of the bridegroom would provide festal clothing for them so that none of them should have a reason for refusing the invitation; and (4) the sending of a courier in front of the bridegroom, urging everyone to assemble at the house of the bride.

Then the bridegroom would arrive with his best man, and the wedding itself would start. It would last for a week, during which period the groom and bride would mingle with their guests. Finally, at the end of the week, the groom would take his bride to his parents' house for the union.

Christ as the Bridegroom of the Church: (1) signed the contract for His Bride with the Blood He shed on the cross (Acts 20.28); (2) sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost to prepare the bride with the gifts of the Spirit that He had received from the Father; (3) is preparing with His Father festal garments for the faithful Christians who are invited to the feast (Matt. 22.1-14); and (4) will send Elijah to prepare the way for His Coming, just as He sent John the Baptist as His best man to prepare the way for His First Coming.

Christ arrived at the wedding at Cana on the third day of the feast. His Mother was already there. She came up to Him and said: "They have no wine." He said to her: "Woman, what concern is that to Me? My hour has not yet come."

Some western commentators have understood these words as a rebuke from the Lord to His Mother. However, if this is so, then it is surprising that she who is the perfect example of humility should not have taken heed of this rebuke, but instead told the servants: "Whatever He says to you, do it." The Fathers of the Church point out that "Woman" is a title of respect and distinction. The Lord addressed his Mother from the cross in the same way (John 19.26), as also the Samaritan woman (John 4.21), the woman taken in adultery (John 8.10) and Mary Magdalene (John 20.13,15). Clearly Christ greatly honoured and respected womanhood.

In this passage, according to some Fathers, the Lord was reminding Mary of the special relationship that existed between them. It is as if He was saying: "What is the relationship between you and Me? I am not only your Son and God, but also your Bridegroom, and a bridegroom always tries to fulfil the wishes of his bride. My hour has not yet come - that is, the hour of My glorification, of My Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension into heaven. Then will come the time of My Heavenly Marriage with the Church, of which you are the first member, and of which this earthly marriage is an image."

Mary understands that she has to petition Him on behalf of man, and that He will act because of His love for her. So she goes to the servants and tells them to do whatever He tells them. And He says: "Fill the waterpots with water", referring to the earthenware waterpots which were used by the Jews for ritual cleansing before going to the Temple to pray. There were six of them at Cana, each containing 20 or 30 gallons of water. Then, when they had filled them to the brim, the Lord said: "Draw some out now and take it to the master of the feast." The master of the feast tasted the water that was made wine, and did not know where it had come from (but the servants knew), and called to the bridegroom: "Every man at the beginning sets out the good wine, and when the guests have well drunk, then the inferior. But you have kept the good wine until now!"

The Fathers explain that the earthenware pots are symbolic of us, who are made of earth. Our earthly nature first needs to be purified by the water of Baptism. Then it can be filled with the wine of the Eucharist.

They also explain that "the wine runs out" for an earthly married pair, their love being subject to time and change. But if God is invited to the feast and accepts the invitation, He can add an eternal quality to the relationship, so that the wine does not run out. So the Guest at the feast turns out to be the Host.

This was the first miracle Christ did after His temptation in the wilderness. For He is our Heavenly Bridegroom, Who came to woo us away from the enticement of the devil. As St. Paul says: "I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one Husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, so your minds may be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ" (II Cor. 11.2-3).

St. Paul also says: "The head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man,.. and woman is the glory of man" (I Cor. 11.3,7). The Mother of God is the glory of Christ, the new Eve to His new Adam, and she teaches us how we should be in relationship to our Heavenly Bridegroom. "Do whatever He tell you to do," she says. And as on the icons which represent her as the Guide

(Greek: Hodigitria) pointing the way to Christ, so now she points to Christ and reminds us: "Listen to God. Do whatever He tells you to do."

25. THE BEHEADING OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

(Matt. 11.2-19)

This took place about a year before the Resurrection of Christ.

King Herod had married Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. This was against the Law of God, and John rebuked Herod for it. Herodias was furious with John and wanted revenge, so she forced Herod to imprison John and also wanted him to be killed. But Herod was afraid of the people, who revered John, and refused this request of hers.

While John was in prison, his disciples were perplexed that God had allowed His great herald John to be put in prison. They could not understand the ways of God, which seemed unjust to them. So they started to doubt whether Jesus was truly the Messiah, as John had told them.

In order to resolve their doubts, John sent two of his disciples to Christ to ask: "Are you the One Who is to come, or do we look for another?" At that moment Christ was working many miracles of healing, and He replied: "Go and tell John that which you hear and see: the blind see and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up and the poor have the Gospel preached to them. And blessed is he, who is not offended because of Me."

According to the Church Fathers, John put this question in order to guide his own disciples. He himself did not doubt that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, because God Himself had granted him to see the Holy Spirit descending and remaining on Him, and to hear the Voice of the Father calling Christ His beloved Son. John's disciples were sorrowful about the plight of their master John, and in doubt about the Divinity of Christ. So Christ's answer was a quotation from the Prophet Isaiah (29.18; 35.4-6), in which the prophet describes the works that the Messiah will do.

Christ's parting words to them: "and blessed is he, who is not offended because of Me", mean that we should not in God when we do not understand His ways at times. How often do people say: "How could God allow this to happen?" when they don't understand why some evil is taking place.

Then the Lord continued to speak about the greatness of John the Baptist. He said that he was the prophet of whom God spoke in the Scriptures, saying: "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You" (Isaiah 40.3-5; Malachi 4.5). Then the Lord said that John was the greatest born of women - "but he who is least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than he." What did the Lord mean? He meant that as long as John was outside the Kingdom of heaven, which is the New Testament Church, he would be less than even the least inside the Church. Of course, when Christ

crushed the gates of hell, He took with Him to Paradise all the righteous who had died before the Coming of Christ, including the greatest of them, John the Baptist.

Now Herodias was plotting to have John killed. So she hit on a clever scheme. When Herod's birthday was being celebrated, the daughter of Herodias, who was called Salome, danced before the guests and pleased Herod. So he promised her on oath to give her anything she asked. Salome, prompted by her mother, said: "Give me the head of John the Baptist on a platter." Herod was upset and frightened, because he knew that John was a prophet. But he did not want to lose face with his guests, because he had made an oath of Salome. So he sent and had John beheaded in prison. And his head was brought on a platter and given to Salome, and she brought it to her mother.

The Church teaches us that when we have to choose between two loyalties, or between a bad oath and following God's will, it is better to break our oath to men than to anger God. As we hear in the hymns of the feast: "O Herod, it would have been better for you to have broken your oath to man than to have killed a prophet of God."

The Church also teaches that after his beheading John descended into hell and preached to the souls imprisoned there that the Saviour was on His way. He taught them to repent so as to receive the forgiveness which Christ offered.

26. JESUS' TRUE RELATIVES

(Matt. 12.46-50; Mark 3.31-35; Luke 8.19-21, 11.27-28; John 19.25-27)

In the Middle East, cousins and relatives by blood or marriage are called brothers or sisters. Thus Abraham called his nephew Lot "brother" (Gen. 14.14), and Boaz spoke of his relative Elimelech as his "brother" (Ruth 4.3). According to Orthodox tradition, Joseph was an elderly widower who had several children by his first marriage. These are referred to in the Gospel as the brothers and sisters of the Lord. The brothers are James (one of the seventy Apostles, who later became first bishop of Jerusalem), Jude (one of the twelve Apostles), Simon (second bishop of Jerusalem) and Joses.

Once when the Lord was sitting with a multitude of people around Him, He was told that His Mother and brothers were outside looking for Him. Then He said: "Who is My Mother, or My brothers?" And, looking round at the circle of those around Him, He continued: "Here are My Mother and brothers! For whoever does the Will of God is My brother and sister and mother." Then a woman from the crowd said: "Blessed is the womb that bare You, and the breasts which nursed You!" And the Lord replied: "More than that, blessed are they that keep the Word of God and keep it."

The Lord is explaining that spiritual relationships are deeper and more important than natural ones. However, He is not belittling His Mother here, but drawing attention to her greatness. For Mary heard the Word of God and kept it, which is why she is blessed among women. For she did not only did she bear Him physically: by keeping His words in her heart and obeying Him in all things she became His relative spiritually, too. It was her response: "Let it be according to your word" that brought the Almighty God down to earth. By bearing the immense sorrow of the crucifixion without murmuring and without asking Christ to come down from the cross, she again showed exemplary obedience to the Divine Will. The sorrow she felt was greater than that of the Apostles, for He was her only Son; but never did she allow her maternal feelings, her physical relationship to Christ as a Man, interfere with her spiritual love and obedience to Him as God.

Not only in the former communist countries, but also in the West, we often see adults who are atheists or agnostics while their child is a believer in Christ. In these family relationships there is only a physical bond, but no spiritual relationship. The true Christian immediately recognizes a brother- or sister-in-Christ; they have a spiritual relationship sharing Christ and His Holy Church.

According to Jewish tradition, if the eldest son of a widow died, the next son was obliged to take care of his mother. When the Lord was on the cross, He gave His Mother into the care of John, the beloved disciple, although John was not His natural brother. This shows that the Virgin had no other children;

for if she had had others besides Jesus, they and not John would have been obliged to take care of her.

"Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His Mother, and His Mother's sister, Mary, the wife of Cleopas..." Now we know that Joachim and Anna, the Virgin's parents, were elderly people, and that Anna was over 60 years old when she gave birth to the Virgin. So here again we see an example of the use of the word "sister" in the sense, not of sibling, but of relative by blood or marriage. Cleopas was the brother of Joseph, so Mary his wife was the sister-in-law of the Virgin; but she is referred to her as her "sister".

On the cross the Lord said to His Mother: "Behold your son!", and to John: "Behold your Mother!" And from that moment John took her to his home and looked after her. By calling Mary the Mother of John, the Lord symbolically established His Mother as the Mother of all Christians - of the entire Church, His Body. She was His Mother on earth, giving Him His Body, and now the Lord reveals that she is to be the Mother of His Body, the Church. Thus in the person of John, the beloved disciple and the only one who stood by Christ at the cross, all Christians receive in Mary the Mother of God a new spiritual mother.

27. THE PARABLES

In His teaching the Lord often used parables, which are stories with images drawn from daily life in the world, in order to explain the deep things of God. The parables contain spiritual truth, but can be understood only by those who have spiritual understanding, which is given by grace so that "seeing they can see, and hearing they can hear". The Lord used parables to explain both the merciful love and forgiveness of God (the Prodigal Son) and His righteous judgement (the Talents, the Ten Virgins, the Sheep and the Goats). These stories help us to love God and grow in understanding of Him. Those who cannot see or hear the truth in the parables are responsible for this themselves. The judgement of God is upon them because in their lives they "prefer the lie to the truth" (II Thess. 2.10), becoming insensitive and dull to the truth. If people prefer the honour that comes from men to the honour that comes from God, and it matters more to them to be recognized by the world than by God, they become blind to the spiritual riches contained in the Scriptures and the parables.

1. The Sower and the Seed (Matt. 13.1-23; Mark 4.1-20; Luke 8.5-15).

In this parable the Lord tells us about a certain Sower who sows seed on various kinds of earth. The Sower is Christ, and the seed is the Word of God, which is sown in the earth of human hearts.

Some of the seed falls on the road and is immediately picked up and eaten by the birds. This means that some people receive the Word of God superficially, so that the demons (the birds) come and take it out of their hearts almost immediately by leading them into false teachings, heresies. Other seed falls on stony ground and starts growing, but cannot put down deep roots to find moisture in the soil, and so shrivels up and dies. This means that some people hear and accept the Word of God, but then lose it again in time of temptation and persecution, which inevitably comes to all true Christians (Acts 14.22). They cannot bring up the effort and sacrifice which true Christianity involves, and so fall away. Then there is the seed which falls on the earth and grows, but weeds grow up and suffocate it. This signifies the people who are overcome by worldly cares and pleasures, and so do not bring forth spiritual fruit. Finally, there is the seed which falls on good earth and brings forth good fruit, some one hundred-, some sixty- and some thirty-fold. These are the true Christians who bring forth spiritual fruits for God, and are saved. However, some produce more fruit than others. Those who bring forth fruit one hundred-fold are the saints and martyrs, who devote their lives completely to God. Other Christians live less intense spiritual lives, and bring forth less fruit. The saints are called "mountains" in Holy Scripture, and when we are exhorted to "lift our hearts to the mountains, from whence comes salvation" (Psalms 120.1), we are being called to turn for help to the Church Triumphant, the saints.

So in this parable the Lord is calling us to receive His Word and to purify the ground of our hearts, so that they can bring forth much fruit.

2. The Good Samaritan (Luke 10.25-37)

This parable was told by Christ in answer to a lawyer, who asked: "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Christ answered him: "What is written in the law? What is your understanding of it?" The lawyer answered: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind" and "your neighbour as yourself." So the Lord said: "Do this, and you will live." But the lawyer, wishing to justify himself, said: "Who is my neighbour?"

Then the Lord told the story of a man who went from Jerusalem to Jericho and thieves attacked him and robbed him of his clothing, wounded him and left him half dead. Now by chance a priest came down the road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Then a Levite came and did the same thing. But then a Samaritan came, saw the wounded man and had compassion on him. He went up to him, cleansed his wounds with wine (a disinfectant), poured oil (which soothes and heals) on them, and bandaged them up. Then he set the man on his own animal, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day as the Samaritan was departing, he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper and said: "Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, when I come again, I will repay you."

Then the Lord asked the lawyer: "Which of these three do you think was the neighbour to him who fell among thieves?" And he answered: "He who showed mercy on him." Then the Lord said: "Go, and do likewise."

Now this Parable can be interpreted at different levels of understanding. Some see that it means only: "You get help from unexpected sources! In this case, help came from a Samaritan, who according to the Jews was a heretic and outside the Household of God."

This is partially true. However, the Fathers of the Church offer a much deeper interpretation. According to their teaching, the man travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho is Adam, Jerusalem is heaven or paradise, and Jericho is hell. The road from Jerusalem to Jericho goes downhill, and in the same way man has gone steadily downhill since being cast out of paradise. The thieves who attack him are the demons. They remove his clothes (the gifts of the Holy Spirit) and leave him covered in wounds (the fallen passions) and half-dead spiritually. The priest who passed by was incapable of helping him because before the Coming of Christ all men, even the righteous ones of the Old Testament, were themselves wounded by sin and on the road to hell. The

Levite, who knew the Law of Moses, was also helpless. Even the great Moses, to whom God gave the Law, could not keep it and was not saved by it.

Then the Lord mentions the Samaritan because, although they were indeed heretics in Old Testament times (cf. John 4.22), they responded to the teaching of Christ and the Apostles more readily than the Jews and became Christians (Acts 8.4-17). The word "Samaritan" means "keeper". The Good Samaritan, the true Keeper of our souls and bodies, is Christ Himself. He has compassion on fallen man, and through the sacraments (the oil of Holy Chrismation, the wine of the Holy Eucharist) He cleanses and heals our nature, covering its sins with the bandages of forgiveness. Then He sets man on His own animal, that is, His own human nature, and takes him to the inn, that is, His Church. The next day He departs (ascends into heaven), but gives the inn-keeper (the priesthood of the Church) two denarii (the Old and New Testaments) with which to look after fallen man. He also says that He will return (at the Second Coming in glory) and repay them then.

Christ tells us to "do likewise", that is, have compassion on wounded souls and bring them to the only place that can truly heal them - the Church. First we talk about Christ to them, and then when they respond we lead them to the Church. We should help all those whom God sends us on our way, regardless of their race, class or culture.

Thus my neighbour is, first of all, Christ, the Good Samaritan, and secondly, every person in whom Christ dwells through the true faith and the sacraments. I should love him as myself because God is in him. The second great commandment follows directly on the first, because if we love God with all our heart and mind, we will also love those in whom God dwells. He who does this is my neighbour, just as I am a neighbour to him if I "do likewise".

3. The Lost Sheep (Luke 15.1-7).

In this parable the Lord tells of a shepherd who has 100 sheep. When one of them gets lost, he leaves the ninety-nine and goes off in search of the lost one, not resting until he has found it and brought it back home. In the same way, says the Lord, when one sinner repents and returns to God, there is great rejoicing among the angels in heaven, greater than over all the righteous who have not gone astray.

The Church Fathers explain that the one lost sheep is mankind, while the ninety-nine others are the good angels. The shepherd is Christ, Who has come to rescue the lost sheep, humanity. The Fathers also explain that the angels are represented by the ninety-nine sheep, and mankind by only one, because mankind is vastly outnumbered by the good angels.

By showing us that there is such great joy in heaven over one repentant sinner, the Lord is showing us that repentance is linked with joy, and that we should hasten to repent so as to bring joy to God, to the holy angels and the saints, and to ourselves. For "the sweet wine of contrition", as the Fathers say, is a joy-bringing sorrow. The Lord came to bring us joy, and repentance is the door to this joy.

4. The Lost Coin (Luke 15.8-11).

There was a woman, according to this parable, who had ten silver coins. When she lost one, she lit a lamp, swept the house and carefully searched for it until she found it. And when she had found it, she called her friends and neighbours together, saying: "Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost!" "Likewise," the Lord concludes, "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

The Church Fathers explain that the woman in this parable is the Bride of Christ, the Church. According to Jewish tradition, a woman who was getting married had to have ten silver coins. These coins represent the faithful members of the Church. When one of them gets lost, the Church lights a lamp, that is, the Light of Christ, sweeps the house and carefully searches for the lost soul. When she finds it, she rejoices greatly, because without the ten coins she cannot get married - that is, without all the souls whom God has called and chosen, the Marriage Feast of the Lamb cannot begin.

5. The Prodigal Son (Luke 15.1-32).

In this parable there is a father with two sons, the younger of whom asks him to give him his inheritance because he wants to go abroad and live there instead of in his father's house. His father gives him his inheritance, and the son leaves. But then, after squandering all his money in loose living, and after taking a very poor job feeding pigs, he comes to his senses. He wonders why he is putting up with such a miserable existence when even the servants of his father have a better life in his father's house. He decides to return and tell him that he has sinned against him and against God and is no longer worthy to be called his son, and to ask him to accept him as a servant in his house. But while he is approaching his father's house, his father sees him, runs out to meet him and embraces him, giving him to understand that he has already forgiven him. The father then tells his servants to prepare a fatted calf for a feast and to get out his son's former robe and put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.

While the father and his younger son are celebrating his return, the older son comes home from the fields, hears the music of the celebration, and becomes jealous. He points out to his father that all these years he has remained faithful to him, but has never been rewarded by such a feast. But his

father replied: "Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found."

In this parable the Lord teaches us that it is the Divine Will that man should choose in freedom whether to be with God or away from Him. He also teaches us with what great love and immediate forgiveness God receives the sinners who sincerely repent and return to Him. Since God knows the hearts of men, He knows when a soul is really mourning for its sins without needing to be told, and immediately embraces and forgives.

"The former robe" which the Prodigal Son is given on his return signifies the robe of light with which man was clothed in Paradise, which he lost when he sinned against God, and which he receives back again in Holy Baptism. The ring signifies that the son is restored to his former relationship to his father, and the sandals signify that he will now walk according to the Gospel of righteousness (Eph. 6.15). The fatted calf signifies the Lamb of God, Christ, Whose sacrifice on the Cross takes away the sins of all those who sincerely repent and Whose Body and Blood are consumed in the feast of the Holy Eucharist for the forgiveness of sins.

The younger son represents the Gentiles, who fell away from God through paganism and idolatry, but who returned to the Father's embrace in the New Testament Church. The older son represents the Jews, who were the people of God in the Old Testament, but who became jealous of the Gentile Christians. The father explains to the older son that he should not be jealous because the fact that he always stayed with his father, enjoying his abundance, was a reward in itself, while his brother suffered terribly for having left his father's house. The prodigal son wanted to return to his father's house as a servant, which shows his humility. But the Lord shows that the truly penitent sinner is restored to his full status as a son of God.

6. The Rich Man and his Crops (Luke 12.16-21).

The rich man of this parable is constantly increasing his material wealth, so he decides to pull down his barn and build a bigger one "to store all his crops and goods". The equivalent in today's world might be a man who invests in more and more property, or stocks and shares. Now that he has so much, the rich man thinks, he can relax and enjoy himself, eat, drink and be merry. But God says to him: "Fool, This night your soul will be required of you, and then whose will those things be which you have provided?" "So is he," says the Lord, "who lays up treasure for himself (in worldly goods) and is not rich toward God."

Here the Lord is teaching that those who put all their energy and time into becoming rich are fools. It is vain, for example, to long for the day of our

retirement so as to enjoy life in sport, travel, entertainment, etc. Instead of aiming for material riches and pleasures, we should aim to be rich toward God, which means having a close relationship with Him through faith and good works (the works of faith).

After this parable, the Lord exhorts us to have the right priorities and not to worry about our material needs. For God knows our needs and will look after us if we put Him first. "Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing. Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap, and they have neither storehouse nor barn; and God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds. And which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature. If you are not able to do the least, what are you anxious about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. If then God so clothes the grass, which today is in the field, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will He clothe you, O you of little faith? And do not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind. For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. But seek the Kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you. Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom." (Luke 12.22-32; Matt. 7.25-34)

In these beautiful sayings, the Lord is expressing the love of God for us. He is telling us not to worry, because God is our all-powerful Father Who will take care of us if we put the seeking of His Kingdom first and aim first of all for spiritual riches. "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Luke 12.34). For the heart is the spiritual as well as the physical centre of man, and God seeks our heart. But if we have an abundance of material goods, then our heart will be with them and not with God.

7. The Tenacious Widow (Luke 18.1-8).

This parable presents us with a widow who is always pestering a judge to give her justice against her enemy. Now the judge fears neither God nor man, and does not pay any attention to her. However, then he says to himself: "Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow troubles me, I will avenge her (that is, take up her case and have the injustice dealt with), in case by her continually coming to me she weary me."

Then the Lord said: "Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He puts up with them for a long time? I tell you, He will avenge them quickly. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"

Here the Lord is exhorting us to pray without ceasing and not lose heart even if God does not seem to answer our prayer immediately.

He told the parable just after the Pharisees had asked Him when the Kingdom of God would come (Luke 17.20-37). The Lord replied that first He had to suffer many things and be rejected by that generation. "And as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be also in the days of the Son of Man: they ate, they drank, they married wives, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all." The Lord then reminded them that the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all.

And He continued: "In that night (when He will come again to judge the world) there will be two men in one bed: the one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding together; the one will be taken and the other left." (I Thess. 4.15-18; Matt. 25.1-13). This sudden "taking away of people refers to the Second Coming of Christ, when those still alive on earth who belong to the remnant faithful will rise to meet the Lord in the air, their corruptible bodies being changed in the twinkling of an eye into incorruptible bodies.

So in this parable the Lord is telling the remnant faithful of the latter days to be like the tenacious widow, "to pray and not lose heart" in preparation for the Coming of the Lord. If a helpless widow wins her case by persistent pleading before even a callous judge, how much more God's elect find quick justice before a loving and righteous Father? Will Christ really find faith when He comes again (Luke 18.8)? Each of us must take earnest care to belong to His faithful remnant.

Of course, this parable applies to all generations of Christians, and not only to those who will be alive at the Second Coming. We do not know when we will die and appear before the dread judgement-seat of God. So we must "pray without ceasing" (I Thess. 5.17), with the persistence of the tenacious widow, in order to turn the wrath of the Righteous Judge into mercy.

28. ELECTION AND THE CHOSEN ONES

Nowadays the world thinks in socialist categories. The ideal is a materialist paradise on earth in which there are no distinctions of rank or wealth. However, the Holy Scriptures reveal to us that the world is ordered hierarchically.

Sovereign over all is God, "the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords" (I Tim. 6.15). After God come the Angels, who were created before the material universe and who are ordered into nine ranks. The highest ranks - those of the Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones - stand around the Throne of God. Then there are the powers, virtues, dominions, principalities, archangels and angels.

There is a hierarchy among men, too. St. Paul tells us that we "differ in glory", just as the stars do (I Cor. 15.41). The greatest of all created me is the Mother of God, who is even "more honourable than the Cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim". For she bore God under her heart, an honour not bestowed even upon the angels! After her comes St. John the Baptist, whom the Lord called "the greatest born of women" (Matt. 11.11). Then come the apostles and prophets and all the orders of the saints.

Throughout the Bible we see that God chooses some and rejects others. In the Old Testament He chose Israel out of all the nations of the earth. However, after the Jews rejected Christ, He rejected them, and chose the Gentiles - that is, us - in their stead. St. Paul called the Gentiles "a remnant according to the election of grace" and went on: "Israel has not obtained that which it seeks, but the election [i.e. the Christian Gentiles] has obtained it, and the rest were blinded" (Rom. 11.5, 7).

Christ Himself is called "the elect stone" and His disciples are called "elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ" (I Pet. 2.6, 1.2).

When Christ was in Nazareth He clearly made the point about election. He reminded the people that in the time of Elijah, when for three and a half years no rain came on the earth at the request of Elijah, there were many suffering widows in the country. But Elijah was sent only to one, the widow of Zarephath, and supplied her miraculously with oil and meal, raising her son from the dead. In other words, this woman - who is a symbol of the Church - was chosen in preference to all the others. Again, the Lord reminded the people that in the time of Elisha, there were many lepers in the country, but the prophet was sent only to one, Naaman the Syrian. The message is the same: some are chosen and others are rejected.

After the Last Supper the Lord said: "I do not pray for the world [i.e. unbelievers, those who reject Christ], but for those You have given me, for they are Yours" (John 17.9). So He does not pray for everyone, but only for those whom the Father has chosen and given Him.

Finally, we read that when Christ returns "on the clouds of heaven [i.e. the angels] with power and great glory, he will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet to gather together His elect" (Matt. 24.31). And at that time those whom He has chosen on earth will rise to meet Him in the air, like the five wise virgins of the parable (Matt. 25.1-13), while those whom He has not chosen, like the foolish virgins, will remain on the earth (I Thess. 4.15-18).

And yet, while God chooses some and rejects others, He does not do this in an arbitrary manner, but in response to the freely expressed good will of the one and the bad will of the other. There is no fatalism in the Gospel; it is an appeal to free and rational creatures by the One Who created them in absolute freedom and love. If we want to belong the elect, we can, by freely and with love responding to His call.

29. PETER'S CONFESSION AND DENIAL

(Matt. 16.13-28; Mark 8.27-38; Luke 9.18-21)

All the people were wondering who Jesus was. Some thought that perhaps He was Elijah, who went up to heaven in a chariot of fire and of whom it was prophesied that he would come back to earth during the three-and-a-half-year reign of the Antichrist. Others thought He was John the Baptist, or Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets.

Christ asked His disciples: "Who do you think that I am?" And Simon Peter answered: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." "Christ" is another word for "Messiah", and means "Anointed One". So here Peter was saying that Jesus was both the Messiah and God.

Praising him for his correct confession of faith, the Lord said to Peter: "Blessed are you, Simon bar Jonah (Simon son of Jonah), for flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but My Father Who is in heaven." For the true confession of faith that Jesus Christ is God is a gift of God. As St. Paul says: "No man can say that Jesus is Lord but by the Holy Spirit" (I Cor. 12.3).

The Lord went on: "And I say to you that you are Peter (Greek: Petros), and on this rock (Greek: Petra) I shall build My Church, and the gates of hell shall not be victorious against it." From the Greek text it is clear that Peter and the rock are not the same thing, as the Roman Catholics believe. Peter confesses the Rock, which is Christ (I Cor. 10.4), and thereby becomes rock-like and able, together with all those who confess this faith, to conquer "the gates of hell" - that is, all the heresies and heretics that have waged war against the Church from the beginning. For not only Peter, but everyone in the Church becomes rock-like when he confesses this faith and builds his life on it. That is why St. Paul calls all the apostles and prophets and the whole household of God "stones" which together build up the Church, Jesus Christ being "the chief corner-stone, in Whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (Eph. 1.20-21). So the Rock on which the Church is built is Christ God, or the saving confession that Christ is God.

As if to prove that Peter cannot be the Rock, a few verses later Christ severely rebukes Peter, saying: "Get thee behind me, Satan! You are an offence to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." Peter was rock-like as long as he confessed the Rock, Christ. But as soon as he began contradicting Christ and disobeying Him, trying to persuade Him not to be crucified, he is no longer called Simon Peter ("Simon" means "obedient"), but Satan! How can the Church be built on Satan?! No: Peter is unique, not because he is the Rock, but because he was the first to confess the Rock openly. But when he contradicted the Rock, he became like Satan, who always contradicts and disobeys God. And later, when he denied Christ, he even ceased (temporarily, until his repentance) to be an apostle.

Peter himself never claimed to have a special authority which the apostles did not have. When St. Paul rebuked him over the question of circumcision, and the Church decided that Paul was right, he humbly accepted this decision. This shows that he was not infallible.

The Lord said to Peter: "And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Christ is here talking about the future, after the Resurrection. And at that time the keys of the Kingdom of heaven were given, not only to Peter, but to all of the apostles (John 20.19-24). The keys of the Kingdom of heaven mean the power to admit or exclude people from the Church and the sacraments of the Church through the sacrament of Confession. In the sacrament of Confession, the apostles and their successors are given the grace to absolve Christians from their sins, or, if they are not penitent, to withhold absolution.

30. RESURRECTION AND REINCARNATION

The words of the apostles to Christ: "Some say that You are John the Baptist, others that You are Jeremiah or one of the prophets" are sometimes used by believers in reincarnation as "proof" that the Jews believed in reincarnation. They also quote the words of Christ to His disciples concerning the man born blind: "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents" (John 9.2) as if they imply that since the man was born blind, and it was not his fault or his parents', he must have sinned before his birth, in his previous life.

Neither Christ, nor the apostles, nor any of the holy Fathers of the Church believed in reincarnation. Some Jews thought that certain extraordinary people, like St. John the Baptist, might come back from the dead - but as the same person, with the same personality. As for the two main sects of the Jews, the Pharisees believed in the resurrection (Acts 23.8), not in reincarnation, while the Sadducees did not believe in any life after death. The Lord rebuked the Sadducees, saying: "You are wrong, not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God" (Matt. 22.29), and went on to speak about the resurrection.

The Christian teaching is that, in St. Paul's words, "it is ordained for men to die once, and then comes the judgement" (Heb. 9.27). At death, our soul leaves its body and continues in existence while the body is dissolved into the earth. Our soul is not essentially changed or destroyed by death - it remains as it was in our life; it is only our body which changes. But at the general resurrection from the dead, our bodies - the same bodies we had in life, only glorified if we have been counted worthy of it - are resurrected and re-joined to our souls. And in this resurrected form we shall live forever.

When Christ Himself died in His human nature, His soul went into hell while his body remained in the tomb. Then, at the Resurrection His soul - the same soul - was re-joined to His body - the same body. He never was reincarnated and never will be reincarnated, so we know for certain that all those who say they are "reincarnations of Christ" are false christs.

Reincarnation is an essentially Hindu teaching which is completely incompatible with Christianity. For believers in reincarnation there is no need for grace or a saviour, for repentance or forgiveness. They believe that one can become perfect or "enlightened", like Buddha, by living through endless lives. They believe that sin is simply lack of awareness. Christians, however, know that sin is much more than lack of awareness, that it can be abolished only by a truly contrite heart and the grace of God.

Some believe that Jesus was a great spiritual master who became a god and is reincarnated on earth to help mankind. For these people, Christ is no greater than many other gurus or atavars who become "gods" and are reincarnated. However, Christ Himself gave us a completely different

teaching. He did not say that He was one of many gods or sons of God, but the only Son of God Who is equal to God the Father in essence. He said: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; no man cometh to the Father but by Me" (John 14.6). Again He said: "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (John 11.25), "I am the Light of the world" (John 9.5), "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8.58). He claimed for Himself what no other man has claimed for himself, and proved the truth of His words by doing what no other man has done - by raising Himself from the dead!

Many people believe in reincarnation because of stories of people suddenly "remembering" a "previous life" and the details of that life. They forget that the demons are masters of deception and can put all these "memories" into the minds of people. Mediums, too, can call up the sight and sound of dead people by means of demonic deception. The poor duped person thinks that it is the dead person who is speaking to them when in fact it is a demon imitating that person. The demons can imitate even long-dead people because they were present at those distant events and conversations, and have far greater abilities than us. However, we are forbidden by God to delve into the realm of spirits, the psychic world. Only in those very rare cases when God allows it for very special reasons, is it possible for a dead person to come back and speak to a living one. Such a case was the story of King Saul's going to the witch of Endor and calling up the spirit of the dead Prophet Samuel.

31. FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST

(Matt. 16.24-28)

When Peter told the Lord that He should not suffer the death of the cross, the Lord not only rebuked him, saying that it was necessary for the Son of Man to die, but also indicated that every true Christian must take up his cross and suffer: "If any man desireth to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me."

The Lord spoke about "taking up" one's cross, which shows that the cross is voluntary, and does not simply mean all the involuntary sufferings - bereavements, sickness, injustice, etc. - which the whole of mankind undergoes. The cross means, first of all, witnessing to the truth, which inevitably brings suffering. Thus the Lord said to Pilate: "For this cause came I into the world, to bear witness to the truth. And all those who are of the truth hear My voice and follow Me" (John 19.37). To follow Christ by witnessing to the truth is to declare that He is far higher than Buddha or any "atavar"; for he is not a created being who became a "god", but the Uncreated God Who created the universe and Who in the last times became man to save us.

To follow Christ means to follow Him in witnessing to the truth about Christ even to death. For he who confesses the truth will inevitably suffer persecution. "He who follows behind Jesus is not he who only confesses Him to be the Son of God, but rather it is he who also undergoes all tribulations and endures them" (Blessed Theophylact).

"For whosoever would save his life shall lose it, and whosoever would lose his life for My sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man shall come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and then shall He reward every man according to his works. Verily I say unto you, there be some standing here, who shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of Man coming in His Kingdom."

Here the Lord is hinting at the glory of His Transfiguration, which the Apostles Peter, James and John would soon see.

32. CHRIST'S PROPHECIES OF HIS CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION

1. (Matt. 16.21-28; Mark 8.31-9.1; Luke 9. 21-27). The first time that Christ spoke openly about His forthcoming sufferings, crucifixion and resurrection was directly after Peter's confession that He was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. It was at this time that Peter tried to persuade Him not to suffer and that the Lord rebuked Him, stressing that every follower of Christ must suffer for the confession of the truth and the glory of God's holy name. And as if to emphasize the point that dishonour and suffering on earth will lead to glory and honour in heaven, the Lord went on to say that He would to earth return in glory with all His angels and would reward every man in accordance with his works.

2. (Matt. 17.22-23; Mark 9.30-32; Luke 9.43-46). The second time that the Lord predicted His crucifixion and resurrection was immediately after His Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, when the disciples Peter, James and John became witnesses of His Majesty, their eyes being opened to see His human nature transfigured from within by the glory of the Divinity. Then, after coming down from the mountain, He healed an epileptic boy and said: "The Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of sinners, and they will kill Him, and the third day He will be raised up." The hymns that the Church sings on the Feast of the Transfiguration explain that the Lord revealed His Divine glory on Mount Tabor so that when they should see Him crucified they would know that His sufferings were voluntary.

3. (Matt. 20.17-19; Mark 10.32-34; Luke 18.31-34). The third time that the Lord predicted His crucifixion and resurrection was when He and His disciples were going up to Jerusalem. He took them aside and said to them: "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed into the hands of the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify. And the third day He will rise again."

In this way the Lord gradually prepared His disciples for the great shock that the crucifixion would be to their faith. Each time He revealed a little more about the circumstances of His death. And each time He reassured them with the hope of the resurrection.

Just as, for Christ, suffering and glory were closely linked, His suffering being the path to glory, so it is with each individual Christian. For, as St. Paul says: "We suffer with Him, so that we may be also glorified together with Him" (Rom. 8.17). And again: "If we suffer, we shall also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He also will deny us" (II Tim. 2.12).

It is a custom to give honour to those who have died for their country. In England, we observe one minute's silence in honour of those who died in the World Wars. Why, as Christians, cannot we give even one minute at 3 o'clock on Good Friday to honour Him Who died that all men should live?

33. BEING A DISCIPLE

(Matt. 5.13,8.21-22,19.29; Mark 10.28-31; Luke 14.25-35,9.57-62,18.28-30)

The Lord said: "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple."

These words seem shocking at first sight. How can the Lord tell us to hate our parents, when it is one of the Ten Commandments that we honour them? How can He tell us to hate anyone when He told us to love even our enemies?

What He means is that the love of God must be a total commitment, having priority over every other love. So "it is plain that He permits us to love, but not more than we do Him. For He demands for Himself our chief affection; and that very justly; for the love of God in those who are perfect in mind has something in it superior both to the honour due to parents, and to the natural affection felt for children." (St. Cyril of Alexandria)

"And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me is not worthy of Me". This is the voluntary cross, which we have already discussed, of confessing the truth about Christ and His Gospel.

"For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it, lest after he has laid the foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, this man began to build and was not able to finish."

We should not undertake a spiritual task or calling, such as missionary work, or the priesthood, or monasticism, or martyrdom, unless we have been called to do so. Otherwise, we may find that the task is beyond our strength and we suffer a serious spiritual fall. But if God calls us, then we must immediately respond, knowing that He will provide us with the spiritual strength to bring the task to completion - as long as we have truly "forsaken all" to follow Him.

Someone said to Him: "Lord, I will follow You wherever You go." Jesus said to him: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." Then another of His disciples said to Him: "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him: "Follow Me, and let the dead bury their dead. But you go and preach the Kingdom of God." And another also said: "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid farewell to those who are in my house. But Jesus said to him: "No one, having put his hand to the plough and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God."

There is a cost to discipleship. Provision for personal security does not mix with true discipleship. The disciple will be no more secure than his Teacher. If the Teacher had nowhere to lay His head, neither will the disciple.

Moreover, the response to the call must not be delayed. Like the Prophet Elisha who immediately left his plough and his father's house to follow the Prophet Elijah, and like the apostles who dropped their fishing nets - their means of livelihood - immediately to follow Christ, so must we when we hear His call. For it is not a mere man who is calling us, but the Creator, the Holy God.

Nor must we be held back by any obligations to the dead. Of course, the Lord did not mean that the physically dead should bury the dead. In the Holy Scriptures "the dead" refers to those who are spiritually dead, who have not been "quickenened" by the Holy Spirit. The world is full of dead people who live only for the things of this earth and for whom the Kingdom of God does not exist. Let the spiritually dead bury the physically dead, says the Lord. Don't you worry about the things that the "dead" people of this world worry about. He who is called to preach the Gospel is called to preach spiritual life to the living.

However, there is a reward for discipleship, a great reward. Peter said: "See, we have left all and followed You." Jesus said to him: "Verily I say to you, there is no man who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children for the sake of the Kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come eternal life."

"But many who are first shall be last, and the last first." Many of those who are called to discipleship prove to be unworthy and are replaced by others.

For "you are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost its savour, how shall it be seasoned? From that time it is good for nothing except to be cast out and trodden under the feet of men." That is, disciples must be like salt, which stings, on the one hand, but preserves food from corruption, on the other. They sting by proclaiming the truth, which hurts. But they preserve from corruption because those who listen to their words repent and are saved from the corruption of the world. However, when the disciples of Christ lose courage and stop proclaiming the truth, they are like salt which has lost its savour. From that time they are of no use to God.

34. PAYING TAXES

(Matt. 22.15-22; Mark 12.13-17; Luke 20.20-27)

The chief priests and scribes wanted to catch the Lord out, so as to have an excuse to deliver Him to the governor, Pontius Pilate. So they asked Him: Teacher, we know that You speak and teach rightly, and that you do not accept persons, but teach the way of God in truth. Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not?" But He perceived their wickedness and said: "Why do you test Me? Give me a denarius." And when they had given Him one, He said: "Whose image and inscription does it have here?" And they said: "Caesar's." And He said to them: "So give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." And they could not catch Him in His words in the presence of the people. And they marvelled at His answer and kept silent.

The chief priests were actually planning a national revolution against Roman power. But they were worried that the people would follow Christ, Who rejected political revolution because, as He said, "My Kingdom is not of this world" (John 18.36). So they tried either to discredit Christ in the eyes of the people by showing that He did not want freedom for the Jews or to denounce Him to Pilate as a revolutionary. But Christ did not fall into their trap. He said that we must obey Caesar, that is, the political authorities, in those things which do not conflict with the law of God - the payment of taxes, military service, etc. But God also has His rights, and we must fulfil our obligations to Him before all else.

In one of His parables (Luke 15.8-10), the Lord compared man to a lost coin. And just as a coin bears the image of the man who minted it, so man bears the image of His Creator, God. So when the Lord asked: "Whose image does it have?" He is reminding us that we belong first of all to God Who made us, and all other authorities must be subordinated to this first allegiance. When the Jews finally did manage in handing over Christ to Pilate and demanded His crucifixion, they forgot this lesson and showed themselves to be apostates from God, saying: "We have no other king but Caesar" (John 19.15).

35. THE TRANSFIGURATION OF CHRIST

(Matt. 17.1-9; Mark 9.2-10; Luke 9.28-36)

Not long before His crucifixion, the Lord took three of His disciples, Peter, James and John, onto a high mountain by themselves. A high mountain in Holy Scripture is often a place of revelation (Exodus 19.3, 25; Isaiah 2.3; II Peter 1.8).

Having reached the top of Mount Tabor, the Lord was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun and His clothes became white as snow.

And then Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Christ. They were speaking about His forthcoming crucifixion and death.

Then a bright cloud overshadowed them and a voice came out of the cloud, saying: "This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" When the disciples heard it, they were very frightened. But the Lord came and touched them and said: "Arise, and do not be afraid."

When they lifted up their eyes, they saw only Christ. He told them not to tell anyone the vision until He had risen from the dead.

The Lord does not reveal His mysteries to everybody, but only to those who are ready to receive it. That is why He showed the mystery of His Transfiguration only to three of the disciples.

And what did they see? They saw the Divinity of Christ shining through His Humanity, human nature deified, made godlike, by the uncreated Light of the Holy Trinity. St. Peter refers to this event when he writes: "We did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honour and glory when such a voice came to Him from the excellent Glory: 'This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased.' And we heard this voice which came from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain." (II Peter 1.16-18).

Why did Moses and Elijah appear with the Lord? Because Moses stands for the law, and Elijah for the prophets, and the two appearing together on either side of Christ shows that both the law and the prophets witness to Christ, Who is their fulfilment. Also, Moses stands for the dead, and Elijah for the living (for Elijah has not died, but will be killed by the Antichrist at the end of the world).

According to God's law, there should be two or three witnesses to prove a case (II Cor. 13.1). Here Moses and Elijah are two witnesses from the spiritual

realm testifying that they received the Law and prophecy from Christ, Who is God. The Apostles are three witnesses from earth to the Divinity of Christ.

Also, God the Father in the form of a voice, and God the Holy Spirit in the form of a bright cloud testify to Christ, that He is truly God the Son, God by nature from before the beginning of the world. His Divinity was also revealed by the Light which flowed from His Body and which was not created, like the light of the sun or electricity, but uncreated. Those heretics, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Christian Scientists, who deny the Divinity of Christ and say that He was a created being are shown to be wrong by the Transfiguration.

The disciples asked Him: "Why then do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?" And Christ answered: "Indeed, Elijah is coming first and will restore all things. But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him, but did to him whatever they wished. Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands." Then the disciples understood that He was speaking about John the Baptist.

How are we to understand these words?

In the Old Testament we read that Elijah went up to heaven in a chariot of fire and did not die (II Kings 2.11), but will return to the earth to prepare us for the Day of the Lord, the great and terrible Day of Judgement (Malachi 4.5-6). Together with the Prophet Enoch, who also has not died (Gen. 5.24), he will preach for three-and-a-half years against the Antichrist, will convert many of the Jews to Christ, and will then be killed by him (Rev. 11.3-13). This is what the Lord was referring to when He said that Elijah is coming first and will restore all things.

However, when he said that Elijah had already come and the people did not know him and had done to him whatever they wanted, He was referring to John the Baptist, of whom the Angel Gabriel said that he would come "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1.17). We say of a person sometimes that they are "of the same spirit" as another person when they are very similar to each other. And indeed, St. John the Baptist and the Prophet Elijah are very similar in that they have great zeal for God and prepare for His Coming to earth by calling on people to repent.

36. THE LORD'S ANOINTING FOR BURIAL

(Matt. 26.6-13; Mark 14.3-9; John 12.1-8)

When Jesus was in Bethany and sitting down to supper, a woman came to him with an alabaster flask of very costly fragrant oil, and poured it on His head while He sat at table. St. John says that this woman was Mary of Bethany, and that the anointing took place on the Saturday before Palm Sunday - that is, the same day on which He raised Mary's brother Lazarus from the grave.

Some of the disciples criticised the woman, especially Judas Iscariot, who said: "[the oil] might have been sold for 300 denarii and given to the poor". But the Lord said: "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a good work for Me. For you have the poor with you always, but Me you do not have always. She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My Body for burial. Verily I say to you, wherever this Gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be told as a memorial of her."

Is it right to spend a lot of money in beautifying God's churches (for Christ called His Body a Temple)? Should the money be used instead for social services, for the poor and the hungry? It depends on one's motive. If a person has saved up money to build a beautiful church where God can be glorified, the Lord approves of this intention and rewards it. Thus the Lord praised the woman who gave two mites, which was all she had, to the Temple in Jerusalem (Mark 12.41-44; Luke 21.1-4). But many cathedrals have been built, not for the glory of God, but for the glory of men.

Of course, we should help the poor, but the bodily needs of people should not be served at the expense of their spiritual needs. The Lord helped the poor in many ways; and of course, being God, He could have removed poverty altogether. He could have changed stones into bread, not just for the 4000 or 5000, but for the whole world. But he didn't do that. He didn't do it because He came first of all to bring the people spiritual food. He brought them God and the Kingdom, He offered salvation, not material comforts.

Both the rich and the poor can be saved - the rich through being merciful and generous, the poor through being patient. In the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16.19-31), and in several other places (for example, Luke 12.13-21), the Lord warned against greed and reminded the rich that they are responsible for the poor and will be judged accordingly. The rich man in the parable was sent to hell because of his "hardness of heart", because he did not help the poor man Lazarus; while Lazarus went to heaven because of his humble faith, patience and lack of resentment against the rich man.

In this story of the anointing, Mary's act of devotion - "the extravagance of love" - is contrasted with Judas's hypocrisy and cynicism. He said that the money should be spent on the poor, but was in actual fact a thief. He resented money being spent on Christ, and only a few days later betrayed Him for money. But Christ praised Mary, who wanted to give the best she could offer to glorify the Passion of Christ. Such offerings are just as valuable in God's eyes as giving to the poor.

37. PALM SUNDAY

(Matt. 21.1-11; Mark 11.1-10; Luke 19.28-40; John 12. 12-19)

The Prophet Daniel had prophesied that the Messiah would enter Jerusalem and fulfil His mission "seven weeks and sixty-two weeks" of years, i.e. 483 years, from "the command... to build Jerusalem until Christ the prince... And after the sixty-two weeks, the Christ shall be destroyed" (9.25-26). And precisely in fulfilment of this prophecy, the Lord entered Jerusalem in triumph.

First He sent two of His disciples to a village, saying: "Go into the village opposite you, where as you enter you will see a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Loose it and bring it here. And if anyone asks you, 'Why are you loosing it?', say to him: 'Because the Lord has need of it.'" And it happened exactly as Jesus had foretold them. They brought him to Jesus. And they threw their own clothes on the colt, and they sat Jesus on him. And as He went, many spread their clothes on the road. And as He was now drawing near the descent of the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they had seen, saying: "Blessed is the King Who comes in the name of the Lord, Peace in heaven and glory in the highest." And some of the Pharisees called to Him from the crowd: "Teacher, rebuke your disciples." But He answered and said to them: "I tell you, if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out."

The Prophet Zechariah had prophesied: Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is He, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass" (Zech. 9.9). The Lord now fulfilled this prophecy exactly. He rode on a donkey because riding on a donkey, as opposed to a horse or a chariot, was a symbol of peace. In this way He expressed his rejection of the nationalist passions of the Jews, who wanted a Messiah who would fight against the Romans and give them national independence. For Christ is the King of peace, and He came to Jerusalem to open the way, not to an earthly kingdom, but to the Kingdom of Heaven, the Jerusalem on high.

The colt on which no-one has sat signifies the Gentiles, who had never accepted the law of God. They accepted Christ, while the Jews rejected Him and tried to stop the children crying "Hosanna", which means: Save now", as Christ entered Jerusalem. The words "Blessed is He that comes in the name of the Lord" are a quotation from Psalm 117, which was sung by the Jews every day during the Feast of Tabernacles, and seven times on the last day of the feast. The palm branches which the people took with them to meet Christ (John 12.12) are a symbol of joy and victory in that feast.

When Christ spoke about the stones, He was again referring to the Gentiles, whose stony hearts would be softened and cry out the glory of

Christ even when the Jews rejected Him. St. John the Baptist had prophesied the same when he said: "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham" (Matt. 3.9). Thus when Christ entered Jerusalem He proclaimed Himself not only the Messiah of the Jews, but the King and Saviour of all peoples.

38. THE CLEANSING OF THE TEMPLE

(Matt. 21.12-14; Luke 19.45-46; John 2.13-21)

When the Lord had entered Jerusalem, He went into the Temple and drove out all those who bought and sold things there, and overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He said: "It is written: 'My House shall be called a House of prayer', but you have made it a den of thieves."

The Lord saw that worship of God was becoming commercialized, and so He acted to stop the abuse. His cleansing of the temple shows that God wants his churches on earth to be holy places of worship, separated from the world and commercialism. So if people allow concerts, musicals, fashion shows, exhibitions, etc. to take place in church, they are defiling it and angering God. We honour God by keeping his House clean.

Now this was not the first time that the Lord cleansed the Temple - He did it also at the beginning of His ministry (John 2.13-21). At that time the Jews had been angry with Him and asked: "What sign do You show to us [i.e. what authority do you have?], since you do these things?" And the Lord replied: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Then the Jews said: "It has taken forty-seven years to build this Temple, and You will raise it up in three days?" But He was speaking of the Temple of His Body.

Here the Lord shows us the relationship between the Church as a building and the Church as the Body of Christ. And just as we keep the building of the Church clean, so we must keep our own personal churches - our souls and bodies - clean. For Christ has cleansed them by His Body and Blood, making them temples of the Holy Spirit. For, as St. Paul says, "do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?" (I Cor. 6.19).

The Lord said that He would raise His Temple-Body in three days, which He did at the Resurrection. This shows that the Resurrection was the work not only of the Father and the Holy Spirit, but also of the Son. For He, too, is God, and so was able to raise Himself from the dead.

39. THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM AND THE LAST TIMES

(Matt. 23.37-39, 24.3-30; Mark 13.5-13, 24-37; Luke 19.41-44, 21.8-28)

When the Lord entered Jerusalem for the last time, he looked on the city and wept, saying: "If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation."

The Lord was here prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., when the Romans came and destroyed the city and defiled the Temple. During the siege the sufferings of the starving Jews were so great that some women even ate their babies! Many hundreds of thousands of Jews were killed and the rest were scattered over the face of the earth.

The Lord said sadly: "I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate."

Such was the judgement of God upon the Jews for not recognizing the coming of their long-awaited Messiah and even crucifying Him.

Now as the Lord sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying: "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your Coming, and of the end of the age?"

There are two questions here: first about the destruction of Jerusalem, and then about the end of the world. The Lord answers both questions, beginning with the question about Jerusalem.

"Take heed," He says, "that no one deceive you. For many will come in My name saying 'I am Christ' and will deceive many. And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars. See that you are not troubled; for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines, pestilence and earthquakes in various places. All these things are the beginning of sorrows. Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My Name's sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of money will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved. And this Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come. Therefore when you see the

abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet standing in the holy place (whoever reads, let him understand), then let those who are in Judaea flee into the mountains, let him who is on the housetop not come down to take anything out of his house, neither let him who is in the field return back to take his clothes. And woe unto them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days! But pray that your flight will not be in winter, neither on the sabbath day. For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened."

All these words, according to St. John Chrysostom and Blessed Theophylact, refer to the destruction of Jerusalem. There were many false Christs in those days, and the Christians suffered great persecution from the Jews. But the Gospel had been preached throughout the Greco-Roman world by 70 A.D. And then the end came: "the abomination of desolation" - that is, the statue of Titus, the Roman conqueror - was set up in the Holy of Holies and Jerusalem was destroyed. But the Christians had been warned beforehand, and they fled across the Jordan to the city of Pella.

From now on, the Lord begins to speak about the end of the world: "Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!', do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand."

So at the end of the world there will again be people falsely claiming to be Christ. And we see that now, when many, especially Hindus, claim to be reincarnations of Christ or some great "master" who has been sent as a "saviour" for mankind. There is only one Christ and Saviour, the God-Man Jesus Christ.

"Therefore if they say to you, 'Look, He is in the desert!', do not go out; or 'Look, He is in the inner rooms!', do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the East and flashes to the West, so also will the Coming of the Son of Man be."

When Christ comes again, everybody will know it, because it will be a cosmic event bringing the world to an end and preceded by other cosmic events.

"And there will be signs in the moon and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring, and men's hearts failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now

when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near."

"Where the corpse is, there will the eagles be gathered together." That is, "just as the eagles, that is, the vultures, swiftly converge on a corpse, so too all the saints, who soar in the heights, will come where Christ will be and they will be snatched up into the clouds as the eagles. Certainly the corpse is Christ Who died for us and lay as a corpse" (Blessed Theophylact).

"Immediately after the tribulation of those days, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, the stars of heaven will fall, and the power of heaven will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. And then He will send His angels and gather together His elect from the four winds, from the furthest part of the earth to the furthest part of heaven."

The "tribulation" is the persecution of the Antichrist, which will last for three-and-a-half years. But then the Lord will destroy him "with the spirit of His mouth and the brightness of His Coming" (II Thess. 2.8). "For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God. And the dead in Christ shall arise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall be ever with the Lord" (I Thess. 4.16-17).

When used in the singular, the word "cloud" often refers to the Holy Spirit in the Bible. However, "clouds" in the plural refer to the angels and saints, who are filled with the Holy Spirit. For "the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgement on all" (Jude 14-15).

"Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the heavens, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory." The sign of the Son of Man is considered by the Fathers to be the sign of the Cross. For it is the symbol of victory, the victory achieved by the humility of God over the pride of the devil.

"Verily I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place". The word "generation" here refers to the generation of all believers, from the beginning to the end of time.

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away. But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Here the Lord is speaking with humility, as if He were an ordinary man. He is teaching the disciples "not to seek to know things that exceed human knowledge. By saying 'not the angels', He restrains

them from seeking to learn now that which even the angels do not know. By saying 'My Father only', He also prevents them from seeking to learn thereafter. For if He had said, 'I know, but I do not wish to tell you,' they would have been grieved as though He had disdained them. But now by saying, 'Not even the Son knows, but My Father only,' He prevents them from asking. It is like a father who will often hold something in his hands and when his children ask for it and he does not want to give it, he hides and says, 'I do not have what you are asking for,' and so the children stop crying for it. So too the Lord says, 'Even I do not know, but My Father only,' in order to put an end to the desire of the apostles to know the day and the hour. That He Himself does know that day and hour is clear from many other things. All that the Father has belongs to the Son. As the Father had knowledge of the hour, so the Son surely has the same knowledge." (Blessed Theophylact).

"Watch therefore, for you do not know when the master of the house is coming - in the evening, at midnight, at the crowing of the rooster, or in the morning, lest, coming suddenly, He finds you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all: Watch!" The Lord is exhorting us to be ready, not only for the end of the world, but also for our death, which can come at any time. To find us sleeping means to find us spiritually unprepared for the judgement of God. And this will come for us either at our death or at the Second Coming of Christ, whichever comes first.

40. THE PARABLES OF JUDGEMENT

(Matt. 25)

1. The Parable of the Ten Virgins.

All the virgins are waiting with lamps for the Coming of the Bridegroom to take them into the marriage. But while they all have lamps, only the five wise virgins have oil in their lamps. Then, while they were slumbering (dozing off), "at midnight a cry was heard: 'Behold, the Bridegroom is coming, go out to meet Him!' Then all the virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise answered, saying, 'No, otherwise there will not be enough for us and you. Go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.' And while they went to buy, the Bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with Him to the wedding; and the door was closed shut. Afterwards the other virgins came also, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open to us.' But He answered and said, 'Verily, I say to you, I do not know you.' Watch, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming."

The Apostle Peter tells us that "judgement begins at the House of God" (I Peter 4.17). After the Church has been judged, God will judge those outside the Church, for example, the Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc. The Holy Scriptures do not reveal anything about how God is going to judge those outside the Church, except that, as St. Peter says, "if it [the judgement] begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the Gospel of God?" (I Peter 4.17). We should not worry about how God will judge those outside the Church; we know that He is a just Judge and will not judge unrighteously. What should concern us is the saving of our own souls.

The number ten signifies completion, totality. So here the virgins signify all the members of the Church, who have been purified through Holy Baptism. Virginity means not only "no knowledge of sex", but purity and chastity of soul and body. It is possible to be a virgin in body but not in soul if one has dirty thoughts. Also, it is possible to be a married person but chaste and pure.

According to St. John Chrysostom, the lamps which the virgins hold in their hands signify faith, and he explains that the trimming of their lamps means the last confession of repentance before the Coming of Christ the Bridegroom.

The oil in the lamps, according to Chrysostom, are the "works of faith" to which the Apostle James refers in his epistle.

The five wise virgins had added works to their faith, which brought them the oil of the Holy Spirit. The more a Christian responds to the voice of the Holy Spirit by acting upon his faith, the more oil, or grace, he receives. A

lamp that is full of oil burns more brightly and gives more light than a lamp that has only a little oil, which soon runs out, quenching the flame altogether.

The foolish virgins asked the wise ones to give them some of their oil. But it is not possible to share one's works of faith with another person. The wise virgins were spiritually prepared, and this is something you cannot give to or borrow from another person. It is a condition of one's personal being, which depends on the exercise of one's own free will. For "each one will be deemed righteous by his own deeds and not by those of his neighbour" (Blessed Theophylact).

Then the foolish virgins went "to them that sell" - that is, according to the Fathers, the poor. "They pondered how good a thing is almsgiving, but now the door was shut for them. For there is no time for repentance and deeds after our departure from this life. The Lord therefore says to them, 'I know you not'. For the merciful God Who loves mankind does not know those who lack mercy." (Blessed Theophylact).

A still deeper interpretation of these words has been given by the Russian Saint, Seraphim of Sarov: In the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, when the foolish ones lacked oil, it was said: 'Go and buy in the market.' But when they had bought, the door of the bridal-chamber was already shut and they could not get in. Some say that the lack of oil in the lamps of the foolish virgins means a lack of good works in their lifetime. Such an interpretation is not quite correct. Why should they be lacking in good deeds if they are called virgins, even though foolish ones? Virginity is the supreme virtue, an angelic state, and it could take the place of all other good works.

"I think that what they were lacking was the grace of the All-Holy Spirit of God. These virgins practised the virtues, but in their spiritual ignorance they supposed that the Christian life consisted merely in doing good works. By doing a good deed they thought they were doing the work of God, but they little cared whether they acquired thereby the grace of God's Spirit. Such ways of life based merely on doing good without carefully testing whether they bring the grace of the Spirit of God, are mentioned in the Patristic books. "There is another way which is deemed good at the beginning, but it ends at the bottom of hell."

2. The Parable of the Talents.

In this parable, the Lord tells of a man who before going on a journey gives to one of his servants five talents, to another two, and to a third one. The man is a symbol of Christ, Who goes on a journey to heaven; the servants are the Christians, and the talents are spiritual gifts.

The parable goes on to say that the servant who had received five talents added to them another five talents; and the servant who had received two added another two. But the servant who had received one went and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money there. This means that some Christians use the spiritual gifts they have received for the good of others, and in this way increase those gifts. In other words, they add the works of faith to their faith. However, other Christians bury the one gift that all Christians receive - that is, the gift of grace given in Holy Baptism - in the earth - that is, in earthly affairs. If we have received Baptism, the one talent, but the world sees no difference between us and an unbaptized person, then we have buried our talent in the earth.

Now after a long time the master of the servants returned and settled accounts with them. That is, the Lord Who ascended into heaven will return at His Second Coming and will demand an account from Christians at the Last Judgement. And the servants who had multiplied their gifts came and received praise from their master: "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things. I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord." That is, those Christians who make good use of their spiritual gifts, whether these be small or great, will receive as a reward the Kingdom of heaven.

However, the servant who had received the one talent came and said: "Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours." But his lord answered and said to him: "You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have put my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest. Therefore take the talent from him, and give it to him that has ten talents. For to everyone who has more will be given, and he will have abundance. But from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

The Lord is indignant with Christians who, instead of blaming themselves for not having used their spiritual gifts, put the blame for their own spiritual laziness on God. The Lord reaps where He has not sown in the sense that our fallen nature does not naturally produce good spiritual fruit, but requires the

exercise of free will. If we do not use our free will for our own and our neighbour's salvation, then we are renouncing the grace of God and showing hardness of heart towards both God and man. In that case it is just that God should take away the gift he has given us and give it to someone who will make use of it. And all those who do not use the gifts God gives them will be condemned for that.

What are the spiritual talents that God gives Christians? St. Paul mentions "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" (Gal. 5.22-23). And again: "the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, gifts of healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, the gift of speaking in different tongues, and the interpretation of tongues" (I Cor. 12.8-10). St. Paul says that prophecy is a greater gift than speaking in tongues, but that none of the gifts are worth anything without love. "And now there remain faith, hope and love; but the greatest of these is love" (I Cor. 13.13).

3. The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

In this parable, the Lord says that when He will come in glory at the Second Coming, and all His angels with Him, and will sit on the throne of His glory, then all the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.

This is the majestic climax of the Judgement parables. Since He is approaching the humiliation of the Cross, the Lord gives us a glimpse of the glory of the Son of Man, Who is here explicitly called "King". He shows the heavens opened, and all the holy angels, and the whole of mankind assembled before the Righteous Judge. For while in His First Coming He came to suffer and die as the suffering Servant (Is. 53) Who is noticed by only a few, in His Second Coming He will come in glory and power and will be seen by everybody.

"And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on the right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and fed You, or thirsty and gave You drink? When did we see You a stranger and took You in, or naked and clothed You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and came to You?' And the King will answer and say to them, 'Verily, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'"

That which is done to Christians is counted by the Lord as having been done to Himself. Thus when the persecutor Saul encountered the Lord on the road to Damascus, he heard a voice saying: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9.4). In the same way, works of mercy that are done to Christians, who are here called the "brethren" of Christ, will be counted at the Last Judgement as having been done to the Lord Himself.

The Holy Fathers point out that this passage does not only refer to physical acts of mercy. It is good to give physical food to the physically hungry. It is even better to give spiritual food, the Word of God, to those who are hungering and thirsting for righteousness. But if we cannot give spiritual food or comfort, we can at least give physical food and comfort according to our ability. For, as the Lord said, "whoever will give one of these little ones a cup of water to drink only in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto, he shall in no wise lose his reward" (Matt. 10.42; Mark 9.41).

Of course, as Christians we should be merciful to all men, and not only to Christians. But there is a special value in doing good to those in whom Christ dwells. For, as St. Paul says, "do good unto all men, but especially to those who are of the household of the faith" (Gal. 6.10).

The parable then goes on to say that those who did not do physical acts of mercy to the brethren of Christ will be condemned as having refused to do them to Christ Himself. For those who show no mercy must not expect to receive mercy. So "these shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

The parable of the ten virgins teaches us that we should be prepared to meet God with burning lamps - that is, with both faith and the works of faith. The parable of the talents teaches us that we must make good use of the spiritual gifts that are given to us - for example, prophecy, teaching, faith, hope and love. The parable of the sheep and goats teaches us that we shall not receive mercy at the Last Judgement if we have not shown mercy to the disciples of Christ for the sake of Christ - this is the minimum condition of our salvation.

41. THE FAREWELL DISCOURSE OF CHRIST

(John 14.1-26)

During the Last Supper, the Lord said to His disciples: "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwellings; if it were not so, I would not have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, you may be also. And where I go you know; and the way you know."

Then Thomas said to him: "Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?"

The Lord said to him: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

So the Way is a Person: Christ. The Truth is a Person: Christ. And the Life is a Person: Christ.

The Way to the Father has been forever established: through the Son. And there is no other way: neither through Buddha, nor Mohammed, nor through any other person or teaching.

The Truth is the Person of Christ, because He is God. It is not a philosophical system. It is the Revelation of God, which is Christ.

The Life is Christ, the uncreated, eternal Life revealed in the flesh.

So while aspects of truth and goodness are to be found among all people insofar as we are all made in the image and likeness of God, only Christ, Who is God Himself, can give us Absolute Truth and Perfect Goodness.

The Lord continued: "Believe Me, that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me."

While human beings are made in the image of God, the Incarnate son is the exact image of the Father (Col. 1.15; Heb. 1.3). The Lord did not say: "I am the Father", because He is not. Instead He declared: "I am in the Father, and the Father in Me." This means that He and the Father are one in essence and undivided.

"If you love Me, keep My commandments."

For the only real proof that we love Christ is that we keep His commandments. If a person says He loves Christ but does not keep His commandments, He is a liar.

"And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper (Comforter), that He may abide with you forever - the Spirit of truth, Whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. The Helper (Comforter), the Holy Spirit, Whom the Father will send in My Name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you."

So in these last verses, the Lord teaches us that God is a Trinity of Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And we can believe this because one of the Trinity, Christ, has revealed it to us.

42. THE TRUE VINE

(John 15.1-12)

The Lord continued: "I am the True Vine, and My Father is the Husbandman. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the Vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned."

So the Vine is Christ, the branches are the Christians, and the bunches of grapes are our good works. That which connects the Vine with the branches and the grapes is the sap, which is the Divine Body and Blood of Christ. It is through the sap that we are rooted in Christ and are able to bring forth good fruit; for without Him and His grace we can do nothing.

Nowadays people think that it is possible to achieve holiness without being a Christian, and that even Buddhists and Muslims can be saints. But Christ here makes it quite plain that we can produce the fruits of holiness only by believing in Him and partaking in Him. Humanists and members of non-Christian religions can produce works which seem to be good; but since they are not the fruits of the True Vine they do not produce true holiness.

The figure of the vine and its branches shows that the union of Christians with Christ is of the most intimate kind; it is true comm-union. His life flows into us as sap flows into branches. And in a saint we see the fruits of this intimate communion. He produces truly good works, the "works of faith", in St. James' phrase. It is vain to think that we can produce truly good works, or be true disciples of Christ, if we do not partake of Him in the sacraments. For, as St. Paul says, "if a man wrestles, he is not crowned unless he wrestles lawfully. The husbandman who labours must be first a partaker of the fruits" (II Tim. 2.6).

43. THE WASHING OF THE FEET

(John 13.1-17)

The Old Testament Passover was celebrated with unleavened bread and a sop of herbs. The unleavened bread recalled the Israelites leaving Egypt in haste without leavened bread. It symbolizes the fact that when we leave the world (Egypt) and strive towards the Kingdom of Heaven (the Promised Land), we must remove from ourselves the "leaven" of this world, "the leaven of the Scribes and Pharisees" (Matt. 16.6), which is false teaching, and replace it by the new leaven, which is the grace of the Holy Spirit. "Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven," says St. Paul, "that you may be a new lump, since you are truly unleavened. For indeed Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us" (I Cor. 5.6-7).

And so, at the Last Supper, after celebrating the Old Testament Passover with His disciples with unleavened bread, the Lord instituted the New Testament Passover with leavened bread.

However, before proceeding to the New Testament Passover, the Lord washed the feet of His disciples. Peter objected to this, for feet-washing was usually the task of slaves. But the Lord said to him: "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this." And again: "If I do not wash you, you have no part in me."

Frightening words! And so Peter offered not only his feet, but also his head and his hands to be washed. But the Lord said: "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, and is completely clean." Why does He say this? "Because," says St. Ambrose of Milan, "in Baptism all guilt is washed away" (On the Sacraments, III, 1, 7). For in washing His disciples' feet, Christ set forth not only an example of humility which we should imitate, but also a symbol of Holy Baptism. Through Baptism we enter into the Death and Resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6.1-11). Our being immersed totally in water signifies death to the Old Adam and all his fallen desires and tendencies, and life in the New Adam, Christ. After we have been baptized we are clean and so can partake in the New Testament Passover, the Body and Blood of Christ.

The washing of the feet also symbolizes the sacrament of repentance and confession. For through our contact with the world our "feet", our human nature, becomes dirty again and in need of cleansing. But through the tears of repentance, "the second baptism", we are cleansed again.

44. JUDAS' BETRAYAL

(Matt. 26.14-16, 20-25, 47-50, 27.3-10; John 13.21-30)

On Wednesday, two days before Good Friday, Judas went to the chief priests and asked: "What are you willing to give me if I deliver Him to you?" And they gave him thirty pieces of silver. The Prophet Zechariah had prophesied that Christ would be betrayed for exactly this sum of money (Zech. 11.12).

While Christ and the disciples were still eating the Old Testament Passover, the Lord said to them: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, one of you shall betray Me". The disciples were very sorrowful on hearing these words, and in their humility each of them asked: "Lord, is it I?" Judas, too, asked this question, and the Lord said to him: "Thou hast said." However, the other disciples probably did not hear this exchange, because Peter then asked John, who was leaning on the Lord's breast (a sign that the Apostle John was the closest to the heart of Jesus and understood the Mystery of His Divinity better than the others) who the traitor was. Then the Lord said: "He it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it." And having dipped the sop in a herbal mixture, in accordance with the ritual, he gave it to Judas Iscariot. Now the giving of the sop was a mark of honour, so the Lord was here making a last appeal to Judas' conscience. However, Judas had already agreed with the high priests to hand over Christ to them for the sum of thirty pieces of silver. So his heart was hardened, and when he had received the sop we read that "Satan entered into him" - that is, he came completely under the power of the devil. Seeing this, the Lord said: "What you are doing, do quickly." The other apostles did not know what these words meant. They thought that since Judas had the money-bag, perhaps he was being told to buy something for the feast, or give something to the poor. Then Judas went outside in order to betray the Lord. "And it was night" - the physical darkness symbolized the spiritual darkness of Judas' soul.

The Lord said: "The Son of Man goeth as it is written of Him; but woe unto that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It had been good for that man if he had not been born." This shows that the Lord foreknew everything that was going to happen, and allowed it to happen so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled. But it also shows that Judas acted out of freedom; he was not forced to betray Christ. For if he had not acted out of freedom, but in accordance with fate, the Lord would not have condemned him or prophesied damnation for him. Thus while God foresees our acts, those acts are free and we bear responsibility for them.

Why did Judas betray Christ? The Lord had chosen him as one of the apostles; he had been with Him for three years, watching the miracles of God, listening to His teachings. The Lord gave Judas, like the other apostles, the gifts of healing and the casting out of demons. So why did Judas betray Him?

The Fathers of the Church explain that he was disillusioned with Christ. His idea of the Messiah was quite different from Christ's. He expected the Messiah to lead His disciples in overthrowing the Roman occupation and making Israel the dominant nation in the world! Judas wanted God to remove all the political and social injustices of the world and establish a utopia, a kind of universal welfare state, on earth. This is the hope of the modern world and of the majority of Christians and Christian "Churches". Their hope is essentially humanist. Like the sick people in the plain, they cry to God: "Come on, make me better, take my pain away, so that I can continue to enjoy life on earth. Don't bother me with God and His Kingdom - that is for later, much later."

If we Christians responded to Christ's calling, we would become saints and the world would become a completely different place. If we had the mustard-seed of faith, we would believe the words of the Lord: "My Kingdom is not of this world", and live by them. But instead, like Judas, we betray the vision that God has set before us, substituting for it the vision of the welfare state. Countries with welfare states show us how utterly desolate life is without true faith in God. They have affluence, but also enormous suicide rates, crime rates, occultism and general unhappiness. So when an Orthodox Christian fasts on Wednesdays, he is reminded not to be like Judas, like the humanists and materialists of this world.

Judas betrayed Christ with a kiss. Just as Satan used false love to deceive us, so Judas used false love to betray the Saviour of the world. When the soldiers arrested Jesus, all His disciples forsook Him and fled. However, when Judas learned that Jesus had been condemned and had been delivered to Pontius Pilate, he was remorseful and brought back the thirty piece of silver to the chief priests. He said: "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said that they did not care. So Judas threw the money down in the Temple and went and hanged himself.

If only Judas had not lose hope of receiving forgiveness, even he would have been forgiven by Christ. But avarice and anger against God, Who would not act the way that Judas wanted Him to act, made him an instrument of the devil. Many people feel sorry for Judas and say that he had to betray Christ so that Christ should die for us and save us by His death (Isaiah 53.7). But St. John Chrysostom explains that Christ could have died for us without being betrayed by Judas. The Jews tried to catch and kill Him many times, but each time He got away from them, because His time had not yet come. Only when the time was right did God allow Himself to be delivered into their hands. That time was the feast of Pascha, when the paschal lamb was sacrificed in remembrance of the deliverance of the Israelites from death at the hands of the Egyptians. Christ died at that time to show us that He is the Paschal Lamb, sacrificed to save us from death and the devil. God in His

foreknowledge knew that Judas would betray Him and so help to bring about that sacrifice. However, he did not predetermine that Judas should do it; for if He had predetermined Judas, then Judas would have had no freewill.

When Christ gave Judas the sop, Satan entered him. At that point, Judas may have lost all faith in Christ as our God and Saviour, so that even when he felt remorse for betraying innocent blood, he did not have the faith to seek forgiveness from Christ. Only through faith can we be saved.

The chief priests decided to buy a field with the thirty pieces of silver. This field was called the field of blood. And so the prophecy of Zechariah (11.12,13) was fulfilled: "They took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of Him who was priced and gave them for the potter's field."

45. THE INSTITUTION OF THE EUCHARIST

(Matt. 26.26-35; Mark 14.27-31; Luke 22.14-21)

Then the Lord took the leavened bread, blessed it and broke it, and gave it to His disciples, saying: "This is My Body". The Lord did not say: "This is like My Body", but: "This is My Body". Moreover, the Greek word for "this" agrees in gender with the word for "Body", which shows that "this" does not refer to "bread" but to "Body".

Then He took the cup and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying: "Drink from it, all of you. For this is My Blood of the New Testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." The Lord called it a "testament" or "covenant", because a testament is an inheritance that is given only after the death of a man, and He was now going to His death. He called it the "New" Testament because He had already drunk the cup of the Old Testament and was now drinking the cup of the New. It was new also because it did not pass away and lose its validity, like the old, but was the partaking of ever-new, eternal, incorruptible life. For as He had said before: "Whoever eats of My flesh and drinks My blood, has eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6.54).

Then the Lord told them that after His death He would rise from the dead and meet them in Galilee. But first He warned them in the words of the Prophet Zechariah (13.7): "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd (Christ), and the sheep (the disciples) will be scattered.'" After this warning, however, comes consolation: "After I am raised, I will go before you to Galilee (which means "passing over")."

Then Peter said: "Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be." But the Lord showed that these words were an empty boast, coming from a man who did not know his own weakness: "Verily, I say to you that today, even this night, before the cockerel crows twice, you will deny Me three times." But Peter spoke more strongly: "If I have to die with You, I will not deny You." And all the other disciples said the same. But they, too, as Blessed Theophylact says, "in ignorance made promises that they would not be able to keep".

This last major miracle of Christ's life recalls the first miracle which He performed at the wedding in Cana. There He came as a guest and turned the water into wine. Here He comes as the Bridegroom and Host, and turns the wine into His own Blood, which He then gives to His Bride, the Church.

How could this be His Blood, "shed for many", even before His Crucifixion and Death? Because for God time is transcended in His own Eternity. And so even before His Crucifixion, the bread became His crucified Body, and the

wine became His shed Blood, by the consent of the Father, and the power of the Word of God - that is Christ Himself, and the operation of the Holy Spirit.

This is His precious inheritance for us.

46. CHRIST IN THE GARDEN OF GETHSEMANE

(Matt. 26.36-46; Mark 14.32-42; Luke 22.39-46; John 18.1)

Then the Lord led His disciples to a place called Gethsemane and said: "Sit here while I go and pray over there." He took with Him Peter and John and James, and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed. Then He said to them: "My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me." He went on a little further and fell on His face and prayed: "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will." Then He came to His disciples and found them sleeping, and said to Peter: "What? Could you not watch with Me one hour? Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." Again, a second time he went away and prayed: "O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done." And He came and found them asleep again, and He went away and prayed for the third time. Then an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him. And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

"Take this cup from Me." It is not as God that He asks this, but as Man. In His Divinity Christ cannot suffer; but in His Humanity He can and does. Here we see the full reality of the Humanity of Christ, and the real struggle He had to overcome His natural (and not sinful) fear of death in order to fulfil the will of God. He became obedient to death, even the death of the Cross (Phil. 2.8), conforming His human will to His Divine will, which is also the will of God the Father. He accepted the most extreme spiritual and physical suffering and death in order to give man eternal life, becoming the Perfect Sacrifice for the sins of all mankind.

Christ took with Him the same three disciples who had been with him at the Transfiguration because in His Manhood He gained comfort from the support of other men. And the Father also sent Him an angel to comfort and strengthen Him. According to tradition, it was the great Archangel Michael who came at this moment to help the Son of Man.

47. BETRAYED, ARRESTED, FORSAKEN

(Matt. 26.47-56; Mark 14.43-52; Luke 22.47-53; John 18.2-12)

After the Lord had prayed for the third time, He went again to His disciples and said: "Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise up, let us be going. See, My betrayer is at hand."

And while He was speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, with a great multitude carrying swords and clubs, came from the chief priests and elders of the people. Now His betrayer had given them a sign, saying: "Whomever I kiss, He is the One; seize Him." Judas went up to Jesus and said: "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed Him. But Jesus said to Him: "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" Jesus went forward and said to the soldiers: "Whom are you seeking?" They answered Him: "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus said to them: "I am He." And Judas, who betrayed Him, also stood with them. Now when He said to them: "I am He", they drew back and fell to the ground. Then He asked them: "Whom are you seeking?" And they said: "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus answered: "I have told you that I am He. Therefore if you seek Me, let these go their way."

These soldiers did not know what Christ looked like. They did not belong to the multitude of the people who had come to be healed by Him and to listen to His teachings concerning the Kingdom of God. That is why Judas told them that the One Whom he would kiss would be Christ. Just like the modern heretics and ecumenists, he used false love, signified by the kiss, to betray the Truth. But the Lord exposed his treachery.

When the Lord said to the soldiers: "I am He," they fell to the ground in awe, so great was the inner power of these words by the God-Man. The Lord then told them to let His disciples go and just take Him, in fulfilment of His words at the Last Supper: "Of those whom Thou hast given Me, I have not lost one."

But before the disciples could flee, Simon Peter drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant, whose name was Malchus. But the Lord said to Peter: "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the Scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?"

This shows that Christ went voluntarily to the Cross, and that Peter was going against the Divine Will in trying to prevent it. It also shows, according to the Holy Fathers, that there were twelve legions of demons - that is, 72,000 demons - in Jerusalem at that time. That is why He mentions the twelve legions of angels He could have summoned to oppose them. But He did not

want to oppose them; He wanted the demons to have their will and crucify Him, so that thereby He could finally crush their power and save mankind.

48. HOLY DECEPTION

Why was it that when the demons possessing people cried out to the Lord: "Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth! Did you come to destroy us? I know who You are - the Holy One of God!" (Luke 4.34, 41) - the Lord rebuked them and told them to keep quiet?

In the Psalms we read: "Unto the sinner God hath said: Why declarest thou My statutes and takest up My covenant in thy mouth?" (49.17). God does not want demons to confess Him, but only those who truly believe in Him. And true believers are those who not only believe in God ("the demons also believe, and tremble" (James 2.19)), but also believe God - that is, who believe all His words and strive to obey them. The demons believe in God, but they do not believe His words and obey them. Christ does not need the help of demons in order to be recognized by men: He will reveal Himself to them in His own way and in His own time.

There is a lesson for us here: we must never pay attention to messages coming from the demons, even if they seem to be true; for the devil is the father of lies and deception. He can mix lies with truth and in that way lead us astray. He can lead us into pride by making us believe that we are receiving a message from God because we are holy already.

There was another reason why the demons called out to Christ that He was the Son of God. They were not sure themselves, and wanted to hear from His own lips that He really was God. But the Lord did not want the devil to know this yet. St. Ignatius the God-bearer writes that the secret of Christ's Divinity was hidden from the devil, which is why no demon was allowed to be present at the Annunciation, when the Angel Gabriel revealed to the Virgin Mary the mystery of the Incarnation. When the Lord was tempted in the wilderness, the devil again wanted to know whether the Lord was really God: "If You are the Son of God..." He knew that Christ was someone quite extraordinary, but He could not believe that God would have such humility as to be born of a woman Himself. None of the demons knew this, says St. Paul, "for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (I Cor. 2.8) - and the Lord wanted to be crucified.

Since the devil had destroyed man in the Garden of Eden by an act of evil deception, the Lord wanted to save man by an act of holy deception. He came to man in the guise of human flesh, when He was in fact not a mere man, but the God-Man. And the devil, thinking He was a mere man, crucified Him. But when Christ descended into hades, the devil discovered that He had in front of Him not a mere man, but the Mighty God, Who then destroyed the might of hades and released all the souls Who believed in Him.

The Fathers compare this to what we do when we go fishing. The fish are caught by a hook, but the fish swallow the hook because they are attracted by the bait, the worm which is on the hook, and do not see the hook itself. In the same way, the devil was "hooked" by God. He tried to swallow up His humanity (the worm) but was destroyed by His Divinity (the hook under the worm).

Until the Coming of Christ, the devil had a right to swallow up all the souls of men, because all men are sinners who have allowed themselves to be deceived by the devil, not believing the words of God. However, Christ's soul was perfectly sinless, so when the devil swallowed up His soul, He committed a great injustice. So in return for this injustice God demanded compensation, propitiation. And the compensation He demanded was that all those souls Who believed in Christ should be freed from hades. In this way the devil's evil deception was conquered by holy deception, and the injustice of men was cancelled out by the devil's even greater injustice, in accordance with the wonderful Justice of God.

49. CHRIST BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN

(Matt. 26.57-68; Mark 14.53-65; Luke 22. 54, 63-65; John 18.13-24)

The Lord was brought first before Annas, who had been high priest before Caiaphas and was his father-in-law. Annas asked Him about His disciples and His doctrine. The Lord replied: "I spoke openly to the world. I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where the Jews always meet, and in secret I have said nothing. Why do you ask Me? Ask those who have heard Me what I said to them. Indeed, they know what I said." Then Annas sent Him bound to the High Priest Caiaphas.

In Caiaphas' house, and many false witnesses were brought forward to accuse the Lord. One of them accused Him of saying that He would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. However, the Lord had not used precisely those words, and in any case He had been referring, not to the temple built by Herod, but to His own Body, which He would raise from the dead after three days.

The Lord did not answer any of His accusers, after which Caiaphas in exasperation said: "I put You under oath by the living God: tell us whether You are the Christ, the Son of God!" The Lord was bound to answer this, and in any case He now had no reason to hide that He was the Divine Messiah. So He replied: "It is as you have said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven."

This was a quotation from Psalms 119.1, in which the Messiah is depicted as sitting at the right hand of God, and also from Daniel 7.13-14, which speaks of the Messiah as "the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven." In this way the Lord was declaring that He was the Son of God, equal to the Father, and that all these unjust judges would one day see His glorious Second Coming to judge the world.

Then the High Priest tore his clothes (which was forbidden for a high priest to do - Lev. 10.6, 21.10) and said: "He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, how you have heard His blasphemy! What do you think?"

They replied: "He is deserving of death." Then they spat in His face and beat Him; and others struck Him with the palms of their hands. Then they blindfolded Him, saying: "Prophecy to us, Christ! Who is the one who struck You?"

The High Priest and the Sanhedrin sentenced Christ to death because He claimed to be God. But since He is truly God, His words were not blasphemy,

but the truth, and it was the Jews who committed blasphemy. In fact they sentenced God to death for blaspheming against God!

However, a charge of blasphemy was of no interest to the Roman authorities, so the Jews had to invent another charge to convince Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, that Christ was worthy of death. What they did was accuse Christ of striving to be "king of the Jews" - in other words, a political agitator and rebel against Rome.

50. PETER'S DENIAL OF CHRIST AND JUDAS' SUICIDE

(Matt. 26.69-75, 27.1-10; Mark 14.66-72; Luke 22.54-62; John 18.15-18,25-27)

John and Peter had followed Christ to Caiaphas' house. Since it was a cold night, a fire was kindled in the courtyard and the officers and servants were sitting warming themselves round it. Peter also warmed himself, while watching from a distance to see what they were doing to his Lord.

Then three different people came up to Peter and asked him whether he knew the Lord and was one of His disciples. Each time Peter vehemently denied that he knew Him. After the third denial, the cock crowed and the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Suddenly he remembered the words of the Lord: "Before the cock crows, you will deny Me three times."

Peter went out and wept bitterly...

When the morning came, all the chief priests and elders plotted together how to put Christ to death. They bound Him and brought him to Pilate. Then Judas, seeing that He had been condemned, was overcome by remorse and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests, saying: "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood."

Judas was remorseful but not repentant - in sharp contrast to Peter, who truly repented of his denial of Christ. The devil who had entered Judas at the Last Supper made him forget the mercy, love and forgiveness of the Lord. He fell into despair and committed suicide.

The chief priests then took Judas's money and used it to buy a potter's field in which to bury him. And so it came to be called the Field of Blood. In this way the prophecies of Zechariah 11.12-13 and Jeremiah 32.6-9 were fulfilled: "And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of Him Who was priced and gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord directed me."

51. THE KING OF THE JEWS

(Matt. 27.11-26; Mark 15.1-5; Luke 23.1-7; John 11.50,18.28-38)

When the Sanhedrin plotted to capture Christ and kill him, Caiaphas prophesied: "It is better that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish." Caiaphas did not realize the truth of his words; for the death of Christ was indeed necessary for the salvation both of the Jewish nation and of all men! Caiaphas meant that the death of Christ would avert Roman intervention and the destruction of the last vestiges of Jewish independence. But in fact it was precisely in revenge for the death of Christ that God sent the Roman armies which finally destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and scattered the Jews all over the world.

The Jews sent Christ to Pilate, as we have seen, on the political charge that he was an agitator against Roman power and aspired to be king. But this was hypocrisy: it was the Jews who wanted to overthrow Roman power, while Christ stood for a completely different kind of spiritual Kingdom. Pilate knew the Jews' hypocrisy, so at first he tried to free Christ.

"Are you the King of the Jews?" he asked. The Lord replied: "Are you speaking for yourself, or did others tell you this concerning Me?" Pilate said: "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?" The Lord said: "My Kingdom is not of this world. If My Kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight that I should not be delivered to the Jews. But now My Kingdom is not from here." Pilate then asked Him: "Are you a King then?" The Lord answered: "You say rightly that I am a King. For this cause was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." Pilate said: "What is truth?"

So the Lord makes it clear that He has not come to build a political kingdom and to put right the political and social injustices of the world. He has come to do something infinitely more important: to bear witness to the truth and lead men, through the truth, to the Kingdom of Heaven, which is not a continuation of life on earth, but a participation in the Divine life, a continual growing in the knowledge and love of God. This is eternal life.

Pilate was indifferent to the truth, so he did not understand what Christ was talking about. The charge of blasphemy against Christ meant nothing to him, and he knew that He was not a revolutionary. Moreover, his wife had warned him not to condemn Christ because of a dream she had had. So he was motivated to release Him, and suggested to the Jews that since he could release a prisoner to them for the feast, he would release Christ.

However, the Jews demanded instead the release of Barabbas - a murderer and revolutionary like themselves. The irony is that "Bar-abbas" means "son of

the father". So the Jews demanded the release of a son of the devil, whom the Lord had said was their father (John 8.44), while condemning the Son of God the Father to death.

Seeing that he could not persuade the Jews, and fearful that they would denounce him to Caesar, Pilate washed his hands in front of the angry crowd, saying: "I am innocent of the blood of this Person. You see to it."

At a certain stage when Pilate discovered that Christ came from Galilee, he sent Him to Herod, whose jurisdiction was Galilee. Herod was in Jerusalem at the time and was very glad to see Christ, because he had heard many things about Him and hoped that He would do some miracle in front of him. However, Christ did not answer any of Herod's questions, so he mocked Him, arrayed Him in a gorgeous robe and sent him back to Pilate.

That same day Pilate and Herod, who had been enemies previously, became friends. Thus enemies can become friends on the basis of a crime in which they both take part.

52. THE TRIAL OF CHRIST BEFORE PILATE

(Matt. 27.27-31; Mark 15.16-21; Luke 23.13-25; John 19.1-16, 19-22)

Then Pilate's soldiers took Christ into the Praetorium (governor's residence) and gathered the whole garrison around Him. And they stripped Him and put a scarlet robe on Him. When they had twisted a crown of thorns, they put it on His head, and a reed in His right hand. And they bowed the knee before Him and mocked Him, saying: "Hail, King of the Jews!" Then they spat on Him, and took the reed and struck Him on the head. And when they had mocked Him, they took the robe off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him away to be crucified.

Every king is proclaimed by his soldiers. It was fitting, therefore, that Christ should be proclaimed by the soldiers, although they were not aware of what they were doing. So He was clothed in scarlet, the symbol of royalty, and given a reed in mockery of the sceptre of which David says: "A sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of Your Kingdom" (Ps. 45.6).

Concerning the crown of thorns, St. John Chrysostom says: "Christ is the Plough, Who with His Divine Head uproots the earth from its ancient sin of which thorns are the symbol." The Shroud of Turin has revealed that the crown of thorns was placed, not round His Head, as many pictures show, but on His Head, like a cap, which is way kings are crowned.

In the mockery of Christ by the soldiers we see the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah concerning the Suffering Servant Who is "despised and rejected of men" and "bears the iniquities of us all" (53.3,6). In what the Fathers calls "the mad passion of God for man", God allowed Himself to be mocked and humiliated to the most extreme degree. For He came to save us through His humility; it was the humility of God that defeated the pride of Satan and his servants.

The soldiers knelt and said, "Hail, King of the Jews!" in a parody of the salute they owed to their king. But even their mockery contained a hidden truth. For they, like all men, will one day bow the knee to Christ; for "at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow" (Phil. 2.10).

When Christ was brought before Pilate, the Jews shouted: "Crucify Him, crucify Him!" Pilate said to them: "Why, what evil has He done? I have found no reason for death in Him. I will therefore chastise Him and let Him go." But the Jews replied: "We have a law, and according to our law, He ought to die, because He made Himself the Son of God." Therefore when Pilate heard that saying, he was the more afraid and he went again into the Praetorium and asked Christ: "Where are You from?" But Christ gave him no answer. Then Pilate said to Him: "Are you not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?" Then Christ answered:

"You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given to you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin."

The Lord makes clear here that, although Pilate, too, was guilty of His Death, it was the Jews who had the greater guilt. Pilate was willing to release Christ. He did not believe that He was a political agitator, and when he heard that He had called Himself the Son of God, he was afraid.

However, the Jews now changed tactics and reminded Pilate that Christ claimed to be a King, and that Pilate should remain loyal to his king, Caesar. "If you let this Man go," they said, "you are no friend of Caesar's. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar."

Then Pilate brought in Christ, robed in scarlet and crowned with thorns, and said: "Behold your King!", indicating how absurd it was that such a humiliated Man could be a serious political threat.

But the Jews cried out: "Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!" Then Pilate said: "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered: "We have no king but Caesar! His Blood be on us and on our children!"

At this point the Jews, in the person of their religious leaders, apostatized from the Lord God, preferring a pagan Roman as their king. Moreover, they cursed themselves and their children. This curse began to be fulfilled when Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D., and has continued to be fulfilled in those Jews who reject Christ, their only King.

So Pilate delivered Christ to be crucified.

But, through the Providence of God, he saw to it that the Jews should not forget that it was their true King Whom they had crucified. For he ordered that above the Head of Christ should be written His accusation in three languages, Hebrew, Greek and Latin: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." The Jews did not like this, so they came to him and said: Do not write 'King of the Jews', but 'He said: "I am the King of the Jews".' However, Pilate would not be moved. "What I have written," he said, "I have written."

53. THE CRUCIFIXION OF CHRIST

(Matt. 27.32-44; Mark 15.20-32; Luke 23.26-43; John 19.16-27)

Now as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. Him they compelled to bear His cross - a great honour. And when they had come to a place called Golgotha, that is to say, the place of the skull (for Golgotha was by tradition the place where Adam was buried), they gave Him to drink sour wine mingled with gall, which was meant to deaden the sufferings of the condemned man. But when He had tasted it, He would not drink, wishing to drink the cup of sufferings to the end and in full consciousness.

And a great multitude of the people followed Him, and women who also mourned and lamented Him. And the Lord, turning to them, said: "Daughter of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children. For indeed the days are coming in which they will say, 'Blessed are the barren, wombs that never bore, and breasts which never nursed!' Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!' For if they do these things in the green wood, what will be done in the dry?" By these words, the Lord was warning the women about the terrible calamity that was to befall Jerusalem. The green wood full of sap (i.e. grace) signified Himself, while the dry wood signified the Jews. A fire which burns even green wood will reduce dry wood to ashes very quickly. So if they dealt with Him so mercilessly when He was innocent, what punishment was awaiting the guilty people!

Christ was crucified at noon. First they divided His clothes and cast lots for His robe, which was seamless and had been woven by the Mother of God herself. Imagine the scene as He was then lain upon the Cross and the nails hammered into Him, surrounded by soldiers and the fanatical crowd stirred up by the hatred of the Jewish establishment. The Creator of the universe was tormented by His own creatures.

"Every member of Thy holy body endured dishonour for our sakes: Thy head, the thorns; Thy face, the spitting; Thy cheeks, the buffeting; Thy mouth, the taste of gall mingled with vinegar; Thine ears, the impious blasphemies; Thy back, the scourging and Thy hand, the reed; Thy whole body, the stretching on the Cross; Thy limbs, the nails; and Thy side, the spear. Thou hast suffered for us and by Thy Passion set us free from passions; in loving self-abasement Thou hast stooped down to us and raised us up: O Saviour almighty, have mercy on us."

With Him they also crucified two thieves, one on His right and the other on His left. So the Scripture was fulfilled which says: 'He was numbered with the transgressors' (Is. 53.12). And those who passed by blasphemed Him, wagging their hands and saying: "Aha! You Who destroy the temple and build it in three days, save Yourself, and come down from the Cross!" In the

same way, the chief priests and scribes mocked and said: "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. Let Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the Cross, that we may see and believe." And the crowd said: "He trusted God; let Him deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, 'I am the Son of God'."

Even one of the criminals crucified with him joined in with the sneering crowd and said: "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us." But the other one (the one on His right) rebuked him: "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds. But this Man has done nothing wrong." Then He said to Christ: "Lord, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom." And the Lord replied: "Verily, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

We call this man "the good thief" because He recognized the Divinity of Christ and begged for mercy. He admitted the justice of his punishment, repented of his sins, and was saved. We believe that he was the first man to enter Paradise with Christ. The other thief, on the other hand, refused to repent and went down into hell. That is why on Orthodox crosses there is a crossbar at the bottom, which is tilted upwards, towards heaven, on the right, and downwards, towards hell, on the left. The story of the good thief shows that salvation is a completely unmerited gift, but is open to all of us if we believe and repent. If we acknowledge that we deserve to die for our sins, then God will give us life eternal.

Now there was darkness over the whole earth from noon to 3 p.m. The sun and the moon and the whole of creation paid homage to the Creator. "Seeing Thee crucified, O Christ, the whole creation trembled. The foundations of the earth shook with fear at Thy power. For when Thou wast raised up today, the people of the Hebrews was destroyed. The veil of the temple was rent in twain, the graves were opened, and the dead rose from the tombs."

In Athens on that day there was a man called Dionysius the Areopagite who noticed the strange darkness. He made a note of it, and when St. Paul came to Athens preaching the Cross of Christ, Dionysius asked him on which day Christ had been crucified. It was the same day he had noted. He became a Christian and the bishop of Athens, and suffered martyrdom for Christ.

When Christ was on the Cross, He asked: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." In this way He teaches us that we must not seek revenge, but must pray even for our enemies. If they do not repent, then God will deal with them in His good time and in His way, which is holy and just as human judgement never can be.

Now there stood by the Cross His Mother Mary and His Mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene. When the Lord therefore saw His Mother, and the disciple whom He loved, St. John, He said to His Mother: "Woman, behold, your son!" Then He said to St. John: "Behold your mother! And from that time St. John took her to his own home.

The Lord calls His Mother "Woman", as He did at the marriage in Cana. In the original language this is a term of dignity and affection. Then He entrusts her to the only apostle who was at the foot of the Cross. This is another proof that Mary did not have any other children. For if she had, the Lord would have entrusted her to them. John here symbolizes the faithful, and his accepting Mary as his Mother symbolizes the fact that Mary is the Mother of the whole Church. She who gave a Body to Christ now becomes the Mother of His Body, the Church.

At the ninth hour (3 p.m.), Christ cried out with a loud voice, saying: "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" St. Augustine points out that He was not here speaking in His own Person, but in the Person of the Old Testament Church, of which He was the Head. The Old Testament Church, the people of the Jews, had indeed been forsaken by God, and the Lord, being a Jew in His human nature, identifies Himself with His people. In these words the Lord expressed the great mystery of His taking on the sins of the world as if they were His own. With our limited minds we cannot comprehend the depth of His suffering on our behalf.

At that moment the veil of the Temple was rent in twain, and the high priest Caiaphas, going into the Temple, saw that the visible sign of God's presence, the Shekinah, had gone. This showed that the Jewish people had lost the grace of God. But at the same time a way had been opened through the veil of Christ's flesh into the Holy of Holies, true communion with God (Heb. 10.20).

Then the Lord cried out with a loud voice: "Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit." And, bowing His head, He gave up the spirit.

St. John Chrysostom says: "When Christ died, He did not then bow His head, as happens with us. But when He had first bent His head, then He died, showing that He was Lord of all."

When Christ died, there was a tremendous earthquake, the graves were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. And coming out of the graves after His resurrection, they went into the holy city of Jerusalem and appeared to many.

At this point a Roman centurion named Longinus who was standing opposite the Cross and saw all that had happened, said: "Truly this Man was

the Son of God!" Longinus later became a Christian and a martyr for Christ. He was the first Gentile to believe in Christ.

All this time Mary was standing by the Cross and suffering in silence. The greatness of her faith and complete trust in the ways of God is shown by the fact that she never tried to persuade Him to come off the Cross, although she knew that He could do that. She suffered as no other mother has suffered before or since; for Christ was not only her Son, but also her God, and her suffering was the greater as her love for God was purer and deeper than that of any man. A sword passed through her soul, as Symeon had prophesied. But she accepted everything, as she had accepted the will of God at the Annunciation: "Be it done to me according to Thy word."

54. THE BURIAL OF CHRIST

(Matt. 27.56-61; Mark 15.42-47; Luke 23.50-56; John 19.38-42)

Joseph of Arimathaea was a member of the Sanhedrin who had objected to that body's decision to have Christ crucified. He was also a secret disciple of Christ. Taking courage when all the disciples had fled, he now asked permission to bury the Body of Christ in the tomb which he had hewn out for himself from the rock, a tomb in which no body had yet lain. Pilate granted Joseph's request. And so Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled that the Lord would have his grave with the rich (53.9).

The tomb was situated not far from the site of the Crucifixion on Golgotha.

Joseph was helped by Nicodemus, another secret disciple, who came to Christ at night (John 3). The two men took the Body of the Lord from the Cross, wrapped it in fine linen with about a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes, and placed it in the tomb, putting a big stone over the entrance. Meanwhile, Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of Jesus sat opposite the tomb and watched what the men were doing.

The burial had to be done in a hurry, because from the evening the Jewish Sabbath began, when no one was allowed to work.

The Fathers point out that just as Christ was born in a cave hollowed out of the rock, so He was buried in a tomb hewn out of the rock. For He is the Rock on which the Church is built (Matt. 16.18). For, as St. Paul says, "that Rock was Christ" (I Cor. 10.3), and "no man can lay any other foundation than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 3.11). He is the Stone which the builders - that is, the Jews - rejected (Ps. 118.22), "the chief cornerstone, elect, precious; and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame" (Is. 28.16).

Christ died on the sixth day of the week because it was on that day that Adam was created, and the death of Christ is the redemption of the original creation. And His Body rested in the tomb on the seventh day, because it was on that day that God rested from all His works.

Meanwhile, His soul descended into hell, where He destroyed the power of hell and preached to the spirits of all the people who had lived since Adam, including those drowned in the Flood (I Peter 3.19). All of those who believed in His preaching were taken by Him from hell into Paradise. The first man who entered Paradise with Christ was the thief who believed in Him on the Cross.

55. THE WOMEN FIND THE TOMB EMPTY

(Matt. 27.63-66; Mark 16.1-15; Luke 24.1-12; John 20.1-18)

Now on the first day of the week, Sunday, the myrrh-bearing women – Mary, the Mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Salome and others – came to the tomb early in the morning. They brought spices and ointments with them to anoint the Body of the Lord. To their astonishment, they found that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb and that the tomb was empty.

The previous day, the Chief Priests and the Pharisees had asked Pilate to place a guard over the tomb and seal it securely. For they feared that the disciples would come during the night, steal the body and tell the people that the Lord had risen. They reminded Pilate that Christ had said that he would rise after three days. Pilate gave them a guard and the tomb was securely sealed. In this way, by the Providence of God, the Jews unwittingly gave the world further proof that the Lord truly rose from the dead.

For not only did the myrrh-bearing women witness the great miracle, but also the guards and, through them, the Jews.

The guards' witness was as follows. There was a great earthquake, and an angel came down and rolled back the stone from the door. The guards then fled in great fear and trembling to the Chief Priests to tell them what had happened. But the Chief Priests gave them money and persuaded them to say that the disciples had come and taken the body during the night – a myth repeated by the Jews to this day. However, one of the guards was Longinus, who had stood at the foot of the cross and exclaimed that Jesus must be the Son of God. He later became a Christian and was martyred for the faith.

The women showed great faith and love in going to the tomb, although they knew that it would be impossible for them to roll away the stone. But “with God all things are possible”, and in response to their faith God did the impossible and sent an angel to roll away the stone for them. The stone symbolizes our lack of faith, which has to be removed if we are to witness the power of God in our lives.

As the women were standing in perplexity, not knowing what the empty tomb meant, two angels appeared to them and said: “Why seek ye the Living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen.” The symbolical meaning of this is that we cannot find Christ, the Living God and the Source of Life, among those who are spiritually dead, but only among those who are spiritually alive. We can only find Him “the Church of the Living God”, which is composed of living stones, true Christians, and is filled with the Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life.

In this Gospel we also see how fear grips men when they encounter a great supernatural event. The human heart is filled with a mixture of inexpressible joy and wonder as well as fear. The women did not dare to tell anyone of their discovery, but sped in silence to the house of the apostles.

The same emotion was experienced by the Holy Virgin after the Annunciation: in joy mixed with holy fear she hurried to her cousin Elizabeth to tell her the good news. There was no one else she could have confided in as no one else would have believed her. But Elizabeth would believe her, because she herself had experienced a great act of God in conceiving a child when she was already barren from old age.

56. THE FIRST DAY OF THE RESURRECTION

(Matt. 28.9-10; Mark 16.9-19; Luke 24.13-49; John 20.1-18)

Sunday is both the first and the eighth day of the week. That is, it is both one of the days of ordinary time, like the other six days of the week, and the day that takes us out of time, beyond the ordinary cycle of days, into eternity. The Lord died for us on the sixth day, Friday, which was also the day on which He created man. He rested in His Body in the tomb on the seventh day, Saturday, which is also the day on which He rested from His works of creation. And He rose from the dead on the eighth day, Sunday, which is therefore the beginning of something new, a new creation, creation resurrected in the Kingdom of God.

The Gospel maintains that Mary Magdalene was the first, with “the other Mary”, to see the empty tomb and witness to the Resurrection of the Lord. The Church reveals that “the other Mary” was in fact Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, also known in the Gospel as Mary the mother of James and Josés (Joseph’s children). Her identity is concealed here in case people should think that her vision of the Lord was simply a hallucination caused by a mother’s grief. According to tradition, the Lord appeared first to the Virgin on her own; but this event is not recorded in the Gospel.

The women were given the great honour of witnessing the Resurrection first, and then announcing it to the apostles. Thus they became “apostles to the apostles”. In this way, the shame and grief experienced by woman when, in the person of Eve, she tempted Adam in the garden of Eden was wiped out by the joy she experienced when, in the person of the two Marys, she brought the joy of the Resurrection to the apostles.

After the two Marys and the apostles had been to the tomb, Mary Magdalene stood outside it weeping. Although the angel had told her that the Lord was risen, she was overcome with grief because she could not find His Body. And then the Lord appeared to her. It sometimes happens, when we are in deep sorrow or when we are not expecting it, that we do not recognize a person we know. In the case of Mary Magdalene and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, it may also have been the case that God “closed their eyes” so that they should not recognize Him immediately. Mary recognized Christ only when He pronounced her name, “Mary”. Then in her joy she fell at His feet and wanted to kiss them. But the Lord forbade her, saying that He was not yet ascended to His Father. However, the other myrrh-bearing women met Him, He granted them to take hold of and kiss His feet. Why this difference?

The Fathers of the Church explain that Mary Magdalene’s love for the Lord was still too carnal; she was still too attached to His physical presence on earth. It was necessary for her to learn that He was not only a Man, her

beloved Master – “Rabbi”, as she called Him, but the Son of God Who would ascend with His Manhood to sit at the right hand of the Father. From now on Mary Magdalene would no longer see Him with her physical eyes, but only spiritually – a new relationship with Him would begin. The other myrrh-bearers did not need to be reminded of this; when they realized that the Lord had risen, they did not go back to the tomb to look for His Body. That is why the Lord allowed them to hold and kiss His feet.

The Apostles Peter and John ran to the tomb to see whether it was truly empty. John arrived first and waited for Peter. Peter went in first, and then John, who “saw and believed”. In his sermon on the Good Thief, St. John Maximovich makes the point that at the time of the Crucifixion all the disciples had fled except John; they had lost their faith in the Divinity of Christ and His ultimate victory over death. Even John, who stood at the Cross of Christ, appeared to falter in his faith. But, having showed more courage and devotion than the other disciples, he was the first to recover. He “saw and believed” even without entering the tomb.

The Lord also appeared to two of the disciples as they were walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus and discussing all the events of the last few days. One of these, according to tradition, was the Evangelist Luke, and the other was Cleopas, brother of Joseph the Betrothed and husband of Mary, one of the myrrh-bearing women. The Lord joined them, and, without revealing Himself to them, asked them why they were so sad. They were astonished that He did not know the dramatic events that had taken place and poured out their hearts to Him. They had hoped and believed that Christ was the Messiah, but His death appeared to mean the end of their hopes. The Lord then explained to them from Moses and the Prophets that the Messiah was bound to suffer and die and rise again on the third day. As they arrived in Emmaus, the Lord made to go on, but the disciples urged Him to stay and have supper with them “as the day is far spent”.

The spiritual lesson here is that many of us do not recognize and have firm faith in Christ as our God and Saviour because we are discouraged by the apparent triumph of evil in our lives. But then at a late hour we feel the need for Christ our God and invite Him into our minds and hearts.

During the supper, the Lord took bread, blessed it and gave it to them. Then the disciples recognized Him. But He immediately vanished. “Did not our heart burn within us when He talked with us on the road?” said the disciples to each other. This burning of the heart is the inspiration of the Holy Spirit within us. It is not given with every speaker, even when what he says is true. Thus Aquila and Priscilla noticed that Apollos, while speaking the truth about Christ, did not speak through the Holy Spirit, with power, because “he knew only the baptism of John” (Acts 18.25). He needed to receive the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is given only in the sacraments of the Church.

On the evening of the first day of the Resurrection, the Lord suddenly appeared to the ten apostles when they were eating. Thomas was not with them. The Lord rebuked them for their lack of belief in His Resurrection in spite of having the witness of the myrrh-bearing women and Luke and Cleopas. His first words to them were: "Peace be with you", because the devil had sowed fear in their hearts and their first need was for the Peace of Christ. Then He showed them His hands and feet, the proof of His Bodily Resurrection. And then He said: "Peace be to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

So here the Lord introduced the sacrament of absolution, of the forgiveness of sins. As the Supreme High Priest, Who alone as God has the right to remit sins, He grants this power to the apostles also. And they by the laying on of hands pass this power on to the bishops and priests of every generation.

Nor is it only the sacrament of absolution that is passed on in this way. The Lord as the Great High Priest gave His apostles and their successors the power to perform all the sacraments of the Church.

57. THE OTHER RESURRECTION APPEARANCES

(Matt. 28.11-20; John 20.24-31, 21.1-25; I Cor. 15.5-8)

On the eighth day of the Resurrection, when Thomas was present with the other apostles, the Lord appeared to them again and invited Thomas to touch His side and put his hands into the print of the nails and verify for himself that the Lord was not a ghost, but truly risen in a real body of flesh - the same Body in which He had suffered death on the Cross. By this simple touch doubting Thomas was filled with faith and exclaimed: "My Lord and my God!" Thereby he proclaimed that Christ was not only his spiritual master, his Rabbi, but the God and Creator of the universe. For only God could raise His human Body from the dead as Thomas had witnessed.

Then the Lord said to Thomas: "Because you have seen you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." This gives encouragement to the millions of believers who have not personally witnessed Christ risen in the flesh, but still believe on the testimony of the apostles.

Now the disciples had been told by the Lord beforehand that He would meet them after the Crucifixion and Resurrection at the Sea of Galilee, and the angels at the tomb had also reminded the women of this promise. So some of the apostles went to Galilee and took up their old occupation of fishing again. It was dawn, and they had been fishing all night, but without catching anything. Then the Lord stood on the seashore and said: "Children, have you any food?" And they answered Him: "No." Then the Lord said: "Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find them." Then they caught so many fish - 153 of them - but even so the net did not break. Then John recognized that it was the Lord Who had been speaking to them, whereupon Peter could not wait and plunged into the sea to meet Him.

When the disciples reached the shore, they saw that the Lord had prepared a little breakfast of fish and bread on a coal fire. It was at this breakfast that he said to Peter: "Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?" And Peter answered: "Yes, Lord, you know that I love You." Then the Lord said: "Tend My sheep." This question was repeated three times, and Peter three times reaffirmed his love for the Lord. In this way his threefold denial of Christ before the Crucifixion was healed by his threefold affirmation of his love for Him, and he was re-established in the choir of the apostles. And the Lord even prophesied that he would suffer for Christ (by being crucified head down in Rome in the reign of Nero).

The Fathers make the point that it was at the Sea of Galilee that the Lord had first called His disciples and told them that they would become fishers of men. And the Lord here renews that promise, giving them a miraculous catch. The net is the Church, which will not break no matter how many people are

caught in it. But first the apostles themselves must be fed with Christ Himself, the Fish. For the word for "fish" in Greek, ICHTHYS, is made up of the first letter of each of the words: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour", and was therefore used as a symbol for Christ by the early Christians. The bread is also a symbol, as we have seen, for the Body of Christ in the Eucharist. And so the apostles, having partaken of Christ, can go out and become fishers of men, feeding them in turn with Christ in the Eucharist.

And how were the apostles to make men into Christians? The Lord explains: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you." The Lord taught His disciples continuously for three and a half years of His earthly life, and then for forty days after His Resurrection. Much of what He taught was not written down – as St. John said, not all the books in the world could contain all His teachings. And so much of the teaching was conveyed in oral form (II Thess. 2.15). *All* of this was commanded to be handed down; for *all* of this is essential to our salvation.

St. Paul tells us that there were many other Resurrection appearances of the Lord: "He was seen by Cephas [Peter], and then by the twelve. After that he was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time." Since Paul also saw the Lord, he, too, can be counted as one of the apostles and witnesses of the Resurrection.

58. THE ASCENSION OF CHRIST

(Luke 24.44-52; Acts 1.1-11)

Forty days after His Resurrection, the Lord appeared to His disciples and told them that all things had to be fulfilled in Him which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Him. Then He opened their spiritual eyes so that they could fully understand the Scriptures and pass their understanding on to the believers. Thus the Church of the Apostles is a treasure house containing the correct understanding of the Scriptures. That is why it is called "the pillar and ground of the Truth" (I Tim. 3.15), and why St. Peter says that "no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation" (II Peter 1.2) - outside the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic church there cannot be the correct interpretation of the Holy Scriptures.

The Lord then goes on to say that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His Name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And He adds: "And you are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the Promise of the Father upon you, but stay in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with Power from on high." The Promise of the Father was the gift of the Holy Spirit, which was to be given to the disciples ten days later, on the Day of Pentecost.

He then led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up His hands He blessed them. While He was blessing them He was carried up by a brilliant cloud, seated in glory. The Church believes that this blessing of the Lord has never ceased, but continues to this day, fulfilling the Lord's promise: "I am with you always, even to the end of the world." The cloud was the presence of the Holy Spirit, as was also revealed at the Transfiguration, when the voice of the Father spoke from inside the cloud.

This momentous spectacle is the climax of the Gospel. The Manhood of Christ is taken up to sit at the right hand of the Father, and insofar as we men partake of the Manhood and Divinity of Christ in the sacraments of the Church, He has also "raised us up together [with Him], and made us sit in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2.6).

The human mind cannot grasp what Christ our God has made possible for us. Through Christ, if we remain faithful to Him in thought and word and deed, we will not descend into hell as every man did before His Crucifixion, but ascend into heaven to partake in the Glory of the Holy Trinity, the Kingdom of God, for all eternity. For as the Apostle Paul says: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for those who love Him" (I Cor. 2.9).

And so "the apostles returned to Jerusalem with great joy and were continually in the Temple praising and blessing God." This is how we should

all be after contemplating the Mystery of Christ as revealed in the Gospel. To Him be glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, unto the ages of ages. Amen.

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