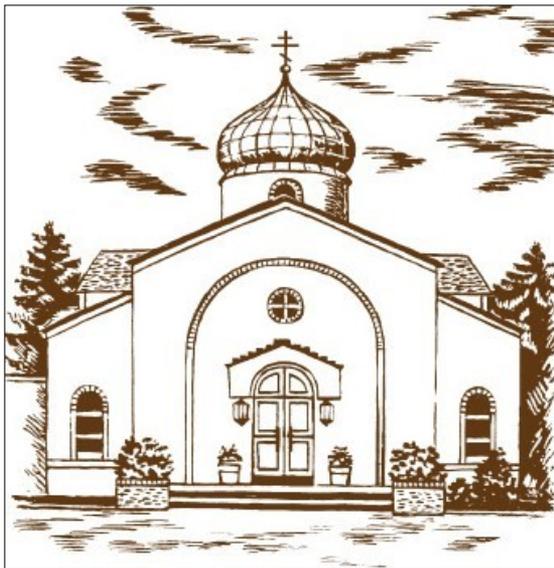


Holy Virgin Protection Russian
Orthodox Cathedral

<http://holyvirginprotection.org>

PARISH BULLETIN



SEPTEMBER 2020

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Archpriest Valery Vovkovsky
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Russian Orthodox Church Abroad

<http://www.russianorthodoxchurch.ws>

Diocese of Chicago and Mid-America

<http://www.chicagodioocese.org>

Clergy of the Protection of the Holy Virgin Cathedral

Archbishop Peter

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Priest Leontiy Nadzions

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Priest Daniel Franzen

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Protodeacon Alexander Kichakov

Deacon Nicholai Lochmatow

Schedule of Services

Divine Liturgy

Sundays and major holy days - 9 a.m.

Weekdays - 8 a.m.

All Night Vigil

Saturdays and Sunday evenings - 6 p.m.

Weekdays - 6:30 p.m.

Akathist to the Protection of the Theotokos

Wednesday evenings at 6:30 p.m. unless All Night Vigil is scheduled

Parish School on Saturdays

For information contact Natalie Gill - 312-203-6677

or Nadejda Evminenko - 224-616-0111

Parish Bookstore

Open after Liturgy on Sunday and major Holy Days.

PARISH NEWS

Due to the coronavirus the cathedral was closed with only clergy and a limited number of choir members attending. The services were broadcast via youtube. Thankfully, the limitations ordered by the governor are being lifted and more parishioners may attend the services. Please be aware of the rules governing church attendance and behave accordingly. Our parish website is constantly updated regarding attendance. If you have questions, please first read what is on the website, then ask the starosta or one of the clergy. Praying that this will all end soon and that we will be able to gather together for services and trapeza and all parish functions.

Please welcome Father Daniel Franzen and his family!
We are happy to have you!

On Wednesday, September 2, at 6:30 p.m., we will return to our weekly tradition of singing the moleben with the Akathist to the Protection of the Mother of God.

PARISH BOOKSTORE

Our Parish Bookstore has a wide variety of books and gifts!

We carry spiritual literature—the Bible, New Testament, Psalter, and a wide choice of spiritual reading.

We offer icons, gold and silver crosses, baptismal robes for infants and children, incense, prayer ropes, scarves, also honey, greeting cards and various gift items.

The bookstore is now online. See the parish website.

AMAZON SMILE PROGRAM

Many of us buy goods through Amazon.com. Amazon has a program for charitable organizations where it donates a percent of the cost of your purchases to the charitable organization you designate.

Please register at smile.amazon.com, and a percentage of your purchase will be donated to our parish. Our parish is under the name:

Russian Orthodox Holy Virgin Protection Cathedral in CHGO

The Beheading of the Holy Glorious Prophet, Forerunner, and Baptist John

September 11

Troparion — Tone 2

The memory of the righteous is celebrated with hymns of praise,
but the Lord's testimony is sufficient for you, O Forerunner.

You were shown in truth to be the most honorable of the prophets,
for you were deemed worthy to baptize in the streams of the Jordan Him
whom they foretold.

Therefore, having suffered for the truth with joy,
you proclaimed to those in hell God who appeared in the flesh,
who takes away the sin of the world, and grants us great mercy.

Kontakion — Tone 5

The glorious beheading of the Forerunner,
became an act of divine dispensation,
for he preached to those in hell the coming of the Savior.
Let Herodias lament, for she entreated lawless murder,
loving not the law of God, nor eternal life,
but that which is false and temporal.

The Beheading of the Prophet, Forerunner of the Lord, John the Baptist: The Evangelists Matthew (Mt.14:1-12) and Mark (Mark 6:14-29) provide accounts about the martyric end of John the Baptist in the year 32 after the Birth of Christ.

Following the Baptism of the Lord, St John the Baptist was locked up in prison by Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch (ruler of one fourth of the Holy Land) and governor of Galilee. (After the death of king Herod the Great, the Romans divided the territory of Palestine into four parts, and put a governor in charge of each part. Herod Antipas received Galilee from the emperor Augustus).

The prophet of God John openly denounced Herod for having left his lawful wife, the daughter of the Arabian king Aretas, and then instead cohabiting with Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip (Luke 3:19-20). On his birthday, Herod made a feast for dignitaries, the elders and a thousand chief citizens. Salome, the daughter of Herod, danced before the guests and charmed Herod. In gratitude to the girl, he swore to give her whatever she would ask, up to half his kingdom.

The vile girl on the advice of her wicked mother Herodias asked that she be given the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod became apprehensive, for he feared the wrath of God for the murder of a prophet, whom earlier he had heeded. He also feared the people, who loved the holy Forerunner. But because of the guests and his careless oath, he gave orders to cut off the head of St John and to

give it to Salome.

According to Tradition, the mouth of the dead preacher of repentance once more opened and proclaimed: “Herod, you should not have the wife of your brother Philip.” Salome took the platter with the head of St John and gave it to her mother. The frenzied Herodias repeatedly stabbed the tongue of the prophet with a needle and buried his holy head in a unclean place. But the pious Joanna, wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, buried the head of John the Baptist in an earthen vessel on the Mount of Olives, where Herod had a parcel of land. (The Uncovering of the Venerable Head is celebrated (February 24). The holy body of John the Baptist was taken that night by his disciples and buried at Sebastia, there where the wicked deed had been done.

After the murder of St John the Baptist, Herod continued to govern for a certain time. Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea, later sent Jesus Christ to him, Whom he mocked (Luke 23:7-12).

The judgment of God came upon Herod, Herodias and Salome, even during their earthly life. Salome, crossing the River Sikoris in winter, fell through the ice. The ice gave way in such a way that her body was in the water, but her head was trapped above the ice. It was similar to how she once had danced with her feet upon the ground, but now she flailed helplessly in the icy water. Thus she was trapped until that time when the sharp ice cut through her neck.

Her corpse was not found, but they brought the head to Herod and Herodias, as once they had brought them the head of St John the Baptist. The Arab king Aretas, in revenge for the disrespect shown his daughter, made war against Herod. The defeated Herod suffered the wrath of the Roman emperor Caius Caligua (37-41) and was exiled with Herodias first to Gaul, and then to Spain.

The Beheading of St John the Baptist, a Feast day established by the Church, is also a strict fast day because of the grief of Christians at the violent death of the saint. In some Orthodox cultures pious people will not eat food from a flat plate, use a knife, or eat food that is round in shape on this day.

Today the Church makes remembrance of Orthodox soldiers killed on the field of battle, as established in 1769 at the time of Russia’s war with the Turks and the Poles.

<http://oca.org/saints/lives/2013/08/29/102419-the-beheading-of-the-holy-glorious-prophet-forerunner-and-baptis>

ST. ALEXANDER NEVSKY, RUSSIA'S KNIGHT IN SHINING ARMOR

Commemorated September 12

St. Alexander Nevsky was Russia's "knight in shining armor." His reputation as a man of exceptional valor and surpassing virtue inspired a visit by a German commander who told his people when he returned: "I went through many countries and saw many people, but I have never met such a king among kings, nor such a prince among princes." The Russians called him their "prince without sin."

He was born just four years before the fierce Tatars, under the leadership of Ghengis Khan, came galloping across the steppes of Kievan Rus. The once flourishing city state—whose social, cultural and spiritual achievements boasted few rivals in Western Europe—had been weakened by quarrelling princes and attacks of warring tribes, and it was an easy prey for the massacring and pillaging Asiatic aggressors. Fortunately, the Mongol Horde's primary interest in conquest was financial gain, and although it imposed a heavy tax on its subjects, they were left to govern themselves and retained their traditions and religion intact. Nevertheless, the yoke of foreign sovereignty was burdensome; individual princes were reduced to acting as feudal landlords for their Mongol lords, and inclinations toward national unity—the dream of Grand Prince Vladimir—were stifled. A strong leader was needed if the land of Rus' was to have any hope of healing internal strife, of throwing off the Tatar yoke, and establishing its identity as a nation state.

The baneful effect of internal dissension was a lesson which came early to Prince Alexander, as he witnessed his father, Prince Yaroslav Vsevolodovich, struggle with the proudly independent spirited boyars of Novgorod. It was there that the boy grew up. Like most noble youths of his time, he had barely learned to walk before he was lifted into the saddle. Training in the martial arts was combined with an education based upon the Scriptures. Under the influence of his mother, who was popularly called "the holy queen" on account of her piety and charitable deeds, the young prince developed a profound spiritual life. He engrossed himself for hours in reading the Old and New Testaments.

He was still an adolescent when in 1236 his father became Grand Prince of Kiev (a position of primacy among the princes), leaving Alexander in charge of Novgorod. Its characteristically unruly citizenry was gradually won over by the uncommon wisdom and youthful charm of its new ruler. Meanwhile, the Tatars were moving north; they overran Ryazan, Moscow and the Russian capital of that time, Vladimir. They were prevented from reaching Novgorod only by the surrounding marshes. But the city was spared this disaster only to face a greater threat, this time from the west.

Encouraged by the Roman Pope who desired the conversion of Russia to Catholicism, the Swedes and Germans took advantage of Russia's weakened state and prepared to attack. As a staunch Orthodox Christian, Alexander recognized that conquest from the west would deal a mortal blow at the very

heart of Russia—the Orthodox Church, a fate incomparably worse than political subjugation by the Tatars. In 1210, well armed Swedish troops moved onto Novgorod territory. Preparing his men to repel the invaders, St. Alexander encouraged them with his now famous affirmation: “God is not in might but in Truth. ‘Some trust in princes and some in horses, but we will call upon the Lord our God.’ “The Russian forces, their Prince in the lead, were crowned with success after a fierce battle on the shores of the Neva.

Victories followed against the Livonian Germans and the Lithuanians. The Russian northeast, devastated by the Tatars, looked with hope upon the young warrior prince. His fame reached the ears of the Mongol lord, Khan Batu, who desired to see this Russian hero. It was a perilous honor. Before being presented to the Khan, the Russian princes—whose authority depended on his approval—were required to fulfill certain pagan traditions: walk through fire, bow down to a bush and to the shadows of deceased khans, etc. Alexander would in nowise consent to such idolatry and, strengthened by Holy Unction, prepared himself to accept the death penalty that Prince Michael of Chernigov had paid under similar circumstances.

Arriving in the Golden Horde’s capital at the mouth of the Volga, Alexander at once confessed his Christian convictions: “O King,” he said, bowing before the Khan, “I bow before you because God has favored you with authority, but I shall not bow before any created thing. I serve the One God. Him alone do I honor and Him alone do I worship.” Khan Batu was so impressed by the courage and handsome demeanor of the young prince that to everyone’s amazement he accepted his refusal and received him with due honor.

Gaining the respect of the Khan was a triumph for Alexander, but it did not insure peace. The remaining course of his life as Grand Prince of Russia was spent in securing its western borders against persistent German campaigns, in subduing the Novgorodians’ defiant opposition to the Khan’s poll tax, and in diplomatically placating the Khan’s anger which flared intermittently in response to indiscretions committed by the lesser princes. Although it was 200 years before Russia was free of Tatar control, St. Alexander’s skill and self-sacrificing devotion which he brought to the Herculean task set before him as ruler, and his commitment to the preservation of Orthodoxy at the core of a growing national consciousness, made him a hero of both historic and spiritual dimensions. He died as he was returning from one of his exhausting journeys to the Khan, having taken the Great Schema on his death bed. His respected spiritual advisor, Metropolitan Cyril, was serving the Divine Liturgy in Vladimir when he saw the Prince’s soul being carried aloft by angels and announced to those present: “Brethren, know that the sun of the Russian Land has now set.” In 1547 St. Alexander was glorified by the Church which celebrates his memory on the day of his repose, November 23, and the day of the translation of his incorrupt relics, August 30, 1724, to the St. Alexander Nevsky Lavra in St. Petersburg, where they rest to this day.

Orthodox America
ROCA.org

<https://pravoslavie.ru/99192.html>

Uncovering of the Relics of the Right-believing Prince Daniel of Moscow

Commemorated on September 12

Holy Prince Daniel of Moscow was born at Vladimir in the year 1261. He was the fourth son of Saint Alexander Nevsky (August 30 and November 23) and his second wife Bassa. When he was two years old he lost his father. The date of his mother's repose is not indicated in the Chronicles; we know only that she was buried in the church of the Nativity of Christ at the Vladimir Dormition monastery (the Princess monastery), and the people in the surroundings venerated her as "Righteous."

In 1272, Prince Daniel received as his allotted portion the city of Moscow and its adjacent lands. The holy prince built a church (and a monastery beside it) in honor of his patron saint, Saint Daniel the Stylite (December 11) on the banks of the River Moskva.

During this period, the Moscow principality was small and unobtrusive. While growing up, Prince Daniel strengthened and expanded it, not in unjust or coercive ways, but peacefully and with benevolence. It was a time of unrest. Fratricidal strife among the appanage princes was rife. Often bloodshed was averted, thanks to Prince Daniel and his incessant striving for unity and peace in the Russian Land.

In 1293 his brother, the Great Prince Alexander, with Tatars summoned from the Horde and headed by Diuden ("the Diudenev Host"), laid waste to Russian cities: Murom, Suzdal, Kolomna, Dmitrov, Mozhaïsk, and Tver. Prince Daniel decided to join them to Moscow to save their people from perishing, for they were not strong enough to resist.

The prince braced himself for terrible destruction and pillaging. Standing up for his rights, Saint Daniel was compelled to come out against his brother near a place called Yurievo Tolchische ("Yurievo Threshing-Mill"), but his desire for peace prevailed, and bloodshed was averted.

In 1300, when the Ryazan prince Constantine was making secret preparations for a sudden assault on the Moscow principality, Prince Daniel went to Ryazan with an army. He defeated the enemy, took Constantine captive, and destroyed a multitude of Tatars. This was a first victory over the Tatars, though not a tremendous victory, but it was noteworthy as a first push towards freedom.

When he had beaten the Ryazan prince and scattered his confederates the Tatars, Prince Daniel did not take advantage of his victory to seize foreign lands or take booty, as was the accepted custom during these times. Instead, he displayed an example of true non-covetousness, love and fraternity. The holy prince never resorted to arms to seize the lands of others, nor did he ever take away the property of other princes either by force or by treachery. And so the Lord saw fit to expand the boundaries of his princely realm.

Prince John of Pereslavl-Zalessk, Daniel's nephew, was gentle and pious and benevolent towards the poor, and he esteemed and loved his uncle. Dying childless in 1302, he bequeathed his principality to Saint Daniel. The Pereslavl lands together with Dmitrov, had the most inhabitants after Rostov, with the corresponding fortification befitting a major city. Pereslavl-Zalessk was well protected on all sides. But the holy prince remained faithful to Moscow and did not transfer the capital of his principality to the stronger and more significant seat of Pereslavl.

This annexation allowed Moscow to be considered as the most significant principality. Here the principle of the unification of the Russian Land into a single powerful realm was set in place.

Through the ages God's providence concerning Russia and its destiny was clearly manifest!

Grateful for the constant blessings of the Hodēgētria (She who leads the Way) both in his personal life, and also in the life of the Russian realm, Saint Daniel's father, Saint Alexander Nevsky said, "God is not in might, but in right!"

In 1303 Saint Daniel fell seriously ill. He assumed the great schema and commanded that he be buried at the Danilov monastery. In his deep humility he wanted to be buried not within the church, but in the common monastery cemetery. The holy prince died on March 4.

Less than thirty years after the repose of holy Prince Daniel, the Danilov monastery he founded was transformed into the Moscow Kremlin, the church was transformed into a parish church, and the cemetery became non-monastic.

At the time of Great Prince Ivan III (1462-1505), Saint Daniel gave reminders of himself to his forgetful descendants. He appeared as a stranger to a youth who attended the Great Prince and said: "Don't be afraid of me. I was a Christian and the master of this place, my name is Daniel Prince of Moscow, and by the will of God I am here. Tell Great Prince John about me saying: you are enjoying yourself while you have forgotten me, but God has not forgotten me."

After this, the Great Prince ordered panikhidas for his ancestral princes to be sung in the cathedral. During the time of Tsar Ivan the Terrible, the dying son of a barge merchant was healed at the grave of Saint Daniel. The Tsar, struck by the miracle, renovated the ancient Danilov monastery and established a yearly church procession. The Metropolitan led the way to the the holy prince's tomb, and served a panikhida there.

In 1652 holy Prince Daniel was glorified by the uncovering of his incorrupt relics, which were transferred on August 30 to the church dedicated to the Holy Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council.

The holy relics were placed in a reliquary "to the glory of the Holy Trinity and for the healing of the infirm." Metropolitan Platon of Moscow (+ 1812), in the Life of the holy prince which he compiled, writes: "The founder laid the foundation of Moscow's grandeur, modestly making only a small path to it. Just as any edifice, which is not built with excessive haste, but rather with great artistry and skill, receives a particular firmness and stands indestructible for a long time; like a tall tree that grows for many centuries after beginning as a small sapling, then slowly becomes sturdier, with its branches spreading about far around, so this city was to grow from small, but firm beginnings, so that its first sparkle would not bedazzle the eyes of the envious, and so it would not be shaken or felled early on, before it had attained its full height. Thus did this founder prepare the great city given him, giving it a modest but steady radiance, undisturbed by any gusts of the wind. He left the great glory of its rise to his son Great Prince John, called Kalita."

<https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/2013/03/04/100653-right-believing-prince-daniel-of-moscow>

COMMEMORATION OF THE MIRACLE OF THE ARCHANGEL MICHAEL AT COLOSSAE

Commemorated on September 19

In Phrygia, not far from the city of Hieropolis, in a place called Cheretopos, there was a church named for the Archangel Michael, built over a miraculous spring.

This church was built by a certain inhabitant of the city of Laodicia in gratitude to God for healing his mute daughter. The holy Chief Commander Michael appeared to this man in a dream and revealed to him that his daughter would receive the gift of speech after drinking from the water of the spring. The girl actually did receive healing and began to speak. After this miracle, the father and his daughter and all their family were baptized. In fervent gratitude, the father built the church in honor of the holy Chief Commander Michael. Not only did Christians begin to come to the spring for healing, but also pagans. In so doing, many of the pagans turned from their idols and were converted to the faith in Christ.

At this church of the holy Chief Commander Michael, a certain pious man by the name of Archippus served for sixty years as church custodian. By his preaching and by the example of his saintly life he brought many pagans to faith in Christ. With the general malice of that time towards Christians, and especially against Archippus, the pagans thought to destroy the church in order to prevent people from coming to that holy place of healing, and at the same time kill Archippus.

Toward this end they made a confluence of the Lykokaperos and Kufos Rivers and directed its combined flow against the church. St Archippus prayed fervently to the Chief Commander Michael to ward off the danger. Through his prayer the Archangel Michael appeared at the temple, and with a blow of his staff, opened a wide fissure in a rock and commanded the rushing torrents of water to flow into it. The temple remained unharmed. Seeing such an awesome miracle, the pagans fled in terror. Archippus and the Christians gathered in church glorified God and gave thanks to the holy Archangel Michael for the help. The place where the rivers plunged into the fissure received the name “Chonae”, which means “plunging.”

The Chudov (“of the Miracle”) monastery in Moscow is named for this Feast.

Troparion — Tone 4

Michael, commander of the heavenly hosts, / we who are unworthy beseech you, / by your prayers encompass us beneath the wings of your immaterial glory, / and faithfully preserve us who fall down and cry out to you: / “Deliver us from all harm, for you are the commander of the powers on high!”

Kontakion — Tone 2

Michael, commander of God’s armies / and minister of the divine glory, / prince of the bodiless angels / and guide of mankind, / ask for what is good for us, and for great mercy, / as supreme commander of the Bodiless Hosts.

<https://pravoslavie.ru/97159.html>

The Nativity of Our Most Holy Lady the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary

September 21

SERMON ON THE NATIVITY OF THE VIRGIN MARY

Our father among the saints Andrew of Crete, was Archbishop of Crete at the end of the 7th century and the beginning of the 8th. He was a true luminary of the Church, a great hierarch—a theologian, teacher and hymnographer, best known for writing the Great Canon.

The present Feast is for us the beginning of feasts.

Serving as boundary to the law and to prototypes, at the same time it serves as a doorway to grace and truth. “For Christ is the end of the law” (Rom 10:4), Who, having freed us from the letter (of the law), raises us to spirit.

Here is the end (to the law): in that the Lawgiver, having made everything, has changed the letter in spirit and gathers everything in Himself (Eph 1:10), enlivening the law with grace: grace has taken the law under its dominion, and the law has become subjected to grace, so that the properties of the law not suffer reciprocal commingling, but only so that by Divine power, the servile and subservient (in the law) are transformed into the light and free (in grace), so that we are not “in bondage to the elements of the world” (Gal 4:3) and not in a condition under the slavish yoke of the letter of the law.

Here is the summit of Christ’s beneficence towards us! Here are the mysteries of revelation! Here is the theosis [divinization] assumed upon humankind, the fruition worked out by the God-Man.

The radiant and bright descent of God for people ought to have a joyous basis, opening to us the great gift of salvation. Such also is the present feastday, having as its basis the Nativity of the Theotokos, and as its purpose and end, the uniting of the Word with flesh, this most glorious of all miracles, unceasingly proclaimed, immeasurable and incomprehensible.

The less comprehensible it is, the more it is revealed; and the more it is revealed, the less comprehensible it is. Therefore the present God-graced day, the first of our feastdays, showing forth the light of virginity and the crown woven from the unfading blossoms of the spiritual garden of Scripture, offers creatures a common joy.

Be of good cheer, it says, behold, this is the Feast of the Nativity of the Virgin and of the renewal of the human race! The Virgin is born, She grows and is raised up and prepares Herself to be the Mother of the All-Sovereign God of the ages. All this, with the assistance of David, makes it for us an object of spiritual contemplation. The Theotokos manifests to us Her God-bestown Birth, and David points to the blessedness of the human race and wondrous kinship of God with mankind.

And so, truly one ought to celebrate the mystery today and to offer to the Mother of God a word by way of gift: since nothing is so pleasing to Her as a word and praise by word. It is from here also that we receive a twofold benefit: first, we enter into the region of truth, and second, we emerge from the captivity and slavery of the written law. How so? Obviously, when darkness vanishes, then light appears; so also here: after the law follows the freedom of grace.

The present day solemnity is a line of demarcation, separating the truth from

its prefigurative symbol, and ushering in the new in place of the old. Paul, that Divine Trumpet of the Spirit, exclaims about this: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; old things pass away and behold, all things have become new (2 Cor 5:17); for the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did, by which we draw near to God" (Heb 7:19). The truth of grace has shown forth brightly.

Let there now be one common festal celebration in both heaven and on earth. Let everything now celebrate, that which is in the world and that beyond the world. Now is made the created temple for the Creator of all; and creation is readied into a new Divine habitation for the Creator. Now our nature having been banished from the land of blessedness receives the principle of theosis and strives to rise up to the highest glory.

Now Adam offers from us and for us elements unto God, the most worthy fruit of mankind: Mary, in Whom the new Adam is rendered Bread for the restoration of the human race. Now is opened the great bosom of virginity, and the Church, in the matrimonial manner, places upon it a pure, truly spotless pearl.

Now human worthiness accepts the gift of the first creation and returns to its former condition; the majesty darkened by formless sin, through the conjoining by His Mother by birth "of Him Beauteous by Goodness," man receives beauty in a most excellent and God-seemly visage. And this creating is done truly by the creation, and recreation by theosis, and theosis by a return to the original perfection!

Now a barren one has become a mother beyond expectation, and the Theotokos has given birth without knowing man, and She sanctifies natural birth. Now the majestic color of the Divine purple is readied and impoverished human nature is clothed in royal worthiness. Now, according to prophecy, sprouts forth the Offshoot of David, Who, having eternally become the green-sprouting Staff of Aaron, has blossomed forth for us with the Staff of Power: Christ.

Now from Judah and David is descended a Virgin Maiden, rendering of Herself the royal and priestly worthiness of Him Who has taken on the priesthood of Aaron according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb 7:15). Now the renewal of our nature is begun, and the world responding, assuming a God-seemly form, receives the principle of a second Divine creation.

The first creation of mankind occurred from the pure and unsullied earth; but their nature darkened its innate worthiness, they were deprived of grace through the sin of disobedience; for this we were cast out of the land of life and, in place of the delights of Paradise, we received temporal life as our inheritance by birth, and with it the death and corruption of our race.

All started to prefer earth to heaven, so that there remained no hope for salvation, beyond the utmost help. Neither the natural nor the written law, nor the fiery reconciliative sayings of the prophets had power to heal the sickness. No one knew how to rectify human nature and by what means it would be most suitable to raise it up to its former worthiness, so long as God the Author of all did not deign to reveal to us another arranged and newly-constituted world, where the pervasive form of the old poison of sin is annihilated, and granting us a wondrous, free and perfectly dispassionate life, through our re-creation in the baptism of Divine birth.

But how would this great and most glorious blessing be imparted to us, so in accord with the Divine commands, if God were not to be manifest to us in the flesh, not subject to the laws of nature, nor deign to dwell with us in a manner known to Him? And how could all this be accomplished, if first there did not serve the mystery a Pure and Inviolable Virgin, Who contained the Uncontainable,

in accord with the law, yet beyond the laws of nature? And could some other virgin have done this besides She alone, Who was chosen before all others by the Creator of nature?

This Virgin is the Theotokos, Mary, the Most Glorious of God, from Whose womb the Most Divine came forth in the flesh, and by Whom He Himself arranged a wondrous temple for Himself. She conceived without seed and gave birth without corruption, since Her Son was God, though also He was born in the flesh, without mingling and without travail.

This Mother, truly, avoided that which is innate to mothers but miraculously fed Her Son, begotten without a man, with milk. The Virgin, having given birth to the One seedlessly conceived, remained a pure Virgin, having preserved incorrupt the marks of virginity. And so in truth She is named the Mother of God; Her virginity is esteemed and Her birth-giving is glorified. God, having joined with mankind and become manifest in the flesh, has granted Her a unique glory. Woman's nature suddenly is freed from the first curse, and just as the first brought in sin, so also does the first initiate salvation also.

But our discourse has attained its chief end, and I, celebrating now and with rejoicing sharing in this sacred feast, I greet you in the common joy. The Redeemer of the human race, as I said, willed to arrange a new birth and re-creation of mankind: just as the first creation, taking dust from the virginal and pure earth, where He formed the first Adam, so also now, having arranged His Incarnation upon the earth, and so to speak, in place of dust He chooses out of all the creation this Pure and Immaculate Virgin and, having re-created mankind in His Chosen One from among mankind, the Creator of Adam is made the New Adam, in order to save the old.

Who indeed was This Virgin and from what sort of parents did She come? Mary, the glory of all, was born of the tribe of David, and from the seed of Joachim. She was descended from Eve, and was the child of Anna. Joachim was a gentle man, pious, raised in God's law. Living prudently and walking before God he grew old without child: the years of his prime provided no continuation of his lineage. Anna was likewise God-loving, prudent, but barren; she lived in harmony with her husband, but was childless. As much concerned about this, as about the observance of the law of the Lord, she indeed was daily stung by the grief of childlessness and suffered that which is the usual lot of the childless — she grieved, she sorrowed, she was distressed, and impatient at being childless.

Thus, Joachim and his spouse lamented that they had no successor to continue their line; yet the spark of hope was not extinguished in them completely: both intensified their prayer about the granting to them of a child to continue their line. In imitation of the prayer heard of Hannah (1 Kings 1: 10), both without leaving the temple fervently beseeched God that He would undo her sterility and make fruitful her childlessness. And they did not give up on their efforts, until their wish be fulfilled. The Bestower of gifts did not condemn the gift of their hope. The unceasing power came quickly in help to those praying and beseeching God, and it made capable both the one and the other to produce and bear a child. In such manner, from sterile and barren parents, as it were from irrigated trees, was borne for us a most glorious fruition — the all-pure Virgin.

The constraints of infertility were destroyed — prayer, upright manner of life, these rendered them fruitful; the childless begat a Child, and the childless woman was made an happy mother. Thus the immaculate Fruition issuing forth from the womb occurred from an infertile mother, and then the parents, in the first blos-

soming of Her growth brought Her to the temple and dedicated Her to God. The priest, then making the order of services, beheld the face of the girl and of those in front of and behind, and he became gladdened and joyful, seeing as it were the actual fulfillment of the Divine promise.

He consecrated Her to God, as a reverential gift and propitious sacrifice — and, as a great treasury unto salvation, he led Her within the very innermost parts of the temple. Here the Maiden walked in the upright ways of the Lord, as in bridal chambers, partaking of heavenly food until the time of betrothal, which was preordained before all the ages by Him Who, by His unscrutable mercy, was born from Her, and by Him Who before all creation and time and expanse Divinely begat Him, and together with His consubstantial and co-reigning and co-worshipped Spirit — this being One Godhead, having One Essence and Kingdom, inseparable and immutable and in which is nothing diverse, except the personal qualities. Wherefore, in solemnity and in song I do offer the Mother of the Word the festal gift; since that He born of Her hath taught me to believe in the Trinity: the Son and Word Without-Beginning hath made in Her His Incarnation; the Father begetting Him hath blessed this; the Holy Spirit hath signed and sanctified the womb which incomprehensibly hath conceived.

Now is the time to question David: in what did the God of all forswear him? Speak, O Psalmist and Prophet! He hath sworn from the fruit of my loin to sit upon my throne (Ps 131/132:11). Here in this He is forsworn and wilt not break His oath, He hath forsworn and His Word is sealed with a deed! “Once — said he — I forswear by My Holiness, that I lie not to David; his seed wilt prevail forever, and his throne, like the sun before Me and like the moon coursing the ages: a faithful witness also in heaven” (Ps 88/89:35-38). God hath fulfilled this oath, since it is not possible for God to lie (Heb 6:18). Consider this: Christ in the flesh is named my Son (Mt. 22: 42), and all nations will worship my Lord and Son (Ps 71/72:11), seeing him sit upon a virginal throne! Here also is the Virgin, from Whose womb the Pre-eternal One issued forth, incarnated at the end of the ages and renewing the ages, likewise sprung forth from my loins! All this is so!

People of God, holy nation, sacred gathering! Let us revere our paternal memory; let us extol the power of the mystery! Each of us, in the measure given by grace, let us offer a worthy gift for the present feast. Fathers — a prosperous lineage; mothers — fine children; the unbearing — the not-bearing of sin; virgins — a twofold prudence, of soul and of body; betrothed — praiseworthy abstinence. If anyone of you be a father, let him imitate the father of the Virgin; and if anyone be without child — let them make harvest of fruitful prayer, cultivating a life pleasing to God. The mother, feeding her children, let her rejoice together with Anna, raising her Child, given to her in infertility through prayer.

She that is barren, not having given birth, lacking the blessing of a child, let her come with faith to the God-given Offshoot of Anna and offer there her barrenness. The virgin, living blamelessly, let her be a mother by discourse, adorning by word the elegance of soul. For a betrothed — let her offer mental sacrifice from the fruits of prayer. All together rich and poor, lads and maidens, old and young (Ps 48:2,148:12), priests and levites — let all together keep the feast in honor of the Maiden, the Theotokos and the Prophetess: from Her has issued forth the Prophet, foretold by Moses, Christ God and Truth (Dt 18:15). Amen.

The Universal Exaltation of the Precious and Life-giving Cross

September 27

On the Inevitability of Suffering: A Sermon on the Cross

By New Hieromartyr John, Archbishop of Riga and Latvia, who, for his unyielding witness to the Truth suffered many persecutions and was burned alive by communist assassins in the night of October 12, 1934.

From that time, Jesus began to show to His disciples that it is necessary for Him to go away to Jerusalem, and to suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and to be killed, and to be raised the third day. And Peter took Him to himself and began to rebuke Him, saying, 'May God be gracious to Thee, Lord; this in no wise shall be to Thee.' But He turned and said to Peter, "Get thee behind Me, Satan; thou art an offense to Me, for thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men" Mt. 16:21-23.

This revelation of the Lord concerning the sufferings which awaited Him, struck His disciples like a thunderclap from a clear sky. Earlier, He had told them that His path was also their path: The servant is not greater than his master.

"He who does not take up his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me" Mt. 10:38.

And in the lives of Christ's true disciples there is a time of suffering passion when each must enter his own Jerusalem, ascend his Golgotha and the fateful cross, and take up the fateful cup – even unto death.

Even the sons of this world each have their own Golgotha. Unforeseen and uninvited, suffering enters the house. You must suffer whether you like it or not. The bitter "must." This "must" is bitter even for the faithful disciple of Christ. And the cross of suffering frightens even him. In his soul is heard the voice of Peter: 'have mercy on yourself, do not let this happen, protect yourself.' And this is not surprising, for after all, the Great Sufferer Himself prayed:

"If it be possible, take this cup from Me" Mt. 26:39; Mk. 14:36; Lk. 22:42.

This "must" is altogether necessary and we are powerless to stand against it.

"From that time, Jesus began to show to His disciples that it is necessary for Him to go away to Jerusalem, and to suffer many things..." Mt. 16:21.

If the way of the Lord leads to Jerusalem, if His fate is to be decided by the scribes, the Pharisees, the elders, then it is natural that He must suffer and be killed. This Jerusalem towards which Christ directed His steps is not the Heavenly Jerusalem, but an earthly city filled with the spirit of this world, which had fallen away from its God, not recognizing, not comprehending the visitation of the Lord.

"This is the same Jerusalem which, at the altar of the Lord, killed the prophets and stoned those who were sent to it" [cf. Mt. 23:37; Lk. 11:47-51]. And the world, my brothers, even unto this day stands on that same foundation. Perhaps it does not have the same outward appearance. Nowadays they do not crucify people on crosses as they did Peter, nor are people stoned like Stephen. People have become too indifferent towards faith to suffer for its sake.

Our path is less rocky and whoever murmurs at the harshness and the evil of this world should know that he is far from suffering unto blood. Nevertheless, now as never before, the words of the Lord contain a sacred truth:

”If ye were of the world, the world would love its own; but because ye are not of the world—but I chose you for Myself out of the world—therefore the world hateth you” Jn. 15:19.

It cannot do otherwise.

The natural desire of man’s heart is to live at peace with everyone. Many a youthful heart has decided to follow the path of reliance on oneself: ‘I want to get along with everyone; I must not antagonize anyone.’ But even the best-intentioned soon realize that this is impossible. Even the meekest lamb is sure to meet on his way a ferocious wolf that says: ‘You are a thorn in my side.’

He who believes must confess his faith. He who desires to serve God in this world must act according to his faith. But every confession inevitably arouses antagonism and every action is sure to meet with hostility. To see that his honest persuasion and striving are not recognized by the world; that his good deeds are everywhere met with opposition; that there where he sows only love, he must reap evil – this is obviously very grievous to the follower of Christ. And he is often ready to ask, together with his Master: ‘What evil has been done to you? Or how have I offended thee?’ [from the hymns of Great and Holy Friday of Passion Week]. The truth which you proclaim and which you confess and which the world cannot gain-say, or the righteousness manifest in your life which silently reproaches the world, or the peace of the Lord written on your face which the world cannot forgive, or the heavenly other-worldliness of your behavior which shames and accuses their earthly way of life – this is how you have offended the world. And the world would sooner pardon you of ten vices and crimes which get you on a level with others, than forgive one good deed which elevates you above the rest. Why did Cain murder Abel? Because Cain’s actions were evil and the actions of Abel were good and righteous [cf. 1 Jn. 3:12]. Why did the scribes and Pharisees condemn the Savior? Because He was Light and darkness cannot abide the light [cf. Jn 3:16-21].

Do not be astonished then, my dear brothers, if the world hates you. It is to be expected. This is nothing unusual. Do not let evil mockings and the vicious hatred of evil doers lead you astray. Go along the straight road with the name of the Lord, through the world which lies in evil and think in yourself “I must...” and the world cannot do otherwise. It would not be the world if it did not prefer the lies of its errors to truth; egoism to love; its laziness to zeal for God; worldly vanity to righteousness. I am not a disciple of Christ, not His soldier, if I do what is pleasing to everyone, if I go along the broad path together with the crowd instead of keeping to the narrow path where there are few travelers.

And so let us step forward in the name of the Lord with the conscious awareness that “I must.”

There is another aspect to this “I must.” When the Son of Man told His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and there to suffer much and to die, He was aware that this was necessary even for Himself.

”Because He was obedient unto death, even death on the cross, God raised Him up and gave Him a name above every name” Phil. 2:8-9.

If the Heavenly Father so willed that even His only-begotten Son would drink from the cup of suffering, is it for us sinners who are so imperfect to shun this cup of suffering, this school of suffering, when we are such a long way from perfection and still have so much to learn in order to become worthy disciples of the Great Sufferer?

Some think: ‘How much more fervently and willingly I would serve my Lord if only my life’s path were easier, if it were not so thickly strewn with sharp rocks.’ In saying this, you yourself obviously do not know who and what you are, what is

beneficial for you and what is harmful, what you need and what you do not need. It is true when they say that a man tolerates least of all his own well-being. Days of happiness, days of success, when everything goes according to one's own wishes – how many times have such days woven a fatal net which captures the soul? What dissoluteness grows on man's heart, like rust on the blade of an unused battle-sword, or like a garden which becomes overgrown if not tended by the gardener's shears. Tell me, O Christian, what preserves you from haughtiness which so easily penetrates even the strongest hearts, even the hearts of Christ's disciples? Is it not the cross of suffering? What humbles the passionate inclinations of the flesh which so quickly and easily spread in times of well being and prosperity, like insects in a swamp on a sunny day? What teaches you to shun this uncleanness? Is it not the rod of misfortunes and sorrows? What arouses you from the sleep of self-assurance, lulled to sleep as we so easily are by times of happiness: Or what is more conducive to a routine of laziness than cloudless, carefree days of prosperity? At such times a storm can only be regarded as a blessing. What will draw you out of the dangerous state of insensibility? Will not sorrows? Will not illness? What tears us away from our worldly attachments, the love for the world and all that is in it? Is it not necessity and misfortunes? Do not trials teach us to take life more seriously? Do not sorrows teach us to be prepared for death? Wild brambles of the heart cannot be uprooted without the pruning shears of the Heavenly Gardener and the good fruit of truth and righteousness will not grow without the rain of tears and sorrows. Nowhere can true obedience be better tested than in the bearing of the bitter cup of sorrows, when one can only say: ...not my will, but Thine be done, Father [cf. Mt. 26:39; Mk. 14:36; Lk. 22:42].

And submission to God's will is never manifested so clearly as in days and hours of storm when in the midst of menacing and frightful waves the Christian gives himself totally into the hands of Him Whose very hand holds these waves and tempests.

When can the steadfastness, courage, and strength of a soldier of Christ be better demonstrated than when trials and obstacles must be turned into deeds, than in the war against evil, or in times of danger? All the noble strength of the Christian soul, of the Christian character shines forth most brightly in times of distress, misfortunes and sufferings. All the miracles of God's grace are most evident in times when the waters of grief and misfortunes flood our souls and we are forced to recognize our helplessness, our weakness and draw all strength and understanding from Almighty God.

Or, when God Himself chastises you and calls you to account, are you going to ask "what for" and "why"? Or when the Lord sends you to the school of the cross, will you say: "I have not need of its teachings"? Rather you must say: "I need this; I must go to this school of the cross; I must suffer with Christ in order to be raised with Him" [cf. Rom. 6:3-8; 2 Tim. 2:11-12]. When the Lord chastens me I must think and feel like a child chastened by the loving right hand of the Lord, like a grapevine under the pruning shears of the gardener, like iron beneath the smith's hammer, like gold in the purifying fire. This "I must" is of God and I must not shrink from it.

If you, my friends, agree to what I say, here in the house of God, then hold onto this principle when you are visited by grief, and yours becomes the way of the cross. These are basic truths which must be repeated before each bed of sickness and with each student entering the school of sorrows. Pastors know this. He who preached these truths a thousand times to others must repeat them for himself in every situation. Thou, Lord, help us to understand more fully and to plant deep within ourselves this lesson of the divine "I must."

Even the ancient Greeks and other people bowed before the divine will, before sacred duty, before immutable destiny, man's dependence upon Providence. The submission of one's will before this divine "I must," the exact fulfillment of divine decrees – in the wise this was called wisdom, in heroes, it was courage, in the righteous, sanctity. How much more willingly must we Christians fulfill our duty when we know that we are not being led by blind faith, but by the good will of the Father which led even Christ to Golgotha and the Cross, but through Golgotha and the Cross to the glorious Resurrection. And so we must put our faith and trust in Him even when we cannot comprehend the meaning of the guidance. Mankind would have been deprived of so much goodness, such glory and blessedness, if the Savior had hearkened to the voice of Peter: 'defend yourself'.

Let each soul bow before the divine "I must"; for the will of God is good, perfect, guiding all men to salvation. And you, O son of dust and corruption, bend your neck under His almighty hand before which your strength is as nothing. Trust to divine wisdom before which your light is but a dark shadow. Give yourself over to the fatherly guidance of Him who desires not enmity and sorrows, but peace and blessedness for all mankind. When you submit your thoughts and your will to His thought and will, then no cup will be for you too bitter, and no cross too heavy. You will be able to withstand it. Such is the will of God.

If your spouse, children, friends, and everyone you love surround you; if they try to persuade you to have pity on yourself, not to destroy yourself – do not look at their tears, do not listen to their pleadings. Point to the Heavens and say: "Do not burden my heart; thus it is pleasing to God and I must. You are reasoning according to man's wisdom and not God's." And if from your own heart there cries out the voice of flesh and blood, and begins to persuade you: "...this cannot happen to you; defend yourself..." – turn away from this counsel of your own heart and follow after that which glorifies God.

We can more easily bear our afflictions if we keep in mind the example of the Savior. See with what peaceful and holy determination He goes to His Passion. And then follow Him along the path of the cross until with His last breath you hear from His lips the divine words: "It is finished" Jn. 19:30.

And then ask yourself: are not you inspired by this example? Do you not understand now the commandment: "...he who wishes to follow Me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow after Me" Mt. 16:24; Mk. 8:34; Lk. 9:23.

Do you not share the conviction of that disciple who said: "I cannot wear a crown of roses when my Savior is wearing a crown of thorns"?

At the cross of Christ even the most suffering souls among us can find consolation. I have endured, and even now endure much, but my Divine Savior endures still more.

And if you find this example too lofty, read what the holy Apostle Paul says: "Thrice was I beaten with rods; once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils in the city in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness" 2 Cor. 11:23-30.

See what he endured for Christ's sake, how many times he was beaten, stoned, imprisoned, and then understand how far we are from him. Everywhere the cross is the sign of Christianity.

A Christian cannot be without his cross. Amen.

<https://www.facebook.com/bishopgeorge.schaefer>

A Pandemic Observed

Katherine Baker

What mourning my husband and son taught me about the fear of death.

We buried my baby in a wooden box in the crook of the arm of his father. My husband was thirty-seven and had died in a car accident coming home from his work as an Orthodox priest in a sudden snow storm on a Sunday afternoon in March. My son was born at twenty weeks gestation about two weeks before his father's death, but the ground was too frozen to bury him in the cemetery plot just then, so the funeral home offered to keep the tiny body until spring. But when his father died too, it was considered worth the use of the special machines used to thaw the ground for a winter burial in New England, and so there was some comfort in knowing the two would lie together.

My husband's face had been destroyed in the accident which took him on the Feast of Holy Orthodoxy, the day we celebrate the restoration of the icons to the use of the church after the iconoclast heresy had attempted to remove all images from worship. My ten-year-old son had recently painted an icon of the Holy Face of Christ which he decided to place in the coffin with his father thinking it would suffice to provide a face for his Dad. It was good theology for a ten-year-old, the second-born of his theologian father, as it is in Christ that any of us can hope to have any wholeness at all. The strange coincidence of the feast on which my husband died often strikes me as painfully ironic but on my best days, it is a hopeful sign of the restoration of those faces someday in the Resurrection.

Though the car skidded on the ice and rolled three times, coming to rest in oncoming traffic, in a strange miracle, my six children, who were with my husband at the time, not only survived but were completely unharmed except for one black eye and one scratched finger needing only a small band-aid. The children were tended immediately, but my husband was instantly killed because he was thrown from the vehicle. At the time, I was at home recovering from the miscarriage.

In making arrangements for his funeral, I learned that priests are buried with their faces covered by the aer, or the cloth that is used to cover the gifts of bread and wine offered in the liturgy. This is to signify the shroud of Christ and the offering of the priest back to God as a sacrifice. A regular open casket could take place, as usual, with his face covered. His hands with the freckles and the fuzz of reddish hair were the only visual aspects left to assure me it really was him — that, and the strange way his shoes turned out in that duck way they always did from a hip abnormality he had from birth. It added some kind of strange comedy to the solemn scene of his church funeral.

And so he was buried and a carved stone icon of the Resurrection was placed over his head, and we all marveled that God had decided to take so remarkable a person: son and brother, husband, father of six living children, dear friend to many, a musician, and a poet, soon to get his PhD in theology and recently recognized for his intellectual work by some of the leading minds of his field, he was recently ordained and assigned to his first parish only six weeks prior. As a priest from our former parish said, "as we have buried such a dear seed, from it we expect a tremendous harvest."

Three of my children and myself were first exposed to a known COVID-19 case on the five-year anniversary of my husband's death but did not hear about the exposure for over a week. I looked to my six children and wondered if any or all of them

would be the next to lie with their Daddy and brother, or if I would be the one to leave them totally orphaned. Now that the oldest was seventeen and the youngest seven we had finally settled into some kind of regularity, though I still struggled daily with a deep darkness.

As I watched the pandemic and lockdown play out, observing it from a place of intimacy with death and mourning. Very often I wondered if that was the case for our leaders and decision makers. It appeared to me death was being approached officially as an anomaly instead of a certainty, and disease we being treated like a strange exception instead of the rule. We ticked off each COVID-19 death one by one through mass media in a way never done with any other cause of death before.

Of course, this seemed justified at the time because, in a pandemic, each death is another piece of the puzzle, which is helping us to understand the disease, and, to be fair, in the early days we had no idea what it might do. But I began to worry about our nation's response to the disease about the time our own self-imposed family quarantine was over. The lockdowns were in full swing and no exit strategies were even allowed to be spoken of without the accusation that anyone considering reopening to a more normal sort of life simply did not care about humanity.

It seemed that so many were willing to make a bargain with whoever might be offering that they would do anything to save others from sickness and death. While this was certainly generous and completely understandable (and I am sure I too would have been tempted by it before I had lost my husband and child), it caused me alarm now that I was already in mourning. I could see that these well-meaning, deeply loving people simply could not imagine life without their dear ones and so they were ready to make any sacrifices that were asked of them to keep death at bay.

I totally identified with the contradictory and confused feelings of the bereaved C.S. Lewis, in *A Grief Observed* when he said about the loss of his wife, "her absence is like the sky spread over everything" but elsewhere saying the loss is, "like an amputation." Both are true. But as a mourning person it is my personal daily struggle to go on living the best I can, with myself and my world utterly altered.

In our fear of death we simply do not want to think about what happens after our loved ones die. But we must. We seem to be willing, in our understandable terror, to trade away many essential things: basic freedoms, our public life and public institutions for the promise of greater safety from sickness and death, but when that sickness and death come anyway (as it must), what will we do when we find we have made the world worse than it otherwise might have been? If we trade the beauty and order of our society for safety, not only will we find we have lost our dear ones anyway, we will sit and mourn them in a desolate land of our own making.

There is a dark part of us all that wants the world to match the pain we feel. I think this is the primary work of mourning people: to refuse bitterness, to choose life every moment we can (and repent when we fail) and refuse to make the whole world worse just because we are hurting. The world is already a graveyard; it does not have to be hell.

The real tragedy is not a person dying young, but a person whose life becomes a kind of death. Those people are truly, "dead before their time." My husband was not dead before his time. He had really lived right up to the last moment and accomplished so much.

In the intervening five years I have, at times, upbraided myself for all the ways I could have kept my baby and my husband alive. I concoct alternative scenarios in which we would all be at home before the snow started falling and I would have taken better care of myself to keep from having a miscarriage. But I know this is a dangerous line of reasoning. While surely some of my choices and my husband's choices did indeed affect the final end result, to place all the blame for accidental death on a survivor just results in that person too, succumbing to a torturous depression that is a kind

of death in life.

Just like it's counterproductive to suggest to a woman who has miscarried that she continue to ruminate on all the ways she might have been responsible for her child's death, or suggest to a spouse or caregiver that they might have done something different to save their loved one, it is also wrong to suggest to everyone that they should tear themselves up with guilt over the deaths of the most fragile. "Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will.... So do not be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:30).

The pandemic has demanded that we siphon all our lives through the internet. The corporal works of mercy seem to have been made incorporeal, better to be filtered through big tech. Someone is making a lot of money when we funnel all our relationships, commerce, education, recreation and even worship through a third party. This new disembodied way of living is an effort to be "safe," but it seems Christ's example suggests we must become more embodied, not less. We already know that however safe living on the internet might make us from some kinds of physical threats, the new cancel culture and persistent internet aggression has opened up whole new ways to devastate and be devastated.

In avoiding the pain of my own life, I find the lure of being dis-incarnated very seductive. The internet — that glittering indulgence of the eyes — is an infinite stream of the finite, wherein you can pretend to lose your loss, and your body with its limitations. There, I can temporarily avoid some of the pain of my present life.

But, God Himself, pure spirit, became a real man with a real body. It is a continuing argument I have with Him that He took the bodies of my dear love and child from me at the same time that He insists on the Incarnation of Himself. My argument with God goes something like this: You say it is so important to be incarnated, to become a human with a body and yet you expect me to be satisfied with this husband and son of mine whose living bodies are gone from me? You expect me to commune with them as far away spirits while you lived as a man. Which is it, God? Is it good to be incarnated or not? To which I wonder if God's response to my objections might be something like: your dissatisfaction, my dear, is exactly My point. This is not the end. We await the Resurrection of the body.

St. Paul says that Christ died and rose again to set us free from our fear of death which is a kind of slavery that has held us in bondage from the beginning (Hebrews 2:15). How do we understand the lives of the martyrs in a pandemic? "They endured mocking and flogging, chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, sawn in two, put to death by sword. They went around...destitute, oppressed and mistreated," says St Paul. But he concludes, "The world was not worthy of them" (Hebrews 11:37).

Pandemic was actually very common throughout history and, through those times, the saints went right on fulfilling Christ's commands to feed and clothe, care for, and love others. It's very possible some disease was actually spread through the charitable acts of the saints, if it was God's will. It's not that those saints were too uneducated to know that this could happen, it's that they made a conscious choice to care for others in a physical way in spite of the risks to themselves and even the risks to those they cared for. Why did they do this? Because the people around them who asked for their embodied love needed that embodied love more than they needed long lives free of suffering.

Even though humans make choices that are real, no sickness or death happens without God's permission or involvement. Or at least Christians used to believe this. Forcible, physical segregation and perpetual isolation is usually used as punishment. Are we so sure that the negative outcomes of these safety measures won't outweigh the positive?

Tertullian said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." Christians

have always been noted as those people who did not practice abortion, euthanasia and suicide. They considered life precious, but their saints famously did not pursue the lengthening of their own individual lives to the detriment of their own souls, nor the souls of others. The martyrs did not count their own physical deaths as much compared to what awaited them (Romans 8:18) And that's not because they undervalued this present life. Christian saints often laid down their lives for other people but there were also some things they simply would not do — like worship idols — not even to save a life, not even the life of their own child. If we want to be people of integrity, we must imitate their example.

I fully expect, if we are living as Church, there could be large outbreaks of COVID-19 in Christian communities, just like in any other human encounter should it God will it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.” And if we are blamed by the authorities for being “super-spreaders,” it would not be the first time in history.

No one blames a person for going to the store for groceries and spreading or picking up germs there, but it seems worship is being approached more like a concert than like “daily bread.” But gathering for Sunday liturgy and fellowship should be a help to facing the possibility of death, which is exactly what we need right now. A priest's job is not to keep me alive; it's to help me live and die well.

Christians should never judge someone who chooses safety from suffering and death as did the early Donatist heretics who cast out of the church those who fled persecution. However, Christians should neither judge nor exclude those who choose honorable risk either. A principal of non-judgment is our example. Force and manipulation should be rejected whether that force or manipulation be in favor of risk or against it.

My husband wrote in a sermon shortly before his death: “God created man in the year 33, on a hill called Golgotha.” Christ, declared his great work “accomplished” from the agony of the cross. It is in union with Christ that we become who we ought to be, and so how can we escape death when even Christ did not? In one of his last sermons, my husband suggested to his flock, “...may we make our own these words of St. Ignatius of Antioch, written to his fellow Christians on his way towards martyrdom for refusing the idolatry of pagan Rome: ‘It is better for me to die in Christ Jesus than to be king over the ends of the earth... The pains of birth are upon me. Allow me, my brethren; hinder me not from living, do not wish me to be stillborn... Allow me to imitate the passion of my God ...when I shall have arrived there, I shall become a human being.’” (Epist. ad Rom., 6).

The week my husband died, I heard one of my younger children ask my oldest, who was twelve years old at the time and had been sitting in the front seat in the accident, why he didn't tell Daddy to put on his seatbelt because that would have saved his life? Alarmed, I immediately told the children that we were not to ask such questions. God decides when people die. Daddy usually wore his seatbelt. It is a mystery to me why he didn't put it on that day. I see before me an entire nation of people being encouraged to ask similar terrible questions of themselves and others. There is a great mystery between God's will and human freedom. We should not pretend to understand something we do not. Christians have never held that death is only a game of chance. It is unconscionable to burden people with guilt for the deaths of others just for going about their lives, especially for the deaths of the most fragile, when death awaits us all.

The night before the accident I found that the middle bench seat in our van was not properly latched into the floor. I tried many times to get the seat to engage into the floor, but it would not budge. The seats were stuck in an unlocked position, the red plastic warning showing. As my fingers became numb with cold, I finally said a prayer, “God protect my children,” and I did the sign of the cross. When I went to the

wrecked van after the accident, the seat was locked into the floor as it should be: the red plastic warning no longer showed. At some point before the rollover, it had locked itself into place and the children were basically uninjured.

I must believe that the death of my husband and my unborn son were the will of God. To do otherwise would not only cause me to degenerate into someone I do not want to be, it would be to deny my faith. I could choose to take total responsibility for those deaths, but practically speaking what would that accomplish for my children other than my own disintegration? I could blame my husband for his own death or for endangering our children. But how would that help? I know he loved them and me deeply and I know he valued his own life. Any mistakes he might have made that contributed to his own death he certainly paid for, crushed against that hard surface of reality.

I could blame someone else for his death or my child's death: family members, friends, doctors, highway workers, but that would only multiply the destruction. God alone knows the level of anyone's culpability in their own deaths and the deaths of others. And should we know for a fact that someone has contributed to a death or perpetrated a murder directly, Christians teach that God is ready to forgive. When it comes to causes of death we must refrain from judgment, and throw ourselves upon the mercy of God or risk making the already bereaved nearly as dead as the people they miss.

God gave human beings freedom with which they often create chaos, hatred and torture. But it is by that same power of freedom that we also love. God took an extraordinary risk in His great benevolence. Human freedom has created no end of misery, and it is easy to blame God for the evil humans create with their freedom. But is it God's fault if we continually use for evil the tools He gave us for good?

God not only risked the loss of our souls to give us the capacity to love, but He also took that risk even further in the Incarnation, wherein His pure spirit took on flesh that ultimately died, just as ours will. We cannot avoid death, but we do have a choice about how we should spend our life. Should we squander it, buried like the gold from the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25), or should we face the risk and live out the adventure of our own lives?

I do not believe, and I think it injurious to me and my children to act out that the death of the body is to be avoided at all costs. Nor do I believe that death is ultimately only something that happens if one does not take the proper precautions. Nor do I find it edifying to imagine that the primary way death comes to us is through the normal breathing and natural movement of other people around me. Even if this is true, acting this out will inevitably create fear, distrust, segregation and xenophobia. When we encourage this attitude, we further enslave people to their own inborn fear of death and isolate them from each other.

We never admire the character in a story who will do or say anything to stay alive a little longer, or who pressures other people to put themselves at risk or even die for him. We admire the person who, if the normal living and breathing of others could cause him to suffer or even die, would rather risk suffering and death than ask someone else to stop living and breathing for him. Of course, this takes a courage we don't actually have. We need grace. A Christian imitates Christ and does not shrink from a fully incarnate life. I fail at this every day. I am terrified of death. But on my better days I am even more afraid of what I could become if I let the fear of death become my master.

In an internet news report on my husband's accident someone wrote in the comment section, "Well, God was not his co-pilot! LOL!" While that thoughtless joke probably represents my own worst temptation, on my better days I believe that the God who can fasten seats to the floor of a vehicle before an accident can send his angels to remind the driver to put his seatbelt on. Who am I to say God was not with my

husband in the moment of his death? I know he prayed for that every day and I trust God to be merciful.

The question isn't will I die? Or will the people I love die? The answer to that has always been, yes. A better question might be will I let the anticipation of death make me and my world, better or worse?

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