

DORU COSTACHE

Reading
Scripture
in the
ORTHODOX
Church
the FESTAL
cycle



THE AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE
FOR ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN STUDIES

Reading Scripture
in the Orthodox Church
The Festal Cycle

*To
Father
Florin
Boitan
who
taught
me
the
sense
of
festal
joy*

**Reading Scripture
in the Orthodox Church
The Festal Cycle**

Doru Costache

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Reading Scripture in the Orthodox Church
The Festal Cycle

by Doru Costache

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Preface

Continuing the first part of this project, where I reflected upon the scriptural readings prescribed for the liturgies of the Sunday cycle, herein I consider the significance of the passages read for the liturgies of the major festivals in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

I observe the same approach: summarising the two prescribed texts from the Apostle and the Gospel books, then pondering their common message against the backdrop of the respective festivals, followed by a brief sentence meant to capture the wisdom of the readings, and a recapitulation of the message in five keywords. I work with the same assumption, which I discussed in the previous volume of the series, namely, that the two readings are not gathered at random and have in fact been chosen because they convey shared wisdom. This is a very profitable way of looking at the pedagogical dimension of the festal cycle. The festivals of the Church are not what we usually call “worship.” Rather, they are part of a complex, ongoing catechism, which every year reminds God’s people of the basics of its faith and way of life.

There is a difference between the two cycles. Whereas the Sunday cycle begins with Easter, when the annual suite of scriptural readings is initiated, the festal cycle begins on 1 September, in accordance with the order of the liturgical year. Correspondingly, the three categories of festivals addressed below begin with those closest to that date. The three categories are as follows: festivals of the Lord, festivals of the Virgin Lady, and

festivals of the Holy Cross. While keeping this usual classification, my reflections point out that, directly or indirectly, even the celebrations falling in the last two categories focus on Christ. In an attempt to avoid repetition, I omitted a number of minor festivals, but even the remaining materials sometimes overlap. Indeed, for many celebrations, the readings are shared, as are their messages. In all likelihood, this is because of the principle discussed in the previous work of the series, namely, learning the fundamentals through repetition.

The reflections collected here are meant to serve as a starting point for both personal contemplation and preaching. As with the previous volume, in order to assist the more assiduous readers I add to my reflections a bibliographical list and a thematic index.

I once again express my heartfelt gratitude to the Australian Research Theology Foundation, Inc, for the grant that made possible the elaboration and the production of this work, and to a private sponsor who wished to remain anonymous. Last but not least, I give thanks to Jonathan Cole for revising the text (all remaining mistakes belong to me) and to Ion Nedelcu for designing the covers and for the layout of the volume.

I wish the reader a fruitful experience.

Doru Costache,
a protopresbyter of the
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Sydney's North
25 March 2019

Part One

Festivals of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ

Sunday of the Holy Ancestors of the Lord

Two weeks before Christmas

COLOSSIANS 3:4–11 The wrath of God is upon people’s evil deeds. Christians must therefore change their old, sinful, and wicked self into their new identity, renewed through knowledge in the creator’s image. The content of their renewed life in Christ will become obvious when Christ himself is seen again. It is then that Christians will understand the content of this mystery, for they will bathe in the glory of the Lord. Christ is indeed “all in all,” the ultimate measure of all who undertake renewal. In this light, neither ethnic nor religious nor social background defines the new person and its perception of other people.

LUKE 14:16–24 Someone offered a banquet and sent his servant to call in the people on the guest list. But those invited declined at the last minute because they were busy with various things, such as property, material means, and family. The host then sent his servant out to bring in the destitute and the marginal. Yet there was still room. So the servant was

sent a third time to call in everyone else—for the host had decided that no one on the original guest list would eat that dinner.

WISDOM One should not become a slave to material things as the original invitees did, missing the banquet. This warning is not about rich people. The warning regards all of us and what we value in life. The Gospel reading mentions three worldly goods which people prioritise, namely, property, material means, and family. Similarly, the apostolic reading mentions passions related to pleasure and anger, showing that these affect both those who nurture them and the people around them. Both readings point out that our existential choices have consequences: the materialists in the Gospel reading missed the banquet, whereas the passionate and the violent in the apostolic letter cannot grasp the will of God who wishes all to be saved. These consequences are not unrelated. The more people prioritise material goods, the more they are enslaved by them, and thus end up developing an exclusive interest in acquiring more and keeping what they possess from others. Greed leads to anger and violence. The entire process corrupts both those who harbour such passions and those who stand in the way. The antidote to this destructive process is to prioritise God and whom God prioritises, our very neighbour. One is not called to stop working, earning, and having a family. But one must understand that life remains unfulfilled without God and neighbour. It is at this juncture that the final message of the two readings comes to the fore. Lovingly, the host of the banquet in the Gospel—an image of God—desires that people enjoy his generosity. And there is ever more room for those who accept the invitation (John 14:2). In the apostolic letter, God, out of love, wishes all to be saved, irrespective of their blood, religion, and social status. The children of God know God's love and are not blinded by wrong priorities and choices. They know that Christmas is the love of God for all. An expression of love is also this liturgy dedicated to the bodily ancestors of the Lord—the love of God for all who desire to taste the Master's dinner.

MESSAGE Whereas material priorities keep people distant from God and neighbour, God's renewed people prioritise love and compassion for all.

KEYWORDS love, materialism, neighbour, passions, renewal

The Forefeast of Christmas

20 December

HEBREWS 10:32–38 Believers must remember the trials of their first days after enlightenment (that is, after their conversion and ecclesial integration). They were then persecuted and humiliated, at times having had to suffer together with other believers who went through similar trials. Throughout, they maintained their faith and hope, rejoicing at the prospect of God's promise that the believers will be richly rewarded. Believers must therefore continue to stay the course, regardless of the adversities they may have to face at the hands of their persecutors.

MARK 9:33–41 While in Capernaum, Jesus conversed with his disciples about their concerns regarding who among them was the greatest. He told them that whoever wishes to be the first among them should be like the last one, namely, the servant of all. He then brought a child in their midst and, holding it in his arms, told them that whoever welcomes a child in his name welcomes him, and whoever welcomes him receives the one (that is, the Father) who sent him. On a related note, John pointed out that someone was performing miracles in the Lord's name without following him. Jesus told them that they should not stop such a person, since that person is neither against him nor against them. He assured them once again that all who give them water to drink because they bear the name of Christ will be rewarded.

WISDOM Today, alongside celebrating the Forefeast of Christ's birth, the Church remembers Saint Ignatius the God-bearer (d. ca 108), Bishop of Antioch in Syria. This association is telling. Christmas, festival of

the Lord's birth, brings hope and joy to the world by renewing God's promise that all people are called to divine adoption, a promise accomplished through the Son, Jesus Christ, incarnated for the life of the world. But the joy of Christmas is no worldly joy. Christian life cannot be reduced to momentary respite. The joy of Christmas is the joy of a divine reward for all who receive Christ and welcome his disciples. This joy is ever linked with trial, sorrow, and pain. The hymns of Christmas in the Orthodox tradition, accordingly, do not just give expression to our joy: they announce that the Child born for us is the crucified Lord. By associating the Forefeast of Christmas and the remembrance of Saint Ignatius, a martyr bishop, today's celebration subtly conveys the same message. The readings make this message plain. Christians should not expect all the best in the world. Just as the world is hostile to Christ, so too is it hostile to those who bear the name of Christ, Christians. It is for this reason that Christianity can never aim at ruling over the world or concern over who is first and who is second. Christians must recognise themselves in that humble child from the Gospel, whom Christ held in his arms—fragile, defenceless, vulnerable. Christians are hated, mocked, and persecuted. Nevertheless, following in the Lord's footsteps, they must serve both one another and this world. They must bring hope and joy to whoever wishes these. Neither their place nor their task is easy, but they must take heart—the promise is true. Saint Ignatius has shown the way, ministering with love, ministering with joy, knowing that those who belong to Christ cannot walk a different path from that of their crucified Lord. From the vantage point of his profound understanding, he urged everyone therefore to “run together” in “like-mindedness,” singing to Christ in “unanimity and consonant love” (*Letter to the Ephesians* 4.1–2). Saint Ignatius, pray to God for us, children of Christmas!

MESSAGE God's people bear hope and joy in the world, but they must be prepared for trials and martyrdom.

KEYWORDS hope, joy, martyrdom, persecution, service

Saturday before Christmas

GALATIANS 3:8–12 The old law created an impossible situation. People were supposed to live by the deeds it prescribed, but no one could keep all its rules. As a result, those who were subject to the law were condemned. Salvation, in any case, could not come through accomplishing such deeds. Righteousness is gained through faith. To make salvation accessible to all people, God promised to the faithful Abraham that all nations would be blessed in and through him. And so, all who believe like Abraham are blessed together with him and thus saved.

LUKE 13:19–29 The Lord told the disciples two parables about the kingdom. One was of the mustard seed becoming a tree in which many birds find shelter. The other was of the woman who added leaven to flour in order to form dough. While teaching on his way to Jerusalem, someone asked the Lord if few are saved. He answered that only those who enter (the kingdom) by the narrow door are saved. Many try to enter, but they fail because they do not walk on the right path. The narrow door means consistency in working deeds of righteousness. Although many will claim to have heard him preach and to have eaten and drunk in his presence, they will not be saved because they will have failed to walk through the narrow door. They will see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the prophets feasting in the kingdom of God together with people from east, west, north, and south, but they will not have a share in their joy.

WISDOM Christmas renews our hope by reminding us of God's promise. The kingdom is now open to all the birds of the air, who now find shelter in the leafy branches of the tree of life. We are all called to salvation, to the kingdom, and to be with the saints in the presence of the Lord. The promise is true, for the Lord, the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, is in our midst. He talks to us and he teaches us, showing all where to go and how to get there: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," says the Lord (John 14:6). A code of conduct will not make us righteous. It is walking with the

Word of God that saves us. As Saint Antony (d. 356) advised, “always have God before your eyes” (*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Antony 2). More precisely, according to Abba Shenouda (d. 466), believers must practice remembering Jesus as God when they go in and when they go out, when they go to sleep and when they get up, when they bless and when they pray (*I Am Amazed* 802). By the Lord we are saved, through him we inherit the kingdom, with him we enter through the narrow door of conversion—the painful change of mind and life. The faith of Abraham, the patriarchs, and the prophets guides us to the path, but in order to walk on that path we must maintain consistency. We must live as we believe, be what we say we are, be transformed from within like the flour mixed with leaven. Then the kingdom’s hall will welcome us. Then we shall rejoice in the presence of the Lord, together with believers from all nations.

MESSAGE Although believers must not put their trust in virtuous accomplishments, they must still walk on the path of personal transformation in order to inherit the kingdom.

KEYWORDS consistency, conversion, kingdom, righteousness, salvation

Sunday before Christmas

HEBREWS 11:9–10, 32–40 Hopeful in the good things to come, the faithful Abraham obeyed God and went to live in the promised land as a stranger, as did Isaac and Jacob. In like manner, judges, kings, and prophets—all spiritual inheritors of Abraham—went through turmoil, pain, suffering, and death, in the hope of the Messiah’s arrival. But these heroes of sacred history did not receive the reward for their faith immediately, so that we might enjoy the promised kingdom with them.

MATTHEW 1:1–25 The genealogy of Christ’s ancestors points to a providentially led history. Fourteen generations passed from Abraham to

David; fourteen generations from David to the Babylonian captivity; fourteen more from the Babylonian captivity to the birth of Jesus Christ. Jews and pagans alike feature in his ancestry, as well as saints and sinners. Thus, all that pertains to humankind is written in the genes of the Lord, flowing through his veins. As a fulfilment of this divinely led history, and despite setbacks, Christ was supernaturally born of the Virgin Mary, who was then under the protection of Joseph. In a dream, an angel disclosed the name of the newborn: Jesus (“the Lord who saves”) and Emmanuel (“God with us”). And the first two witnesses of his birth, his mother Mary and her guardian Joseph, named him as instructed from above.

WISDOM Passing from this world only several decades before the Lord’s birth, the Roman poet Virgil gave voice to our terror saying, *fugit irreparabile tempus*, “irretrievably, time flies.” This was the perception of our ancestors and this is still the way many people construe life: time flies meaninglessly and nothing can be done about it. But not all thought like this then and not all think like this today. *Carpe diem*, exhorted Horace, Virgil’s younger contemporary, who also passed before the Lord’s birth. “Seize the day!” This is what Horace learnt from the Epicureans. There was a sense, therefore, that time could be redeemed, transformed, made meaningful. There was hope that the flow of time and space and matter and all things—Heraclitus’ *πάντα ῥεῖ*, “everything flows”—could be steered towards better things. This, long before even Heraclitus, was the hope of the patriarchs and the judges and the kings and the prophets of Israel. They “looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10). They hoped in the Lord, and their hope was not in vain. The genealogy of Christ shows that, behind the scenes of the historical continuum, a divine plan was underway. The hopes of all were not in vain. Nor ours. Corresponding to the providentially marked history of the Lord’s ancestry, divine providence, against all odds, turns all things for the best for the benefit of God’s people. There is comfort in this. When we experience tribulation we must remember that God’s children are neither abandoned nor defeated. There is hope, there is light, there is joy. The scope and purpose of history is Jesus, “the

Saviour Lord,” the Anointed, Emmanuel, “God with us.” Thus teaches Saint Maximus the Confessor (d. 662), that the mystery of Christ is “the blessed purpose for which all things are constituted” (*To Thalassius* 60). On the scale of the broader history of God’s people, as well as in our personal stories, believers experience the same trajectory: mobilised by the promise, they walk in the midst of peril and turmoil towards the reward, namely, the victory granted by Emmanuel (John 16:33). Glory to the Lord of Peace, Jesus Christ, born on earth to restore the fullness of life to all those who desire it.

MESSAGE The flow of time and the prospect of mortality no longer terrify the believers, who hope in Emmanuel, “God with us.”

KEYWORDS despair, history, hope, promise, providence

The Eve of Christmas

24 December

HEBREWS 1:1–12 Some people might confuse the Son of God, the Lord, with one of the angels. But God proclaimed no angel Son and Lord of the ages. The Son is clearly acknowledged as born of the Father before all ages, the one through whom God created the universe. Furthermore, the Son, the Lord of creation, is also Lord of history. The many and various revelations communicated in the past through the prophets came to fulfilment only when, at the end of the days (allocated for the messianic expectation), the Son revealed the supreme truth. But the Son is not only creator of the universe and revealer of the ultimate truth. Eternally, he is the radiance of God’s glory, bearing the stamp of God’s nature, as well as the priest of our salvation, who purified us, his believers.

LUKE 2:1–20 In the days of Emperor Augustus, a census was ordered throughout the Roman world. All had to go to their motherlands to enrol. So Joseph and his betrothed, the Virgin Mary, both members of David’s

royal lineage, travelled from Galilee to Judea to David's hometown of Bethlehem in order to be written in the census book. While in Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to a child. But because they could not find a room, they had to lodge in a stable where the newborn was put in a manger. Meanwhile, angelic choirs disclosed themselves to nearby shepherds and proclaimed the birth of "a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord." At the exhortation of the angels, the shepherds went to see the child and when they found him they told everything that the angels had communicated.

WISDOM Through the centuries, people have attempted to make sense of the identity of Jesus Christ as best they could. The usual stumbling block proved to be, as it still is, the Lord's human birth, life, and death. Thus, some considered him a mere man, possibly inhabited by a divine power. Others saw him as an angel or a divine power, but not God. Because of these difficulties, the Church established the double festival of Christmas and Theophany in order to help believers comprehend who the Lord is. The Sunday before Christmas, as we have seen, celebrates those who lived their lives in expectation of God's Anointed, the Messiah, and the first human witnesses of the incarnation—his mother, the Virgin Mary, and her guardian Righteous Joseph. Mary and Joseph learnt from an angel the name of the Lord, Yeshua (Jesus), "God-who-saves." From the same angel they heard that the child was he whom Isaiah prophetically announced as Emmanuel, "God-with-us." Today's readings add more references and testimony to Christ's identity. Christ bears the hallmarks of God's nature and glory and therefore is no angel, but God himself. Christ is the creator of the universe (John 1:3; Colossians 1:15–18). Christ is the source of the ultimate revelation and the priest of our salvation. We should not be fooled by the mystery of his humility, his kenosis. We should not be blind to the evidence of his witnesses and the proofs of his divinity. God is with us. We are therefore children of God. If God is not with us, we are not children, but slaves. But the saints among us show that our divine adoption through Christ is true: they shine like the sun (Matthew 13:43), a pale refraction of the glory of the Only-begotten.

MESSAGE Christians believe in the revelation of Christ's divinity, confirmed by so many witnesses in heaven and on earth.

KEYWORDS angels, divine identity, Emmanuel, incarnation, witnesses

Christmas: The Liturgy of Christ's Birth

25 December

GALATIANS 4:4–7 In the fulness of time, God sent his Son to liberate us from the tyranny of the old law and to offer us divine adoption. To adopt us as children of God, the Son deigned to be born of a woman. In order to free us, he was born as a subject of that very law. And now, being adopted children of God, we are no longer slaves to the law; we are God's inheritors through Christ. The sign of our adoption is the presence of the Son's Spirit in our hearts, who teaches us to call out to God, "Abba! Father!"

MATTHEW 2:1–12 Magi from the east came to Judea during the reign of Herod, seeking a newborn king whose star they beheld, in order to worship him. Herod was utterly surprised at the news. He asked the priests and scholars of Jerusalem what they knew about the arrival of Christ (the Messiah, the Anointed). They quoted the prophecy of Micah (5:2) about the birth of Israel's ruler in Bethlehem. Cunningly, Herod learnt from the magi when the star appeared and secretly sent them away to find the infant. He asked them to return and to tell him what they found so that he could go to worship the newborn too. While they were leaving Jerusalem, the star reappeared and led them to the house where the newborn and Mary, his mother, lodged. Upon entering the house, the magi offered gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. After bowing down and worshipping the newborn, they returned to their land by another way following advice by an angel.

WISDOM The readings of Sunday before Christmas clarified that history is not only the chaotic arena where human passions, victories, and defeats take place. They further showed that time is not irredeemable and that God leads history towards a purpose. Today we learn that this purpose is the liberation from all forms of slavery, including religious, for all who believe in Jesus Christ as Son of God incarnate. Thus, when the time was ripe, at the very crux of history, God's Son was born to us. He became one of us, our brother, making us—his sisters and brothers—children of God and his Father our Father (John 20:17). Christmas, therefore, proclaims the fulfilment of God's plan for us. Christmas reveals the opportunity given to us to fulfil our destiny by embracing our new identity as God's children. By embracing it we can make better sense of things. As God's children and disciples of Christ, we can discern the truth of things. Thus we see Christ's birth as the point of convergence of all history and of all the regions (Colossians 1:15–18). In the mystery of Christmas we commune with the patriarchs, the judges, the kings, and the prophets of Israel; with the sages of the pagans who sought him; with the shepherds who visited him; with the angels; with the star and the whole universe. Christmas, the liturgy of Christ's birth, reminds us of the universal togetherness to which we are called; foremost of all our new, divine identity. There, in our hearts, where the Holy Spirit whispers "Abba! Father!" the Son makes us divine children. There, in our hearts, we meet our Father in heaven, together with all the visible and the invisible heavens, with the angels and all peoples.

MESSAGE On Christmas day, believers receive the revelation of their new identity and discover their connection with all the witnesses of Christ's birth, visible and invisible, past, present, and future.

KEYWORDS adoption, convergence, divine identity, history, witnesses

The Second Day of Christmas

26 December

HEBREWS 2:11–18 To perform his duties as our high priest and in order to help us, living in the fear of death and subject to temptation, the Lord became one of us. (Through the incarnation) he partook of the same nature, sharing in our flesh and blood, being like us in all respects. As such, he experienced temptation and suffered death. Strengthened by these experiences, as a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, he helps the descendants of Abraham. These are the believers who experience temptation and live the fear of death. (As a result of his incarnation and ministry), we are all of one source (and so one holy family), sanctifier and sanctified together.

MATTHEW 2:13–23 After the departure of the magi, the angel told the holy family in a dream to seek refuge in Egypt. Thus the prophecy was fulfilled (Hosea 11:1) that God's Son was called from Egypt. Meanwhile, upon the order of the enraged king Herod, soldiers killed all the young boys of Bethlehem aged two and younger, hoping that one of them was the Messiah. This tragedy was foretold by Jeremiah (31:15). After the death of Herod, the angel appeared again to Joseph in a dream, instructing the holy family to return to the land of Israel. Fearing the successor of Herod on the throne of Judea, they sought refuge in Nazareth. Thus the (anonymous) prophecy that (the Messiah) was to be called a Nazarene was fulfilled.

WISDOM The double Christmas narrative continues. The events following the departure of the magi from the East are rendered in simple prose, but not devoid of dramatic content. When Christ, the light of the world, began to shine on earth, the forces of darkness, upsurging from humankind's untamed subconscious, offered murderous opposition. Representing the worst within us, Herod, in his mad desire to maintain power for himself and his lineage, proceeded to have the Messiah, the heir of David, killed. In the process he committed a genocide: the kill-

ing of the innocent, pure sacrifices, like Abel, destroyed by humankind's darkened soul. An angel of God sent the holy family to Egypt and later announced to them when it was safe to return. This was perhaps the same angel of annunciation and who revealed the name of Yeshua, Jesus, "the Lord who saves." And so the Anointed one, the high priest of our salvation, was able to continue his journey on earth. This is where the second narrative—the topic of adoption—comes into view. Christ's incarnation was instrumental to his effectiveness as our saviour. This task required him to know human nature from within (John 2:24–25) and to strengthen our race to withstand the storms of temptation (Hebrews 4:15–16). As one of us, he freed us from the fear of death which enslaved us, since he tasted it and vanquished it. And in becoming one of us, our brother, we all become one family, born from the same source, namely, from above (John 1:12–13). The distinction between the sanctifier and the sanctified remains, but the features of both sanctifier and sanctified are the same. This is the tremendous mystery of Christmas: the purpose of he who was born for us is to make us as he is. Thus human darkness is transformed into light (1 Peter 2:9–10). Thus the evil, murderous conscience of humankind is purified and enlightened. Glory be to him!

MESSAGE Against all odds, God's plan of salvation works. The Saviour was kept safe and we, his believers, emerged from the darkness into the light of the kingdom.

KEYWORDS darkness, evil, fear, freedom, temptations

The Third Day of Christmas 27 December

ACTS 6:8–15; 7:1–5,47–60 Full of grace and power, Stephen performed many wonders and signs. The members of the diaspora synagogue of the Libertines argued with him, but they did not prevail, for the Spirit was with him. Then they sent false witnesses to lie about him (as their

coreligionists had done regarding Christ). They claimed he was a blasphemer who preached the destruction of religion. Consequently, the religious leaders of the Jews had Stephen arrested and put on trial. During his speech, the saint's face, seen by many, looked like that of an angel. In the traditional fashion of remembering God's deeds, he summarised the history of the patriarchs and the kings, represented (in this selection of verses only) by Abraham and Solomon. But then he accused the Jews of being opponents of the Spirit, persecutors of the prophets, disobedient to the law, and killers of those who announced the arrival of God's Anointed, whom they betrayed and murdered. At his final words, the gathering was in uproar, but Stephen, inspired by the Holy Spirit, had a vision of God's glory and saw Jesus, the Son of Man, sitting at the right hand of God. When he told them of his vision, they shouted and seized him, dragging him out of the city where they stoned him to death. Saul (the future apostle Paul) witnessed the murder. Drawing his last breath, the saint prayed, saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," and then, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And so he fell asleep.

MATTHEW 21:33–44 Jesus told a series of parables to the chief priests and the elders, including one about a landowner who rented his vineyard to some workers and then left. The workers refused to pay their dues. The landlord sent his servants to them twice, some of whom were beaten and others put to death. Eventually the landowner sent his own son, but the workers killed him too. At the conclusion of the parable, the Lord asked those present how the workers should be treated. The elders replied that they should be punished and the vineyard given to others. At that point, Christ turned the sentence against them, warning that the kingdom of God will be taken from them and given to those worthy of it.

WISDOM The good news of Christmas becomes increasingly laden with dramatic overtones. The second day of the festival has already warned that whatever Christ experienced will also be experienced by his disciples. Today's readings explicitly spell out the same message. In the form of a parable, the Gospel passage presents the long history of Israel's disobedience. The vineyard's workers killed the prophets sent by God in order to

remind them that they cannot confiscate the promise of the kingdom, i.e. transform the spiritual kingdom into an earthly power. Eventually the workers murdered God's Son and lost the kingdom altogether. In like manner, they killed the disciples of God's Son. The first was the deified saint Stephen, one of the deacons of the Church in Jerusalem. The similarity between the two stories, Christ's and Stephen's, is uncanny. Just as the Lord was falsely accused and unjustly condemned, so too was Stephen. They killed the Lord because he made plain their blind, inhuman, and unspiritual religion, as did the saint. Enraged, they killed Christ, the source of life, and they did the same to the saint who bore life. The Lord surrendered his life to God and so did Stephen. The Lord forgave his killers and the saint did the same. This is the way of the Lord! Glorify him! And this is the way of the saint! Follow in his footsteps!

MESSAGE Christmas reveals, together with Christ's identity, the path his disciples should walk on, the path of martyrdom.

KEYWORDS disciples, forgiveness, martyrdom, religion, saints

Saturday after Christmas

2 TIMOTHY 3:1–9 In later days, the membership of the Church will become corrupted (by the spirit of this world). People full of base instincts and meanness, loving themselves, pleasure, and evil more than God, will fill the ranks and will parade the outward form of piety. However, they will not have an appreciation for piety's power, for its content. These people will take advantage of others who construe themselves as seekers of teaching. But neither the deceivers nor the deceived will attain knowledge of the truth. Nevertheless, these deceivers, the opponents of the truth, will not progress far; their evil will be revealed to believers.

MATTHEW 12:15–21 Upon healing many people, Jesus told them not to advertise his power. This was in fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah

(42:1–4) concerning God’s beloved Servant who, anointed with the Spirit, will work discretely—imparting justice, comforting the downtrodden, and giving hope to the Gentiles.

WISDOM Jesus’ identity and ministry remains the topic of the season stretching from Christmas to Theophany. The passage from Matthew again evokes a witness from the past, the messianic prophecy of Isaiah. As the prophet foresaw, God the Father acknowledged Jesus as his Anointed, which is the very meaning of his names, Christ and Messiah, appointing him as his “servant,” that is, minister or mediator of the New Covenant. Accordingly, Jesus Christ worked for the benefit of all who received his message, healing the ailments of people, guiding them, and giving them signs to strengthen their hope. As the prophet anticipated, he worked all these discretely, humbly, not seeking acknowledgment. But there was a downside to his discretion. Because he did not put his power on display, in other words because he did not openly proclaim his divine identity, many doubted him, as they have through the ages. The apostolic letter confirms this by another prophecy, namely, that with the passage of time many people will become unwilling to believe in Christ, though some might still claim Christian identity. Their unbelief will become transparent through their mindset, preaching, and misbehaviour. And it did. Wholly antithetical to the humility of Christ, who neither exploited his equality with God when he was in the divine form nor shied away from putting on the form of a servant (Philippians 2:6–7), they serve only their selfish interests. Whereas the Lord willingly became a servant of God for our salvation and ministered to us, the unbelievers among us grow arrogant, acquiring power and authority, seeking their own pleasures rather than the wellbeing of the flock. These deceivers stop preaching Jesus as Christ and God in order to make room for themselves, like Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor. Or they do not preach Jesus as Christ and God in order not to “offend” others. And they twist the minds of the ignorant to agree with their unbelief and sin. So it was from very early on. So it has been ever since. But the true believers know who these false teachers are, discerning behind the outward display of politeness, morality, and sophistication the self-seeking and self-serving

imposters. The time will come when the identity of Christ will be plainly revealed to all. Regardless, God's people continue confidently to pursue its journey into the kingdom.

MESSAGE The children of Christmas discern truth from untruth, faith from unbelief, virtue from the lack of it, not allowing themselves to be deceived by words of impious sophistication.

KEYWORDS deceivers, discernment, humility, identity, ministry

Sunday after Christmas

GALATIANS 1:11–19 Having to justify himself before his readers, Paul disclosed that his preaching did not draw on the knowledge of other apostles. It was based on Christ's direct revelation, which he received during his Arabian retreat. It is true that, out of zeal for Judaism, he once persecuted the Church. That said, when the Son of God was revealed to him, he resolved to preach to the Gentiles. It is to this mission that the grace called him from before his birth. After the retreat, he returned to Damascus and only then did he travel to Jerusalem. Once there, he spent fifteen days in conference with Cephas and James, the brother of the Lord (and the first bishop of the Christian community).

MATTHEW 2:13–23 After the departure of the magi, the angel told the holy family in a dream to seek refuge in Egypt. Thus the prophecy was fulfilled (Hosea 11:1) that God's Son was called from Egypt. Meanwhile, upon the order of the enraged king Herod, soldiers killed all the young boys of Bethlehem aged two and younger, hoping that one of them was the Messiah. This tragedy was foretold by Jeremiah (31:15). After the death of Herod, the angel appeared again to Joseph in a dream, instructing the holy family to return to the land of Israel. Fearing the successor of Herod on the throne of Judea, they sought refuge in Nazareth. Thus the

(anonymous) prophecy that (the Messiah) was to be called a Nazarene was fulfilled.

WISDOM The two readings address very different events, namely, the refuge of the holy family in Egypt and then Nazareth, prompted by angelic visions, and Paul's conversion prompted by divine revelation, followed by his Arabian retreat. But these narratives convey the same message: those who listen to God and serve his plans, whether he speaks directly or via messengers, will always be led on the path. Different events therefore tell the same story. As God worked to protect the holy family from the criminal intentions of Herod, so he also worked for the salvation of Paul, who wandered, misled by his religion. The correspondence between the two stories transpires however through a further shared aspect. Both cast light upon important reasons which blind people to God, preventing them from adhering to his will. Herod rejected God's plan because of his thirst for power. Power corrupts and so he succumbed to that vicious thirst. Consequently, to maintain his hold on power he committed unspeakable atrocities. In turn, it was Paul's religious habits that blinded him to God's plan before his conversion. Zealously committed to rules and prescriptions, he thought that his opposition to the Gospel was justified. Power and religion are equally blinding. Interestingly, in sharing this view, the two narratives are consistent with the message of the pre-Christmas season, which points to the factors preventing people from obeying God's will and from attaining divine fellowship. Such factors are greed, hunger for power, materialism, and blind religiosity. The lesson is clear: believers must walk divinely, seeking purification from all kinds of greed, as well as liberation from false religion. There is no other way to attain fellowship with God. Through this lens, Christmas is a festival meant to decipher our experience in its negative and positive aspects, in the light of Christ's advent.

MESSAGE Believers must do away with the factors which blind them to God's will and to their own identity.

KEYWORDS blindness, greed, liberation, power, religion

Christ's Circumcision: Celebrating the Name of the Lord

1 January

COLOSSIANS 2:8–12 The apostle warns the believers not to allow human customs to deceive them or to revert to representing things, even Christ, according to the natural elements of the cosmos. The fullness of divinity dwells in Christ bodily and therefore within him—the head of all sovereignty and power—all believers attain fullness. Being (recapitulated) in Christ, believers receive circumcision together with him and are freed from their passions. Being (mystically) buried with him in his baptism, they are resurrected together with him through faith and the vivifying energy of God.

LUKE 2:20–21,40–52 On the eighth day, the newborn was circumcised according to the law and named Jesus, the name the angel revealed beforehand. And the child kept growing, God being with him. His parents would go every year on pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover. And so they did when Jesus was twelve years of age. Once the festival had ended and his parents had left, they assumed that the boy was in the company of his relatives and thus only began to worry when they found out that he was missing. Looking for him the entire day and not finding him, they decided to return to Jerusalem, where they found him three days later. Jesus was in the temple, sitting in the midst of the scholars who were amazed by the depth of his knowledge and wisdom. His mother scolded him for causing such turmoil, but he serenely answered that he was where he was supposed to be, in his Father's house. His parents did not understand his answer, yet his mother treasured his words. Jesus, in turn, continued to grow up physically and in wisdom, pleasing both God and the people.

WISDOM In tune with the message of Saturday after Christmas, the readings for this festival draw our attention to the identity of Christ. We should not fail to discern and acknowledge who he is. To human eyes, because of the nature of his body and the ritual of circumcision to which he was subjected, Jesus Christ appeared to be merely a man, an

observant of religious traditions. In worldly terms, therefore, the fact that Jesus was born in human fashion and circumcised according to the Mosaic law signified that he was no more than what the eyes could see. Consequently, those who form their opinion based on nature, appearances, and cultural idiosyncrasies miss the mark about his identity. But there are things that we Christians who no longer think according to nature, appearances, and cultural customs are unable to reconcile with the notion of a mere man. We know that Christ, in whom we participate, in whom we live, move, and have our being, procured for us the victory against the darkness within, against our evil passions, and that we are regenerated in him. We have died and been resurrected with him. We have been brought to the fullness of being. This would be impossible if he were merely a man. This is what the Jerusalem scholars discovered in learned conversation with him as a child. This is what Saint Basil (d. 379), whose memory we keep today, later realised. As the hymns of the day maintain, Basil, “the hierarch and the luminary, the divine initiate of Christ” (*kontakion*), “expressed his views in a God-befitting manner” and thus “expounded on the nature of things” (*apolytikion* of the saint). He discerned and acknowledged that Christ is “the merciful Lord who, being in essence God, without change put on the human form” (*apolytikion* of the festival). So do all believers confess with him that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, “the Lord who saves,” in whom we attain fulfilment. Therefore, Christ’s identity transpires through his very name, revealing the object of our hope. Glorify him!

MESSAGE The name of Jesus, “the Lord who saves,” reveals his divine identity to all those who, with purified minds and hearts, seek fulfilment through him.

KEYWORDS acknowledgment, appearances, fulfilment, opinion, revelation

The Forefeast of Theophany

2 January

HEBREWS 5:4–10 God, who gives birth to the Son in the perpetuity of “now,” called Christ to the priesthood, appointing him eternal high priest of our salvation. Predisposed thus from before the ages, Jesus, the Son incarnate, showed profound humility by obeying God’s will. Working towards our sanctification, he offered prayers, intercessions, and tears. Perfected in all regards through obedience, suffering, and death, our eternal high priest vanquished death, providing sanctification for all.

JOHN 3:1–15 One night, Nicodemus, a pharisee and ruler of Israel, came to see Jesus and expressed his conviction that, given the many powerful signs Jesus had performed, he was a teacher sent by God. Jesus replied that no one can see God’s kingdom without being born from above. Since Nicodemus was startled by this answer, Jesus added that no one can enter God’s kingdom without being born of water and the Spirit. He further pointed out that, since the flesh and the Spirit are so different, one should become spiritual in order to inherit the spiritual kingdom. To that end, one must be spiritually reborn and become a child of freedom, unconditioned by the flesh. The Spirit blows freely, unpredictably, like the wind. Nicodemus was even more puzzled upon hearing this. And so the Lord disclosed to him that no human ascent is possible without the descent of the Son of Man who is in heaven. The Son of Man will be lifted up (on the cross) as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, providing eternal life to all who believe in him.

WISDOM The introductory readings of the festival refer to Christ’s ministry as stemming from his identity. The apostolic letter suggests that his ministry originates in the eternal relation between the Son and the Father. More specifically, the eternal birth of the Son, which establishes his identity in relation to the Father, encapsulates his will to obey the Father. His name and identity of Son point to this personal trait. Thus, eternally, the Son determines his own existence in essential relation with the Father, and also, willingly, his priestly ministry, by undertaking the

economy of our salvation. Accordingly, he wishes to obey the Father and to serve the Father's plan for the creation. All this points to the fact that the Father called the Son to become the high priest of our salvation and sanctification on account of his obedient will. In turn, the Son, who through the incarnation became Jesus the Anointed (Christ, the Messiah), fulfilled the divine intention to sanctify humankind and the creation by his sacerdotal ministry. He, the Servant of God foretold by the prophets (Isaiah 53), lived and worked among us as a man of suffering, out of love for the world. This is how he accomplished his priesthood, not by demanding and expecting, but by serving, praying, interceding—with tears and eventually through his death. All this is paradoxical, for who can make sense of the glorious God living a humble life, subject to pain and death? Nevertheless, his being the lamb slaughtered from the foundation of the world (John 1:29; Revelation 13:8), this is to what Christ's priesthood amounted from before all ages. And the Lord embraced this task wholeheartedly (Matthew 26:39,42). It is due to his obedient ministry that Jesus did more than vanquish death: he became the foremost source of life and sanctification for believers, to the extent that all who regenerate in him through baptism in water and the Spirit experience his life, death, and glorification (Romans 6:3–4). Together with Nicodemus, we may be puzzled by the prospect of a spiritual rebirth which lifts us above the limitations of nature. But as baptism means participating in Christ, since Christ renewed the natures by moving down from above and from death to life, all those who believe in him become free from the limitations of nature. Together with nature, all limitations—cultural, social, religious—cease from hindering those renewed in the likeness of Christ through a new birth in water and the Spirit. This is the ministry of Christ. This, also, is the ministry of his Church, represented by Saint Sylvester of Rome (d. 335), whose memory we keep today. The priesthood of the Church has the same purpose as Christ's own priesthood.

MESSAGE Jesus Christ, Son of God and high priest of our salvation, works ever in obedience to the Father for the sanctification of his people, so that we all have a share in his life.

KEYWORDS obedience, priesthood, rebirth, salvation, sanctification

Saturday before Theophany

1 TIMOTHY 3:13–4:5 His visit to Timothy having being delayed, Paul sent him some advice. What prompted him to write was the emergence of certain teachers of false piety who forbade marriage and imposed restrictions on food. Timothy is asked to remember that all the things God created are good, particularly when people receive them with prayer, blessing, and thanksgiving. Above all, Timothy must learn how to conduct himself within the household of God or rather the assembly of the living God that preserves the truth. The truth shared by faith regards the mystery of Christ—God manifested through the flesh and confirmed by the Spirit, seen by angels, preached to the nations, believed in by the world, and finally ascended in glory.

MATTHEW 3:1–11 John the Baptist dwelled in the wilderness of Judea. As prophet Isaiah (40:3) foretold, he prepared the crowds who visited him for the advent of the Lord and his kingdom, calling them to change their mind accordingly. John lived a very austere and secluded life, but he did not abandon his prophetic task. He baptised in the Jordan those who came to listen to him. He warned the pharisees and the sadducees to renounce their hypocrisy, inviting them to change their lives too. They had to stop boasting about being children of Abraham. In turn, to avoid condemnation, they had to prove themselves through producing the fruits of virtue. Above all, John proclaimed to those present that his baptism prepared them for the true baptism, with Spirit and fire, administered by the one who, full of power, would arrive after him.

WISDOM The identity of Christ continues to be the topic of the Theophany season, which in ancient times overlapped with Christmas. Within the liturgical framework, the two festivals are nevertheless linked, as signified by the abolition of fasting between them. We should therefore speak of one season, of Christmas and Theophany, entirely focused upon the identity of Christ and the new life of his believers. In tune with Saturday after Christmas and the celebration of Christ's name on 1 January, this Saturday once again exhorts us to be vigilant about the rise of false

teachings regarding Christ and the Christian way of life. Although the two prescribed passages, particularly the apostolic letter which addresses this matter in detail, do not explicitly connect mistaking the Lord's identity and leading a wrong way of life, the connection is transparent. Consequently, believers should be clear about who Christ is—one full of power whose arrival the prophets, including John, foretold, very God incarnate and thus confirmed by the Spirit, the glorious Lord who brings humankind to regeneration through Spirit and fire. Believers should live accordingly, as people renewed through faith, by acknowledging Christ and by embracing their new identity gained through him. They must live in the light of the incarnation, embodying their faith in a way of life that embraces existence in its entirety, without leaving out—through hypocritical abstinence—what pertains to life as a gift from above. Only this holistic embodiment of the faith leads to people's transformation and to the glorification of God's creation.

MESSAGE God's people are not asked to observe religious prescriptions, their vocation being to embrace and to transform the whole of life in the light of Christ's life.

KEYWORDS abstinence, glorification, hypocrisy, life, transformation

Sunday before Theophany

2 TIMOTHY 4:5–8 Continuing to exhort Timothy to maintain sobriety, fortitude in suffering, and dedication to ministry, Paul announced his own imprisonment. He was at peace, however, knowing that he had proven his commitment to the Christian path. He was convinced that Christ, the just judge, would reward him with the crown of righteousness—as he does to all who love his (bodily) revelation to the world.

MARK 1:1–8 The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begins with the ministry of John the Baptist. The latter, as foretold by Isaiah (40:3,

preceded by Malachi 3:1), was the messenger of God whose task was to prepare God's people for the arrival of the Lord. John lived in the wilderness where he led a very austere life. He baptised all who changed their lives, for the forgiveness of their sins. But his ministry culminated in the acknowledgment that his work merely paved the way for one more powerful than him, who baptised people in the Holy Spirit. This other John was not even worthy to touch.

WISDOM The link between Christmas and Theophany entails both consistency and progression. The two festivals cohere in that they both refer to a variety of witnesses of God's manifestation in the world. The ancestors, the prophets, the holy family, the angels, the shepherds, and the magi, all gave witness to the mystery of Christ's birth. The prophets, John the Baptist, the martyrs, and the apostles confessed Christ as God's Son. There is also a continuous crescendo in matters of Christ's endorsement. Specifically, whereas at Christmas the voice of the Father was inaudible, at Theophany, in John's presence, God acknowledged Jesus Christ as Son, a testimony which the Spirit confirmed by alighting upon him. God's people must trust these witnesses and testify about the true identity of the Lord. If they do so, they are, like Saint Paul, genuine lovers of God's manifestation in the world. This they must do not merely in words, but more so by their way of life. The prophets, including the last of them, Saint John the Baptist, the apostles, the martyrs, and the saints of all times and places, changed their lives in the light of the good news of the kingdom. They did not proclaim an ideological truth. By the way they lived, they proclaimed the fundamental truth of our existence as Christians: God was revealed to us in Jesus Christ (John 1:14,18), renewing us in the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49; Acts 2:1-4). The renewal made available to all who believe in Christ as God incarnate is a reward for our hope. Nevertheless, together with Saint Paul, we are called to progress from glory to glory (2 Corinthians 3:18). We must therefore pursue the Christian journey, keeping the faith, fighting the good fight, and finishing the race.

MESSAGE Faith in the incarnation and manifestation of God among us conditions our renewal and glorification.

KEYWORDS faith, incarnation, manifestation, renewal, way of life

The Eve of Theophany

5 January

1 CORINTHIANS 9:19–27 According to the simile of athletic contests, Christians should run in such a way, that is, live in such a way, so as to win the imperishable crown (of divine glory). Paul himself adopted an ascetic lifestyle in order to train for the great race of changing his life, thus becoming able to preach to others. That said, he accepted the uncomfortable position of one who, albeit free from the Mosaic law, behaved as though under the law. This he did to conquer for the Gospel and the faith those still observing the law. For the same reason, though not free from the law of God in Christ, he lived as if without the law in order to preach the Gospel to those who lived without the law. For the sake of the Gospel he behaved as though weak in the faith, making himself all things to all people, for the salvation of whoever desired it, especially the weak.

LUKE 3:1–18 As prophet Isaiah foretold (40:3–5), the word of God spoke to John in the wilderness, sending him to announce the imminent arrival of the Lord and the need for all to change their lives and receive forgiveness of sins through baptism. Large crowds gathered along the River Jordan to listen to him and be baptised. John, however, admonished them to change their ways and do good; there was no way of escaping God's judgment without producing the good fruits of virtue. Since representatives of various social categories enquired about what they were to do in order to change, John provided more specific advice. The affluent were told to share with those in need any surplus clothing and food. The tax-collectors heard him teaching them to stop taking from people

more than was due. The soldiers, in turn, were advised to be content with their wages and to not put pressure on people to increase their income. Soon, the crowds began to wonder whether John was not the expected Messiah. But he hastened to clarify that he was not. His baptism in water merely represented an anticipation of the true baptism, with Spirit and fire, which was to be administered by one who would arrive after him and be more powerful than him. This other baptiser was also the judge who would separate the wheat from the chaff. John disclosed these and other matters to the people by way of good news.

WISDOM God's people receive from the greatest prophet, Saint John, and from the greatest apostle, Saint Paul, the same teaching. Specifically, to be true Christians people must convert or change their way of thinking and living by adhering to the principles of Christ's Gospel. The standards of the Gospel are the common denominator for all believers who otherwise belong to various social categories and have different cultural backgrounds. Regardless of who they are, their skills, and careers, believers must adhere to the same principle of renewal of habits in order to live by the Spirit, virtuously and charitably. Renewal requires grace from above and a change of priorities, but also personal asceticism, the praxis of moderation, and willingness to adjust oneself to the sensitivities of others. In so doing, through our forbearance, in the footsteps of Saint Paul, many may learn the true manner of the Christian way of life (Matthew 5:16) and so receive the crowns of glory.

MESSAGE Conversion leads to virtue and compassion, but not without sustained personal renewal for the sake of the Gospel and out of care for others.

KEYWORDS asceticism, change, conversion, priorities, virtue

Theophany: The Lord's Manifestation

6 January

TITUS 2:11–14; 3:4–7 Out of love, goodness, and mercy, God formed a new people through Jesus Christ our Saviour, who regenerated us through baptismal washing and renewed us in the Holy Spirit. We have therefore become inheritors of the eternal life through hope. But the manifestation in the world and the sacrifice of the great God and Saviour Jesus Christ—by whom the grace of salvation was bestowed upon God's people—do not exclude our effort. Therefore, even though we renew through grace and hope, we must renounce irreligion and worldly passions, living by the teaching of God, eager to achieve uprightness, sobriety, and good deeds.

MATTHEW 3:13–17 Jesus travelled from Galilee to the Jordan in order to receive baptism from John. But, recognising who he was, John refused to baptise the Lord and instead asked to be baptised by him. Jesus persuaded him to perform the baptism of repentance, which John humbly acquiesced to do. When Jesus came out of the water, John saw the heavens open and God's Spirit descending upon Christ. A voice from heaven proclaimed that this was God's beloved Son.

WISDOM As the Lord embraced our humble condition through the incarnation, so did he continue to walk among his people in utter humility. At the River Jordan, the Lord of glory, true God from true God, creator and saviour of the universe, the Messiah, pure and innocent, the source of all sanctification, took another humble step by asking for the baptism of repentance. John, knowing who Jesus was, saw no reason to grant it. But the Lord had his reasons for undertaking the baptism of repentance, beyond giving expression to his kenosis or humility. He served a lesson. This lesson has to do with his preferred epithet, Son of Man or Son of Adam. God embraced our humility to show us how to retrieve wholeness and attain glorification. In paradise, Adam was glorified for his virtuous life (Genesis 2:7). The content of glorification, we learnt through the readings for Christmas, is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and, in

Christ, the gift of divine adoption. Overconfident, Adam lost the Spirit of adoption when he stopped praying in his heart, “Abba! Father!” This was when he and his consort, Eve, adopted a new manner of thinking and living, not according to God—in fact deprived of God and against God. Through arrogance, Adam lost the Spirit who glorified him. Humankind followed in his footsteps, repeating his mistake time and again in various forms (Genesis 6:3,11–12). Humankind therefore had to learn the way back to divine adoption, which required a change of mind and life conditioned by humility. To that end, Christ, the Lord of glory, became God’s Servant and Adam’s Son and, by putting on the garb of humility, taught that what makes ascension possible is a prior descent (Philippians 2:6–11). Humility leads to glorification. He descended to us in order to show us where we were, lost in the river of transience, of the ephemeral, of sin, and of death. Contemplating his humility, we too must dive into our own abysses in order to realise our humble condition and so begin to redress our lives. All is now possible. The kingdom is at hand (Matthew 4:17). The waters of regeneration wash us clean and transform us into vessels worthy of the Spirit. Back on track, we must nevertheless walk as the Lord taught us, adhering to virtue, sobriety, and goodness. These will restore to us, in his grace, the paradisaal state, the divine adoption, glory ineffable. And should we walk with the Lord, the whole creation—signified by the waters of the river—will be sanctified with us, vivified, and glorified (Romans 8:18–23).

MESSAGE The fact of being regenerated through grace and faith cannot suffice; humbling ourselves, as the Lord teaches, we must rework our lives through practicing a Christ-like way of life.

KEYWORDS adoption, arrogance, humility, regeneration, virtue

Gathering for Saint John the Baptist

7 January

ACTS 19:1–8 While in Ephesus, Paul found twelve disciples. He asked them whether they had received the Holy Spirit after their baptism. The disciples were startled and confessed utter ignorance about the Holy Spirit. Upon enquiring, Paul realised that they had only received John's baptism of repentance, not Christian baptism. He reminded them that John announced the arrival of Jesus and that he urged people to believe in him. Edified by his explanation, the disciples asked to be baptised in the name of Jesus, which Paul granted. When the apostle laid his hands on their heads, the Holy Spirit descended upon them, imparting to them charismata such as speaking in tongues and prophecy. For the next three months, Paul preached in the local synagogue about the kingdom of God.

JOHN 1:29–34 John disclosed to his listeners how he was able to recognise Jesus as Son of God and as the one who was to bring baptism with the Holy Spirit. Thus, the one who sent him to baptise with water told him that soon he would meet someone upon whom the Spirit would alight and who would baptise with the Spirit. This is how he identified Jesus when he witnessed the Spirit's descent upon him at Jordan. It is for this reason that every time he saw Jesus passing he directed the onlookers to him, saying, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

WISDOM Continuity and difference. This is how, implicitly, Saint John the Baptist characterised the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments. His understanding hides in plain sight within his repeated reference to the two baptisms—his own, with water, and Christ's, with water, the Spirit, and fire (Luke 3:16). Let me explain. John's baptism with water recapitulated the essence of the Old Testament. The latter, in turn, established a ritualised relationship between God's people and creation, including the waters. Water was the best metaphor for the created nature, signifying its inconsistency and transience. Ritually used, water washed and cleansed in a physical sense as well as figuratively in

a spiritual sense. The ritual use of water therefore denoted the perception of, and the approach to, created nature in the Mosaic experience of God's people. While he baptised in water—using water in a ritualised manner—John captured the essence of the Old Testament. That said, his baptism bore richer connotations. It was a way of renewing the Covenant through people changing through adherence to the divine principles. Accordingly, he exhorted the recipients to purify and renew their lives through the practice of virtue. Associated with a change of life, water baptism confirmed and clarified the purpose of the Old Testament. Foremost, as John maintained, water baptism was a form of preparation for the arrival of Christ, the Messiah. Christ's baptism preserves all of these aspects, but it also transforms them. For instance, the Creed of Constantinople states that we are baptised (lit. "immersed in water") for the forgiveness of sins. This means that people become Christians by way of the same created element of water ritualised in the form of baptism. John's baptism, as we know, was for the forgiveness of sins too. This denotes continuity between the two baptisms and the Testaments they illustrate. But it is at this very juncture that the discontinuity emerges. In announcing the Messiah and by acknowledging Jesus as Son and Lamb of God anointed from above by the Spirit, John pointed beyond mere ritualisation. The Messiah, the Anointed of God upon whom the Holy Spirit alighted, baptised not only with water; he imparted the same Holy Spirit who descended upon him at Jordan (Luke 24:49). By communicating the Spirit, therefore, Christ's baptism was not a mere repetition of John's Old Testament baptism; it was far superior in regard to content and outcomes. This difference is obvious in the Acts narrative, where, once converted to the Christian faith, the disciples of John received various charismata. In short, when the prophet described Christ's baptism with water and the Spirit, he pointed to the continuity and the difference between the Testaments and their respective baptisms. Both baptisms use water, but only one communicates the Spirit. Gathering to remember Saint John, and gathering together around him to celebrate Theophany, Jesus' divine manifestation, we acknowledge the complexity of the Christian experience. On the one hand, our Old Testament roots and the importance of our ritualised form of representing and engaging

the creation. On the other hand, our New Testament status as God's people, founded beyond the nature of creation upon Christ's Holy Spirit, who liberates us from the limitations of nature.

MESSAGE The experience of God's new people, Christians, continues that of the old Israel, but also differs from it in that it is endowed with the Holy Spirit.

KEYWORDS baptism, fire, liberation, Spirit, water

Saturday after Theophany

EPHESIANS 6:10–17 The soldier of Christ should be prepared for a holy war. But the weapons are spiritual, that is, strength in the Lord, truth, righteousness, and faith. The same goes for the war itself, waged through the Gospel of peace in the Spirit and the Word of God, aiming at salvation, not destruction. The spiritual nature of the war corresponds to the enemy who is not flesh and blood—the devil's cohorts that fly in the air around the world.

MATTHEW 4:1–11 After his baptism, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness in order to be tempted. Fasting forty days and nights, Jesus was very hungry. Then the devil approached him, suggesting that since he was the Son of God he could transform some nearby rocks into loaves of bread to appease his hunger. But the Lord rejected the temptation by pointing out that living is not only a matter of eating; it is also a matter of abiding by the word of God. Then the devil led him onto the roof of the temple, asking him to jump because God would surely send his angels to save him. But Jesus replied that one should not put God to the test. Finally, the devil led Jesus up to a high mountain and, showing him the kingdoms of the earth, promised to make him their ruler if Jesus worshiped him. But the Lord cast him away saying that worship was due to God. At that, the devil left and the angels came to serve Jesus.

WISDOM The Lord's humility, or kenosis, went beyond undertaking the baptism of repentance. It took the puzzling form of submitting to a triple test (Hebrews 2:18), to three temptations not unlike those we mere mortals experience in the various circumstances of life. One may indeed wonder as to his reason for doing so. Why would the Son of God, true God and creator of the universe, go through such a test? But one should not forget that, in his humility, Christ called himself Son of Man or Son of Adam. This was not only on account of the incarnation, by which he became the offspring of Adam (Luke 3:23–38) and one of us (Hebrews 2:11–12). It was primarily because of his mission, namely, to heal Adam and his fallen offspring. To that end he disclosed to us the way of salvation through sermons and parables, but more so through his personal example. And so the Son of God become Son of Man, an example for us, having experienced all that we experience from birth to death—the temptations, the joys, and the pains of this life. But instead of surrendering to the necessities of human nature, temptations, and death, he walked among us sinlessly, gloriously, victoriously. He did not achieve the virtues because of his immutability. He won his victories by adopting an ascetic lifestyle. It is indeed due to his ascetic way of life that he prevailed against the necessities of nature, against the more or less ridiculous tests of the devil, and against the power of death. His way of life has become paradigmatic for us, his people, and it is for this reason that Saint Paul depicts us in this letter as warriors of light, equipped with the armour and the weapons of a spiritual—or ascetic—way of life. Armed thus, we will prevail with Christ's grace against the same enemy who tempted him in the desert.

MESSAGE Believers celebrate the Theophany of the Lord not only in doxologies, but also, or more so, by drawing from his experience the principles and the means of replicating his victories in their own lives.

KEYWORDS asceticism, life, necessity, temptation, victory

Sunday after Theophany

EPHESIANS 4:7–13 Christ who descended from heaven and returned there, filling all things by his presence, bestowed gifts upon God’s people. These gifts correspond to the various responsibilities existing within his Church, such as apostleship, preaching, evangelism, and pastoral care. But these charismata are given so that everyone may work for the betterment of all, for the strengthening of the Church, and for the progress of all in faith and the knowledge of Christ. The end result of this work is that all who mature in Christ reach perfection.

MATTHEW 4:12–17 After Herod imprisoned John the Baptist, Jesus relocated to another town of Galilee, Capernaum, where he began to preach the kingdom of heaven and to call on all to change their mind accordingly. This move from Nazareth to Capernaum evoked the prophecy of Isaiah (9:1–2) who had foretold that the light (of Christ) will shine upon the people who dwelled in darkness, in the shadow of death.

WISDOM After the Lord’s manifestation as God (wherefore the name of the festival, Theophany, “divine manifestation”) at Jordan, he went to Galilee to preach the good news that the kingdom of heaven is near and that people must harmonise their way of thinking accordingly. The verb usually rendered as “repent,” μετανοεῖτε, is an imperative which means “change your mind” or “think differently.” The Christian change of mind does not entail only repentance for one’s sins; repentance is but one outcome of the change of mind. In turn, the Christian change of mind coincides with the revolution of the New Testament, no longer based on —unless one considers “love one another the way I have loved you” (John 13:34–35) a commandment. The Christian change of mind means personal conversion to a higher principle: one listens to the Lord and appropriates the divine wisdom, which in turn becomes an inner rule, a divine way of thinking that no longer requires external and explicit. As the Lord says (Luke 17:21), the kingdom of God is within those who believe. The Gospel is therefore the light that shines in the darkness of our subconscious, freeing us from the fear of death (Hebrews 2:15) by

the evidence of Christ's revelation of/as life. For God's people to attain maturity of conversion, the true change of mind and life, Christ works in the Church by imparting charismata and responsibilities to its members. Without instituting a pyramid of power, his gifts, from ordained clergy to many other forms of ministry, are the ecclesial translation of the light shining to the nations. The charismata are the means by which the spiritually advanced give a hand to those at the beginning of the journey. The charismata ensure that the entire Church is elevated to mature faith, to awareness, wisdom, and aptitude for ministry. This is the goal of the good news: in Christ's light and being charismatically guided, we transcend spiritual infancy. The Gospel frees us from fear and from all kinds of slavery so that we can stand mature in the presence of our Lord, bringing the light of Christ to others and ministering to the world overcome by "the shadow of death." Our "royal priesthood" as God's new people ministering to those in darkness (1 Peter 2:9) finds confirmation in the "sending" of the liturgy: "Let us go forth in peace!" This exhortation is not the end of the liturgy; it refers to our mission as God's people in the world (Matthew 28:19–20; Mark 16:15).

MESSAGE As the Lord ministered to us in the flesh, bringing light and hope to those who were lost, so we, his disciples, undertaking conversion and growing mature, must bring the same message of light and hope to the world.

KEYWORDS change, conversion, hope, light, ministry

The Presentation of the Lord

2 February

HEBREWS 7:7–17 The superior blesses the inferior, not the other way around. Therefore, since he received Melchizedek's blessing, manifestly Abraham was his inferior. But within Abraham was present and recapitulated his entire lineage, Israel, including Aaron the first high priest and

the priestly tribe of Levi. And so, given the link between the patriarch and his bodily descendants, when Melchizedek blessed Abraham, he blessed his lineage in its entirety, including the Levite priesthood and all that pertained to the Covenant, laws and prescriptions alike. Now, God sent to his people another priest in the order of Melchizedek, not from Levi's family, but from Judah, a tribe that had no priestly attributions according to the Old Covenant. This new Melchizedek-like priest was appointed not because of ancestry, but because he possessed the power of an indestructible, immortal, and eternal life. The change of priesthood signified a change of law—the sign of a New Covenant.

LUKE 2:22–40 The parents of Jesus brought him to Jerusalem in obedience to the Mosaic law, to present or dedicate him to God on the fortieth day from birth. This is because, according to the law, each male firstborn of a family, as Jesus was, performed a sacerdotal function within the household (though not in the sense of Levite priesthood). At the temple the holy family was met by Symeon, a devout elder whom the Holy Spirit prompted to be present on that day. Symeon knew from the Spirit that he would not die before seeing the Anointed of the Lord. Thus, when the Spirit sent him to the temple, he perceived who Jesus was and, holding the infant in his arms, thanked God for granting him to witness the arrival of the saviour. Moved by the importance of the event, Symeon foresaw the ensuing drama of the Messiah, the pain of his mother, and the judgment on Israel—for many were to rise and fall on account of him. The devout elder Anna was also at the temple. She was a prophetess who recognised the Lord and proclaimed him to all who sought salvation. After performing the ritual of dedication, the holy family returned to Nazareth.

WISDOM Today we keep the last festival related to the events of the Lord's birth and manifestation. It appears that the Byzantine name of the festival, *ὑπαπαντή*, means "visitation," "revelation," or "manifestation" (the etymology is not entirely certain). Thus, the purpose of the festival is to point once again to the identity of Jesus as Messiah, Christ, Anointed, but also Lord and God. The festival is also known as presentation or

dedication, from *παραστῆσαι*, a verb in the Gospel reading, which refers to the holy parents who brought Jesus to the temple in order to present or dedicate him to God as their firstborn. The festival is furthermore known as meeting or encounter, given that the two devout elders met Jesus at the temple. Moved by the Holy Spirit, they recognised him as the Anointed saviour of Israel and the light who brings divine revelation to all nations. The apostolic letter confirms the above implicitly by pointing to Christ as possessed of the eternal life. Only God lives eternally. In addition, the letter highlights that the bodily arrival of God marks the inauguration of a new priesthood and, with it, a New Covenant between the Lord and God's people. And since the new priesthood is not of the Levite kind, i.e. religious, the New Covenant is not a religion; it is a new way of life. The message is complex. Behind the humble look of the newborn child, God's people must recognise the Lord God himself who deemed it necessary to enlighten us and to save our lives by becoming one of us. Our life builds upon the truth that the firstborn of God has become the firstborn of Mary. Salvation begins by our recognising who he is. Believing is seeing. Seeing is living—in the presence of the Lord, our life. Meet the Lord, new Israel! See the Lord! Love the Lord, new Israel, so that you have life in his name (John 20:31), not another religion!

MESSAGE By recognising Jesus as God and Christ, also as a non-religious high priest, believers implicitly confess that what they received is the grace of life, the fulness of life, not a new religion.

KEYWORDS life, priesthood, religion, revelation, salvation

The Conception of the Lord, or (popularly) Annunciation 25 March

HEBREWS 2:11–18 To perform his duties as our high priest and in order to help us, living in the fear of death and subject to temptation, the Lord became one of us. (Through the incarnation) he partook of the same

nature, sharing in our flesh and blood, being like us in all respects. As such, he experienced temptation and suffered death. Strengthened by these experiences, as a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, he helps the descendants of Abraham. These are the believers who experience temptation and live the fear of death. (As a result of his incarnation and ministry,) we are all of one source (and so one holy family), sanctifier and sanctified together.

LUKE 1:24–38 Six months after the elderly wife of priest Zacharias, Elisabeth, discovered that she was pregnant, in spite of being barren, God sent the angel Gabriel to a virgin, Mary, who was betrothed to Joseph. The latter was of royal blood and both lived in the Galilean town of Nazareth. The angel saluted her with great reverence, calling her full of grace and disclosing that the Lord was with her. She wondered at this salutation. The angel further announced to her that she was to conceive and give birth to Jesus. Her future child, heir to the throne of David, is the Son of the Most High, the Son of God, whose reign will endure for ever. While she was still processing the overwhelming news, the angel explained to Mary that the conception was to take place under the Holy Spirit by the Power of the Most High. Nothing indeed is impossible for God, as proved by the amazing pregnancy of her relative Elisabeth. Upon hearing all this, Mary surrendered to God's will and the angel left.

WISDOM Today we celebrate the supernatural conception of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ—the incarnation of the Son of God in the presence of the Holy Spirit—from the best humankind could put forward, a royal girl of pure heart. The story is well known, but widely misunderstood. Let me explain. In popular belief this is a festival of the Virgin Lady, supposedly meant to emphasise the holiness of her life. And it does that on a certain level. Accordingly, all believers must understand that holiness can be achieved at an early age, even by one entirely like us, in this case a girl who attained it without having to shuffle off this mortal coil. All should therefore strive to achieve holiness in their lives, now rather than later. All must realise also that holiness does not efface that which makes one human—the capacity to wonder and reason, to

ponder and decide. Indeed, the Virgin displayed an entire spectrum of aptitudes and attitudes during her encounter with the angel, culminating in her submission to God's will. It is in this way that she earned the glory of becoming the tabernacle and the chalice of the incarnation. That said, this festival is primarily about salvation. As its main hymn has it, today we focus on the beginning and the recapitulation (both nuances being entailed by the Greek word κεφάλαιον—"head") of our salvation. And although the Virgin Lady cooperated with the Son/Power of God and with the Holy Spirit towards facilitating our salvation, the festival focuses on Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, the "Lord-who-saves" and "God-with-us." The significance of this moment is crucial for the destiny of God's people. It was only through his incarnation that the Lord could live our life and show us the way to overcome sinfulness by experiencing our very temptations (Matthew 4:1–11; 16:1; 26:36–46). As a result of his incarnation and sinless life, and by walking in his footsteps, we are his renewed and transformed sisters and brothers, sharers in the divine life. Salvation amounts, therefore, to our adoption as children of God, by which we become victorious together with the Lord, one family, God's royal nation. Given her holy life, the Virgin was the first to join this glorious family.

MESSAGE Through his incarnation and life among us, the Lord opened for all the path of salvation on which first walked the Virgin Lady who served as the chalice of his incarnation.

KEYWORDS adoption, holiness, incarnation, temptations, victory

Saturday of Lazarus A day before Palm Sunday

HEBREWS 12:28–29; 13:1–8 A summary of the good news. Gratitude and doxology should fill the hearts of believers, for they inherit a stable kingdom. Above all, they must observe the law of love by being hospitable

and compassionate towards strangers, those in prison (for their faith in Christ), and those who are mistreated. They must cherish marriage and maintain fidelity. Trusting in divine providence, they should avoid becoming slaves to avarice and be confident that the Lord will ever be their helper. Remembering their spiritual leaders (worthy of that name) and their glorious end (as martyrs and true saints), they must learn from their example how to live. (They must do all this knowing that) “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever” (and that therefore what the Lord expected from the leaders he expects from all believers, and also that what the leaders achieved in the grace of the Lord all believers can achieve).

JOHN 11:1–45 (While Jesus and his disciples were far from Bethany,) Lazarus, brother to Martha and Mary, fell very sick. The two sisters sent for the Lord, but he stayed where he was for two more days, after which he told his disciples of their friend’s illness and death—Lazarus had died in the meantime. Because the disciples were startled at the news that Jesus wished to return to Judea, where the mob had sought to kill him, he replied, quite enigmatically, that people should travel as long as there is light. Then he spoke to them metaphorically, referring to death as sleep, and since the disciples did not understand he told them plainly that Lazarus had died. Upon seeing Jesus’ determination to go, the disciples took courage and followed him, although they were aware of the danger. They arrived at Bethany four days after Lazarus had been buried, where Martha met him. The latter expressed regret that he had not been there earlier to heal her brother. When Jesus announced to her that Lazarus would live again, she confessed her faith in the resurrection of the dead. The Lord interjected that he is the resurrection and the life (of all), and so believers will never truly die (namely, despite physical death, they will remain alive through fellowship with him). Full of faith, Martha went to call Mary, who ran to the Lord, followed by many mourners. Together they went to the tomb and Jesus was deeply moved by their pain. The tomb was covered by a stone and, upon the Lord’s urging, people pushed the stone away. Jesus acknowledged the Father

and then he called on Lazarus, who came out of the tomb, to the utter surprise of all present, who now believed in him.

WISDOM Anticipating the events of his own death and resurrection, Christ reassured his disciples by bringing back to life his friend Lazarus. The difference between the two events is obvious: whereas Christ rose by his own power, Lazarus depended on his Lord. Today, the common message of the two readings is more important than ever: all who believe in Christ become partakers of a new life and should thus live accordingly. They transcend death regardless of their biological condition. Indeed, they might be physically dead, yet they are in the presence of the Lord, or they might be physically alive, yet without being separated from him. But the Christian experience is not unidirectional. It does not consist only in the divine activity or the grace God bestows on believers. The Christian life is resurrectional, entailing a continuous striving to live as renewed people, walking in the footsteps of Christ. The apostolic passage details the fundamentals of the renewed life, showing what Christians must undertake in order to be worthy of their name, just as their spiritual leaders did: the practice of gratitude, compassion, pure life, and trusting in the Lord. They must walk as long as there is light, living as children of light and children of the day (Ephesians 5:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:5). They become Lazarus, whose name means “God has helped,” by living as though already resurrected.

MESSAGE Whether dead or alive, believers belong to the Lord. But as long as they live they must behave as though resurrected, renewed, reborn.

KEYWORDS compassion, faith, gratitude, hope, resurrection

Palm Sunday

A week before Easter

PHILIPPIANS 4:4–9 A summary of the good news. Christian life amounts to joy, gentleness, sobriety, and good deeds. These procure for us the peace of Christ that exceeds all things and which, in turn, secures the stability of our minds and hearts. We therefore must not worry about anything and instead take all things with prayer and gratitude.

JOHN 12:1–18 In the wake of Lazarus' revival, Jesus returned to Bethany, once again enjoying the hospitality of Martha and Mary. During the banquet, Mary anointed his feet with costly perfume, stirring the opprobrium of Judas the traitor. But Jesus intervened, declaring that this anointing was in preparation for his burial. The next day, he and his disciples entered Jerusalem where they were welcomed in triumph. The Lord mounted a donkey (a symbol of peace and humility, not of worldly ambitions). The temple priests plotted to have Lazarus killed along with Jesus. The disciples only made sense of these events later, after the Lord's resurrection.

WISDOM The compatriots of the Lord misrepresented his entry into Jerusalem as a claim to earthly power. Christians ought to know better and not expect from him what he never promised to offer, namely, worldly goods, property, wealth, and ruling authority. Christ's lineage was indeed that of King David, but he never called himself Son of David, as he never expressed a desire to ascend to the throne. Symbolically riding on a donkey, he exemplified the principles of peace and humility. He entered Jerusalem, the city of peace, as a king of peace who imparts peace and joy to the souls of his disciples. This is what we are to understand, the deep message of the festival. Corresponding to the mystery of the Lady's transformation into the temple of God's dwelling, celebrated on 21 November, the city where the Lord wishes to enter is the temple of our own heart (Revelation 3:20). The best way to grasp this message is by considering it through the eyes of the fourth-century author known as Saint Macarius the Great, who contemplated the Chariot of Glory in

Ezekiel 1 as a revelation of Christ dwelling in the hearts of his people as though sitting on the throne of glory (*Spiritual Homilies* 1.1–2). Therefore, we must make ourselves available to him by reshaping our existence, by humbly making room for him to lay his head upon our lives (see Luke 9:58), so that through his grace our minds and hearts can become peaceful, enlightened, and full of joy.

MESSAGE The entrance of the Lord into Jerusalem points to his sitting upon the throne of the hearts of his disciples, to whom he grants joy and peace.

KEYWORDS grace, heart, joy, peace, throne

The Mystical Supper Thursday before Easter

1 CORINTHIANS 11:23–32 (Because of irregularities among the Corinthians regarding participation in the agape meals, Paul had to step in to clarify the true purpose of such gatherings.) The Lord himself told Paul what he now shares with the Corinthians, that on the night the Lord was betrayed he broke the bread and shared the cup with his disciples, stating that these were his true body and blood, given as a new covenant for his people. This the disciples were to remember and repeat as often as they met. And since the bread and the wine are the body and blood of Christ, reminders of his death, believers are to examine themselves before partaking so that, by judging themselves, they avoid divine judgment.

MATTHEW 26:2–20; JOHN 13:3–17; MATTHEW 26:21–39; LUKE 22:43–44; MATTHEW 26:40–27:2 As the Israelite priests and elders plotted to have Jesus killed, he was eating with his disciples in Bethany when a woman anointed him with a very expensive ointment. The disciples were troubled by what they considered a waste of money. But he told them that this was in preparation for his burial. It was then that Judas, one of the apostles,

went to the priests to betray him for thirty pieces of silver. That night they held an early Passover meal, which began with Jesus—who knew that his time had come—washing the feet of his disciples. After telling them to learn from his example, he announced that his betrayer was in their midst. Then the Lord broke the bread and shared the wine, telling them to partake of his body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. After they sang a psalm, he told them that they would all abandon him. All promised that they would not, Peter among them the most vehemently. When they reached the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus went to pray, asking three disciples to keep watch with him. While they dozed off, he prayed three times, surrendering to the will of the Father. Then the traitor arrived with a large crowd and had Jesus arrested. They led him to the high priest, while the disciples vanished out of fear. Meanwhile, the council of elders sought reason to condemn the Lord, asking him if he was indeed the Christ, the Son of God. He answered: “you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, coming on the clouds of heaven.” Upon hearing this, the high priest declared that it was blasphemy and all condemned Jesus to death. They all spat in his face and slapped him. In the meantime, Peter was sitting in the courtyard, watching the events unfold. Three times he defended himself against the accusation that he was one of Jesus’ disciples. After the last denial, the rooster crowed and then he remembered that the Lord had told him beforehand that this is what he would do that night. He cried, repentant. In the morning, the Lord was brought before Pilate, the governor, to be judged.

WISDOM The Church’s practice of celebrating the participation of the believers in the sacrificed body and blood of Christ, from its very beginning to today, is associated with thanksgiving and joy. The eucharistic sharing in the body and blood of the Lord is for salvation and eternal life. But it was not so at the first eucharistic celebration of the disciples. Worry and fear clouded the supper when the Lord established the new covenant with his people. They knew that the time had come for him to die. Their emotions were consequently in turmoil, fluctuating from the firm decision to die with him to cowardice and betrayal. The sorry farce of the religious tribunal is of no consequence here. It is merely

another example of religion's murderous drive. What matters is what the Lord taught his disciples then—the new alliance was an act of togetherness, an act of fellowship between God and believers, an act of communal participation in the divine life. Such is the way of Christian life, and this is what we celebrate—not religious prescriptions, but the law of love. What is of ultimate importance is that the disciples examine their conscience so that they might participate in the body and blood of Christ—provided they do nothing to cause sorrow to Christ's little sisters and brothers.

MESSAGE The new covenant is about the joy of togetherness, and this is what the believers celebrate when they assemble for the mystical supper.

KEYWORDS blood, body, covenant, eucharist, supper

The Paschal Vigil Saturday before Easter¹

ROMANS 6:3–11 Believers have been recapitulated in the death and the resurrection of Christ. Thus, like him, they should live free of sin, walking in newness of life. In order to activate their recapitulation in Christ, they undertake baptism, which is participation in his death and resurrection. When he died and rose, Christ vanquished the power of sin and death, living entirely for God. In like manner, believers must live dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

MATTHEW 28:1–20 Very early on Sunday, Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” went to the tomb to finalise the funeral rites. But when

¹ In the current practice of the Church, this beautiful office is celebrated on Holy Saturday, in the morning. Its rightful place is by all accounts Saturday night. See A Monk of the Eastern Church, *The Year of Grace of the Lord: A Scriptural and Liturgical Commentary on the Calendar of the Orthodox Church*, trans. Deborah Cowan (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980) 158–61 and, more importantly, 173 n. 65.

they arrived an earthquake made the stone on the tomb roll back—it was an angel of the Lord, who then gave them the good news of Christ’s resurrection. The angel sent the women to tell the disciples the good news. On their way, Jesus himself hailed them and repeated the angel’s words, that the disciples must travel to Galilee where they would meet the risen Lord. Meanwhile, the soldiers that guarded the tomb fell to the ground in fear when they saw the angel, and ran to the city to tell the priests what they had seen. The priests paid them well to lie, saying that, while they were asleep, the disciples had come and stolen Jesus’ body. Unfortunately, this lie is still believed by many (at the time of writing). As for the disciples, they went to Galilee and saw the Lord on a mountain. There he strengthened those among them who still doubted. Then Jesus assured them that he possessed all the power in heaven and on earth. Armed with this certainty, the disciples were to go and preach everywhere, baptising believers in the name of the Holy Trinity and exhorting them to observe Jesus’ teachings. He will be with them always.

WISDOM Believing in Christ crucified and risen is the beginning of a transformative journey—a mystical death and resurrection with the Lord whose vehicle and symbol is baptism. Through faith and baptism (Mark 16:16), people find salvation in communion with Christ. But in order to earn their perfection they must diligently cultivate what Saint Basil called “resurrectional life” and “evangelical conduct” (*On the Holy Spirit* 15.35). This is a matter of reconsidering their priorities and changing orientation in life. Abandoning their sinful habits, they must turn to God and undertake a God-centred life. They must keep the words, the teachings of the Lord (John 14:15,21–24), foremost his commandment concerning love for one another (John 15:12–13) as the supreme good. This is the gift of the crucified and risen Lord for his disciples: the opportunity to renew and to live meaningful lives. The path they must walk is arduous, doubts could overwhelm them at times, but the Lord is with them to the end.

MESSAGE As the crucified and risen Lord defeated death, so must his disciples vanquish sin by living a resurrectional life.

KEYWORDS baptism, crucifixion, faith, renewal, resurrection

The First Paschal Sunday: Resurrection

Easter

ACTS 1:1–8 After his resurrection, Christ spent forty days with his disciples, revealing to them the mysteries of God’s kingdom. Their fellowship occasionally included simple meals, or rather snacks (literally, “sharing the salt”). On one occasion, the disciples displayed a feeble understanding of his intention, enquiring about the restoration of an earthly kingdom. Tactfully, the Lord did not mock their query, but instead drew their attention to what truly mattered—the culmination of his ministry—the bestowal of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

JOHN 1:1–17 The Logos of God, true God, who before all ages was turned towards God, made all things and was present in all. Through the incarnation, the Logos became one with his creation without loss of divine glory. That said, although the Logos was present in the world as giver-of-life, few recognised him. But to all those who recognised him—like John the Baptist who, like us, believed in his divine identity despite the humble aspect of his humanity—he gave the power to renew their existence, to become God’s children, inheritors of the fullness of grace.

WISDOM Today we celebrate the inauguration of the new life bestowed on us. As the hymn teaches, “Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and to those in the tombs he granted life.” We do not only celebrate Christ’s resurrection. What we do is contemplate the main outcome of the event, the life springing forth from Christ and imparted to us, those in the tombs. The two New Testament readings are from the beginning of John and Acts. They are not chosen because

they speak about Christ's resurrection. Whereas the apostolic passage indirectly refers to the event, depicting the days after it, the Gospel reading remains completely silent in this regard. The two passages are chosen because it is on this Sunday that the Orthodox Church begins its annual cycle of scriptural readings, signifying the beginning of our salvation. This cycle commences with John, the Gospel of the spiritually mature, and with Acts, the good news of the ecclesial life. In so doing, the liturgical year takes for granted that the listeners already have a solid faith background and that they do not require the historical introduction of the synoptic Gospels. This means, furthermore, that the lens through which we must consider the synoptic Gospels is the ecclesial perception, something obvious in the fourth one. But the association of these two readings today is not arbitrary; they share common ground. Here is their message. The contemporaries of Christ's earthly sojourn did not recognise him as God, Logos of God, God incarnate, creator and saviour. We are better positioned. In the light of our resurrectional experience with Jesus Christ glorified everything makes sense. By reading these narratives in liturgical context, we accompany the disciples who for forty days received the Lord's instruction about the mysteries of the kingdom, the final revelation of the Gospel's content. It is thus that we contemplate his earthly sojourn. We do not seek the historical Jesus. We behold the glory of the Only-begotten of the Father, through whom all are created and saved. It is the beginning of the paschal revolution. Those of us who believe he is God incarnate are transformed into children of God, inheritors of the kingdom's grace. We do not need signs and wonders. We see with our very eyes the glory of our maker and saviour, richly attested, unquestionably so, by his Holy Spirit who graciously warms our hearts. Let us rejoice, children of God!

MESSAGE As adopted children of God in the risen Christ we are able to see God's glory.

KEYWORDS adoption, glory, kingdom, new life, sight

The Lord's Ascension

The fortieth day after Easter

ACTS 1:1–12 After his resurrection, Christ spent forty days with his disciples, revealing to them the mysteries of God's kingdom. Their fellowship occasionally included simple meals, or rather snacks (literally, "sharing the salt"). On one occasion, the disciples displayed a feeble understanding of his intention, enquiring about the restoration of an earthly kingdom. Tactfully, the Lord did not mock their query, but instead drew their attention to what truly mattered—the culmination of his ministry—the bestowal of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. While giving this last clarification, he began to ascend and a cloud hid him from their sight. The disciples were still gazing upwards when two brightly clad men announced to them that, just as Jesus had ascended, so too would he return (in glory).

LUKE 24:36–53 On the first day of his resurrection, Jesus suddenly appeared amidst his disciples, greeting them with the peace salutation. Utterly surprised and frightened, the disciples needed some convincing and so the Lord asked them to touch him and see that he was real, not a ghost. And since, out of joy, they could still not believe their eyes, he ate before them some broiled fish and a honeycomb. Then he reminded them of his many earlier references to the Old Testament passages which announced his death and resurrection. Opening their minds to understand the Scriptures, he plainly stated that the prophecies about him were now fulfilled and promised that he would soon send them "the promise of my Father" so that they would be "clothed with power from on high." After this he walked with them away from Jerusalem and, bidding them farewell and blessing them with both hands, he ascended. Joyfully, the disciples returned to Jerusalem, spending much time in the temple.

WISDOM The two passages, both from the plume of Saint Luke, seem to place ascension at different times from Christ's resurrection. Specifically, the Gospel reading suggests that the Lord ascended on the same day that he rose, whereas Acts places the event on the fortieth day after

the resurrection. But this discrepancy does not matter. What matters is what happened and the outcome of that event in terms of salvation. Today we celebrate the complete transfiguration and deification of the Lord's human side. Christ's ascension does not mean departure from his people and from the created universe; after all, we Orthodox embrace one another at each and every liturgy, saying "Christ is in our midst! He is, he was, and he will be!" Instead, Christ's ascension means the complete deification of the human mould he put on through his incarnation. His sanctified and ascended body, while genuinely human, was nevertheless possessed of different characteristics from this mortal coil of ours (1 Corinthians 15:35–49). Thus, without his leaving the created cosmos, at some point his body became invisible to eyes that still opened towards the world in the earthly way. Christ's ascension therefore refers to another form of presence everywhere within the creation, not only as God, but as God incarnate, crucified, resurrected, and glorified. Ascended to heaven, he is here and he is there, everywhere, in ways which elude the present condition of our bodies. Christ's ascension, furthermore, refers to the recapitulation of the entire universe within the ascended Christ and thus to the presentation of the creation within him, transfigured, to the Father, as the great Maximus the Confessor clarified (*Difficulty* 41). More important for us, however, is the fact that Christ's ascension signifies an existential difference between him and his people. The disciples saw him taking off, or going up, not because he had indeed left, but because they were not yet on his level, to which they had been called. Even later, Saul was unworthy of the glorified Christ and, upon seeing him, was blinded by his dazzling light (Acts 9:8–9). Stephen the Martyr, however, who was pure and faithful, saw the Lord sitting at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55–56). The ascension, therefore, like Christ's transfiguration on Tabor, was an event that made possible for the disciples to see him as he is and also to realise that they could not see him as he is. It is the same with us. Both his dazzling light and his disappearance in glory mark our incapacity to perceive him as he is, not his literal departure. But since we shall become as he is when we see him again (Colossians 3:4; 1 John 3:2), we must take his ascension as a roadmap pointing to our final destination (Matthew 13:43). After

all, as he “brought us from nonbeing into being,” he “raised us up again,” leaving nothing undone until he “brought us up to heaven and bestowed on us [his] kingdom to come” (*Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom*, the holy offering). This is the ultimate outcome of his incarnation: his sisters and brothers become how he is and are where he is.

MESSAGE Christ’s ascension reveals the glory to which all believers are called.

KEYWORDS ascension, becoming, glory, presence, transfiguration

The Eighth Paschal Sunday: Pentecost The fiftieth day after Easter

ACTS 2:1–11 On the fiftieth day after Christ’s resurrection, the disciples were all gathered together in Jerusalem for Sunday prayer. Marking the descent of the Spirit, a wind from heaven blew violently inside the house and fiery tongues rested upon the disciples. On hearing the noise, many Jewish pilgrims from the diaspora gathered around the house and heard the disciples proclaim God’s mighty deeds in the various tongues of those present. The pilgrims were amazed that the (uneducated) Galileans could do that.

JOHN 7:37–53; 8:12 Jesus was present in Jerusalem (with his disciples for the Festival of Tents). On the last day of celebration (perhaps in the courtyard of the temple), he called all who were thirsty to come to him with faith and drink—to fulfil the Scripture which announces that the believer’s heart becomes a spring of living water, that is, the Spirit. At hearing this, the pilgrims wondered about Jesus’ identity and ministry. Was he the Messiah? The pharisees denied that Jesus was the awaited prophet. Jesus, however, declared that he was the light of the world and that whoever followed him walked not in darkness, but in the light of life.

WISDOM In each and every generation, the paschal revolution, begun two millennia ago, reaches its climax through the divine transformation of all who believe that Jesus is Christ, God's Anointed. This transformation, or, in the words of Christ, the fact of becoming springs of living water, constitutes a mystical event of unsurpassed magnitude. All who acknowledge Jesus as God, Christ, God-sent, light, creator, and saviour—all who have faith in him and live accordingly—become children of God in truth, reborn to a new life, transformed. This message, which corresponds to that of the First Paschal Sunday, is the only promise of the Gospel for all who commit themselves to the Lord. The transformation of believers begins with their faithful adherence to the light of Christ, his good news, and continues with their virtuous walking along the path of light—a Christlike way of life—culminating in their enlightenment by the Holy Spirit of Christ. It is from Christ that we receive the light of life and hence the Spirit, the living water, the freedom of the wind, the fiery tongues. It is in and through Christ that we become wellsprings of the Spirit for those around us, agents working towards the transformation of the world. Changed in Christ and the Spirit, we bring light, hope, and life to the world by preaching Christ in all the languages of the world—above all by preaching him through our way of life, through purity of heart and acts of altruism and compassion. The word, the good news of the embodied Logos, contains the fiery living water of the Spirit. To preach Christ in word and deed is for that matter a life-giving factor. The fulfilment of the paschal revolution, the transformation of our lives, inaugurates and empowers our ministry. Our ministry amounts to facilitating the distribution of the Spirit everywhere by preaching Christ in word and deed. Indeed, as Saint Maximus observed, compassion is as much “bodily service” to the neighbour as it is “sharing the word of God” to those living in ignorance (*Chapters on Love* 1.26). It is through this ministry that the wind of the Spirit (John 3:6–8; Acts 2:2) which energises the creation (Genesis 1:2) regenerates humankind (John 3:5) and transforms the universe (Psalm 103:30 LXX). Through us, God's renewed people, the paschal transformation becomes a cosmic event. It is through our paschal change that the promise of God becomes true: “if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek

my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land” (2 Chronicles 7:14).

MESSAGE Christianity promises to transform the human being through faith, virtue, and enlightenment into a wellspring of life for all, including God’s creation.

KEYWORDS faith, life, light, virtue, transformation

The Lord’s Transfiguration

6 August

2 PETER 1:10–17 Peter entrusts to his addressees a clear and memorable narrative of the events concerning the Lord, so that they remember his message even after his departure and firmly stay the course of the faith. This will secure for them entrance into Christ’s eternal kingdom. A glimpse of this kingdom was revealed to Peter through the Lord’s transfiguration. His eyewitness account is trustworthy.

MATTHEW 17:1–9 Jesus took Peter, James, and John up on a mountain and showed them his body and clothes transfigured in a blaze of glory. Moses and Elijah appeared next to the Lord and spoke to him. Suddenly, a luminous cloud covered them all and a voice from the cloud acknowledged Christ as God’s beloved Son. The disciples were already bedazzled by that sight, to the extent that Peter offered to make three tents for Jesus and the prophets. But at the booming voice (of the Father) they fell to the ground, petrified. The Lord reassured them and upon looking up they saw him alone standing. Jesus told them not to share the news of this vision until his resurrection.

WISDOM The event of transfiguration stands midway between Christ’s promise that the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom (Matthew 13:43), together with the renewal of this promise as vision of his

coming in glory seen by those who believe in him (Matthew 16: 27–28), and his resurrection. In organising the narrative in this way, the evangelist suggests that what Jesus promised earlier was to be fulfilled in his own resurrection and then that of his believers, and that the content of the promise is what he had shown to the three disciples on the mountain. This is in fact the promise of the Gospel to all who believe. Christ never promised a better world and kinder people. He did not promise better standards of life for all and the abolition of social injustice. He did not promise that Christians would behave more environmentally friendly than the rest of people. Instead, to all who believe in him he promised divine adoption and the fulness of life (John 1:12–13; 10:10; 20:31). This is the experience of a transfigured, glorified life (Matthew 13:43) through participation in the divine life (2 Peter 1:4). It is to that end, namely, in order to inherit the glory of the kingdom (Matthew 16:27–28) that we strive to become Christ-like (1 John 3:2). For this we purify our lives (1 John 3:3) and endure all things with hope (Romans 5:1–5). So today we celebrate the revelation of what we are to become. This is what Peter realised and delivered to the faithful. This is what the accomplished ones—saints such as Steven the Martyr, Abba Pambo, Abba Silvanus, Abba Sisoës, Mary the Egyptian, Symeon the New Theologian, Gregory Palamas, Theodora of Sihla, Seraphim of Sarov, and Silouan the Athonite—have beheld and attained. This is what the saints have experienced through the ages and still do: the content of life eternal, transfiguration, deification. The rest is just the false gospel of unconvinced preachers.

MESSAGE The transfiguration of the Lord reveals the glory to which all believers are called.

KEYWORDS adoption, deification, glory, saints, transformation

Part Two

Festivals of the Virgin Mother

The Birth of the Lady

8 September

PHILIPPIANS 2:5–11 Believers should emulate Christ’s mind, or rather his way of thinking. As his action (that is, the incarnation) revealed, his mind was humbly set. For, being glorious in the divine form before the incarnation, he did not begrudge being like one of us and so he put on the slave’s form of our fallen nature. He further descended obediently (to the will of God) unto death, like one of us, but his death was on a cross, dishonourable. On account of his humility, God exalted him to the extent that only those who acknowledge his (divine) name as Lord will be able to praise (thus, know) God (and so inherit eternal reward).

LUKE 10:38–42; 11:27–28 Martha endeavoured to setup a great feast in honour of Jesus while her sister Mary sat at the Lord’s feet, listening to his words. In the rush of hospitality, Martha asked the Lord to order Mary to help her, but he pointed out that Martha’s festive worries were no match for Mary’s choice to listen to him. No one could take from Mary the joy of listening to the Word, whereas Martha’s worries lead nowhere. At hearing this, a woman praised the Lord by blessing his mother. Jesus replied that blessed are those who obey God’s word.

WISDOM Today we celebrate the birth of our Lady, Most Holy Mary, the Birth-giver of God. But in order to keep the festival with orthodox reverence we must remember that her life points towards her Lord and ours; she is a living icon of Christ, not the goal of our hope. There are many reasons for which we revere her, from the holiness of her life to her willingness to obey the Lord, from her service to him to the protection she continuously offers to God's people. Unlike those of us who worry greatly without serenely reworking our lives in order to develop a compassionate heart, she supremely embodied the virtues of the two sisters. She had Martha's practical aptitude for service and Mary's contemplative quality. This is why no anxiety clouded her desire to serve. She was rightly blessed, then, by the woman in the crowd for harmonising the virtues of Martha and Mary. Above all, she was blessed for becoming the chalice of Christ's incarnation and the cornucopia who nourished him as an infant. Only a mother, such as the anonymous mother in the crowd, could have appreciated the privileged relationship between the Lady and her Son, the Lord incarnate. Her glory was her Son. But this is the actual crux of today's celebration. We do not venerate her primarily for her virtues. Through the lens of the last lines in the Gospel reading, we revere her for her close relationship with Christ, for her transformation into his icon and into a living pointer to him. Ultimately, it is Christ whom we glorify when we revere her. It is Christ who is God-who-saves, as his Hebrew name, Jesus, testifies. It is his selflessness which prompted his incarnation for our salvation, as the apostolic letter reminds us. In his name she rejoices. In her Son and Lord she is saved. Her birth is a step in the preparation of his incarnation—a way of glorifying him. We celebrate her by learning from her to appropriate the mind of Christ through dedicating our lives to him, as she did. When, like her, we allow God to lead and guide us, Martha's worry becomes for us unclouded service, making room for contemplating the Word of God, whose name is above all names—the Lord who saves those who listen to him.

MESSAGE Following in the footsteps of Most Holy Mary, all believers should adopt the mind of Christ and, through faithful service, inherit the promise.

KEYWORDS contemplation, humility, icon, service, transformation

The Entry of the Lady in the Temple

21 November

HEBREWS 9:1–7 A description of the holy tent of the first covenant: its two parts, the sacred objects therein, particularly the ark of the covenant containing the golden urn holding the manna. Throughout the year, priests would officiate in the first part of the tent, whereas the high priest would enter only once a year in the second part, the Holy of Holies.

LUKE 10:38–42; 11:27–28 Martha endeavoured to set up a great feast in honour of Jesus while her sister Mary sat at the Lord's feet, listening to his words. In the rush of hospitality, Martha asked the Lord to order Mary to help her, but he pointed out that Martha's festive worries were no match for Mary's choice to listen to him. No one could take from Mary the joy of listening to the Word, whereas Martha's worries lead nowhere. At hearing this, a woman praised the Lord by blessing his mother. Jesus replied that blessed are those who obey God's word.

WISDOM Today, as every year, the Orthodox begin to chant at matins a string of hymns known in Greek as *katabasies* (intoned by the chanters who, to do so, step down from their high chairs). The first of these hymns consists in an exhortation to welcome Christ into the world: "Christ is born, glorify him! Christ from heaven, meet him. Christ on earth, arise. Sing to the Lord all the earth and in merry spirits, O you peoples, praise him for he is glorified." This and the ensuing hymns are sung from today till Christmas, constituting a hallmark of the Advent in Byzantine iteration. Saint John Damascene (d. 749) composed these hymns in the eighth

century by stylising the poetic prose of Saint Gregory the Theologian's (d. 390) Christmas sermon, probably for the year 380. What matters is that today we enter a mystical stage of our Christmas preparation, which began with fasting a week earlier on 14 November. According to the above hymn, we are called to react to Christ's birth by arising from our brokenness, weaknesses, failures, and sins. We are summoned to rejoice in the presence of the Lord, perhaps in the same sense in which Saint Patrick's (fifth century) 'Breastplate' articulates enjoyment of his omnipresence: "Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise, Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me." We must befittingly prepare ourselves in order to glorify the Lord who has come and who will come (according to the two possible readings of the Aramaic *Maranatha*, "Come, Lord" and "The Lord has come" at 1 Corinthians 16:22). To guide us to this experience, we are given an example of preparation for the Lord as well as a revelation of the outcomes of meeting him. Indeed, it is for these reasons that we celebrate the transformation of the Virgin Lady in the temple of the incarnation. The apocryphal story which serves as a pretext for today's festival—from the *Gospel of James* 7–8—speaks of her entry in the temple where, according to the passage from Hebrews 9 above, she could not actually enter. But in establishing this festival the Church interiorises the apocryphal story by inviting us to contemplate the Virgin Lady become, through practical virtue (signified by Martha) and contemplation (signified by Mary), the temple of God's dwelling. She did not enter the Jerusalem temple. She became the temple of the Lord incarnate. She is the tent of the covenant: the outer room of the priests by her practicing virtue; the inner room of the high priest through her contemplative disposition; the golden urn by containing Christ, the true manna from heaven (John 6:32–33). In her footsteps, through the praxis of virtue, contemplation, and prayerful union to God, we become true temples of divine presence (1 Corinthians 3:16–17; 6:19). As Saint Symeon the New Theologian (d. 1022) shows, "when we believe wholeheartedly

and fervently repent, we conceive the Word of God in our hearts, like the Virgin” (*Ethical Discourses* 1.10). Elsewhere in the liturgical calendar, Palm Sunday points to our transformation into God’s temples by way of a historical event, the Lord’s entry in Jerusalem. We must walk, then, on the path as true children of Christmas.

MESSAGE As the Virgin Lady became a temple of the Lord’s presence, so we believers should walk in her footsteps to become true temples of God.

KEYWORDS contemplation, presence, temple, union, virtue

The Dormition of the Lady

15 August

PHILIPPIANS 2:5–11 Believers should emulate Christ’s mind, or rather his way of thinking. As his action (that is, the incarnation) revealed, his mind was humbly set. For, being glorious in the divine form before the incarnation, he did not begrudge being like one of us and so he put on the slave’s form of our fallen nature. He further descended obediently (to the will of God) unto death, like one of us, but his death was on a cross, dishonourable. On account of his humility, God exalted him to the extent that only those who acknowledge his (divine) name as Lord will be able to praise (thus, know) God (and so inherit eternal reward).

LUKE 10:38–42; 11:27–28 Martha endeavoured to set up a great feast in honour of Jesus while her sister Mary sat at the Lord’s feet, listening to his words. In the rush of hospitality, Martha asked the Lord to order Mary to help her, but he pointed out that Martha’s festive worries were no match for Mary’s choice to listen to him. No one could take from Mary the joy of listening to the Word, whereas Martha’s worries lead nowhere. At hearing this, a woman praised the Lord by blessing his mother. Jesus replied that blessed are those who obey God’s word.

WISDOM Today's readings are the same as those for the festival of 8 September. Correspondingly, we should return to that reflection while we replace birth or nativity with dormition or death. Today we celebrate the death of our Lady, Most Holy Mary, the Birth-giver of God. But in order to keep the festival with orthodox reverence we must remember that her life, from beginning to end, points towards her Lord and ours; she is an icon of Christ, not the goal of our hope. There are many reasons for which we revere her, from the holiness of her life to her willingness to obey the Lord, from her service to him to the protection she continuously offers to God's people. Unlike those of us who worry greatly without serenely reworking our lives in order to develop a compassionate heart, she supremely embodied the virtues of the two sisters. She had Martha's practical aptitude for service and Mary's contemplative quality. This is why no anxiety clouded her desire to serve. She was rightly blessed, then, by the woman in the crowd for harmonising the virtues of Martha and Mary. Above all she was blessed for becoming the chalice of Christ's incarnation and the cornucopia who nourished him as an infant. Only a mother, such as the anonymous mother in the crowd, could have appreciated the privileged relationship between the Lady and her Son, the Lord incarnate. Her glory was her Son. But this is the actual crux of today's celebration. We do not venerate her primarily for her virtues. Through the lens of the last lines in the Gospel reading, we revere her for her close relationship with Christ, for her transformation into his icon and into a living pointer to him. Ultimately, it is Christ whom we glorify when we revere her. It is Christ who is God-who-saves, as his Hebrew name, Jesus, testifies. It is his selflessness which prompted his incarnation for our salvation, as the apostolic letter reminds us. In his name she rejoices. In her Son and Lord she is saved, as the Byzantine icon of her dormition highlights by representing her soul as an infant in the arms of her Son and Lord. Her death becomes a step in the fulfilment of her task, a way of glorifying him by pointing all to him. We celebrate her by learning from her to appropriate the mind of Christ through dedicating our lives to him, as she did. When, like her, we allow God to lead and guide us, Martha's worry becomes for us unclouded service,

making room for contemplating the Word of God, whose name is above all names—the Lord who saves those who listen to him.

MESSAGE Following in the footsteps of Most Holy Mary, all believers should adopt the mind of Christ and, through faithful service, inherit the promise.

KEYWORDS contemplation, humility, icon, service, transformation

Part Three

Festivals of the Holy Cross

Saturday before the Elevation of the Holy Cross

1 CORINTHIANS 2:6–9 Those who are wise in the ways of the world and the rulers of the world discarded God’s wisdom and crucified the Lord of glory. Mature believers, in contrast, know that true wisdom, decreed before the ages and regarding their glorification, comes from God. Their reward surpasses what human senses and intellect can grasp.

MATTHEW 10:37–11:1 Christianity is a matter of establishing true priorities and pursuing them to the end. Love for Christ must surpass love for anyone and anything else, including one’s own life. The test of love is the willingness to die for the faith. Should the disciples be faithful to Christ to such an extent, then even those who welcome them in Christ’s name will be rewarded. After teaching them this, Jesus continued to proclaim the good news in that region.

WISDOM Christianity builds upon a radical manifesto and for this reason constitutes a radical movement which does not allow for shades of grey (see Revelation 3:15–16) when it comes to the essence of life. The essence of life is revealed in the true priorities, and Christ warns that false priorities mislead many. People think that they know, and priori-

tising their own reason refuse to learn from the Lord what their true priorities ought to be. They think that they inherit the world and rule over it. In order to keep their properties and maintain their dominion, they refuse to imitate the Lord in the way of compassion. They cherish family and friends above all and, thinking that they know better than Christ, they refuse true wisdom, ending by attempting to selfishly possess and suffocate those whom they believe they love. They cling to their own life and out of an instinct for survival they lie, betray, steal, oppress, and kill. Christ taught that such priorities born of worldly thinking are for nought; they bring death, not life. They enslave, causing pain and destruction. In taking a stand against such views, Christ was not an idealist. He unpacked the example of his own life and mission, for on the cross he loved us more than he loved himself. He revealed that “no one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13) in the way that he lived, selflessly and compassionately. We fool ourselves into thinking that we know better, but all we do is miss the mark of Christ’s crucified wisdom, namely, that it is only when we detach ourselves from our treacherous certainties and false priorities that we can love truly, selflessly, sacrificially, and compassionately. As Saint Maximus observed, “one who loves God cannot help but also love every human being as oneself” (*Chapters on Love* 1.13). And again, paraphrasing the Lord, “the one who loves me... will keep my commandments, and this is my commandment, that you love one another” (*Chapters on Love* 1.16). This is wisdom we must heed in preparation for the festival. This is guidance which leads us to rewards beyond all expectation: “what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, that is what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

MESSAGE The priorities inspired by the wisdom of this world are ultimately destructive; believers should follow the logic of the cross, which leads to divine rewards.

KEYWORDS cross, love, rewards, sacrifice, wisdom

Sunday before the Elevation of the Holy Cross

GALATIANS 6:11–18 Saint Paul mentions the Judaic formalism of some members who insist that all male Christians be circumcised according to Mosaic law. The apostle points out that external signs have no meaning if they are empty of content; Jewish Christians boast about circumcision but do not obey the law. What matters is a person's inner disposition to live according to the example of the crucified Lord. Such people are the new creation.

JOHN 3:13–17 The Son of Man ascends to heaven from where he came down for us. He ascends in utmost humility, fulfilling the type of the Old Testament bronze serpent Moses lifted up on a pole for the healing of bitten Israelites. The Son of Man ascends the cross and through it heals all, so that people might have life eternal through him. Thus, God's love for us becomes manifest, for God did not send his Son to judge the world, but to give eternal life to all who believe in him.

WISDOM Salvation is to inherit life eternal (Luke 18:18,26,29-30). Eternal life, in turn, is not gained only in the afterlife. We attain it in the here and now, through divine participation (2 Peter 1:4). To be saved is to be loved by God and to participate in God's life. Christ gave us access to this life by descending among us (see John 1:14,16) and by embracing the cross for our healing (Isaiah 53:5; 1 Peter 2:24). The cross is reconciliation (Colossians 1:19–20), a sign of love divine (John 3:16), not punishment. The cruciform revelation of divine love is what changes the lives of those who believe. But they should internalise the sign and transform God's sacrificial and saving love into the norm of their lives. They should live selflessly and compassionately. Alas, believers today, like the Jewish Christians of old who practised circumcision for lack of deep conviction, still think that external signs make them Christians. They wear external signs, badges, and bumper stickers, but they do not change their lives, do not seek holiness, and do not practise compassion. In many ways, modern Christians are just another Jewish sect which does not know that what ultimately matters is the new creation, not external signs. In

the words of the fourth-century author known as Saint Macarius the Great, “although the (Christian) crowds, similar to the people of the world, (believe that) the difference and distinction refers to forms and signs, the strange (characteristic) of (true) Christians does not consist in outward forms and signs” (*Spiritual Homilies* 5.4). In order to be the new creation, Christians must undertake personal transformation through internalising the cross. The new creation is born when believers learn from the Lord to descend from their pedestal of glory, crucifying their own mind and heart out of love for everyone, indeed for the world, so that they may serve all as the Lord did. That is how Saint Paul honoured the cross of Christ, by looking at people and at the world through the lens of the cross, through the remaking of his own life (Galatians 6:14). We too must revere the cross—or rather the One who on the cross revealed to us the mystery of salvation—by becoming the new creation.

MESSAGE To revere the cross truly is to walk in the footsteps of the crucified Lord, by adhering to the way of thinking and living of Christ himself.

KEYWORDS crucifixion, eternal life, external signs, internalisation, salvation

The Elevation of the Holy Cross

14 September

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18–24 The message of the cross perplexes many. A crucified God scandalises and attracts mockery on the part of those who, adhering to worldly wisdom, cannot accept that a humble and compassionate God is able to die for his creation. But worldly wisdom has never led anybody to the true God. Although crucified and derided, the true God loves God’s people and saves them through the very foolishness of the cross. For believers, Christ crucified is no less than the very power and wisdom of God.

JOHN 19:6–35 Following the crowd's request to have him crucified, Pilate asked Jesus who he was, expecting to hear a defence. But the Lord was quiet. He assured Pilate that everything that was unfolding was happening by the will of God. Upon hearing this, Pilate attempted to convince the crowd to change its mind, but in vain. So he surrendered Jesus to the soldiers, who then led him to Golgotha where they crucified him together with two others. Pilate had a trilingual inscription placed on Jesus' cross, attesting to his royal status. Jesus' mother, along with Clopas' wife Mary and Mary Magdalene, were near the cross. Jesus entrusted his (unnamed) beloved disciple to the care of his own mother and his mother to the care of the disciple. When the soldiers noticed that he died, they pierced his side with a spear and blood and water gushed from the wound. The writer of this true account witnessed these events.

WISDOM When we contemplate the narrative of the passion and see the Lord's endurance, we also realise the extent of human evil. Those who demanded the death of an innocent and beneficent man were of darkened mind and evil heart. The story, therefore, is not only about the Lord's crucifixion, but the humankind itself, which had crucified him. But, above all, the narrative teaches about the Lord's patience, humility, love, and serenity. Despite the enraged crowds which demanded his death, he remained in charge of his own destiny. He could have begged Pilate to spare him, who would have done so. He could have cursed them, but he did not. Such was the strength of the innocent One, the creator and saviour, unjustly condemned by his children (John 1:10–11). Regarding humankind, the story teaches of its depravity, its twisted thinking and feeling, its injustice and cruelty. For the sake of their religion, the crowds killed a supposed blasphemer. Such is the deadly nature of religion when its followers are blinded by vicious passions. And Saint Paul rightly added that it was not just religious fanatics who misunderstood the Lord; wise men of classical learning did the same (1 Corinthians 1:22–23). Not much has changed in two thousand years since those events. Religious zealots, Christian and otherwise, who disagree with the good news of love for all, still hate Christ and Christians, as do the arrogant intelligent, who cannot make sense of his humility. Dostoyevsky's parable of the Grand

Inquisitor captures perfectly this attitude towards Christ in depicting the passive crowds and the cynicism of the intelligent. But the serene conduct of the misjudged and crucified Lord is a sublime lesson for life, the highest philosophy. His disciples are not spared either, facing ridicule, marginalisation, persecution, and death (Romans 8:36); they too emulate him, the only acceptable example. They shed tears and show compassion for the enraged and murderous humanity, as from the Lord himself (Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60).

MESSAGE The good news of the crucified Lord is that God's love embraces all; this is the paradigm the believers must heed.

KEYWORDS crucified, death, humility, love, religion

Saturday after the Elevation of the Holy Cross

1 CORINTHIANS 1:26–2:2 Paul did not preach at Corinth in lofty discourses; he preached Christ crucified. In this light, the Corinthians should understand that God does not work through lofty means. If people must boast, they should do so in the Lord, acknowledging his counsel and deeds. The Corinthians, now members of God's family, are the very proof of God's wisdom, for none of them was noble, powerful, or wise by human standards. As chosen members of God's people, the Corinthians must act accordingly, heeding the divine call.

JOHN 8:21–30 In a veiled manner, Jesus told the Jews about his crucifixion as his being lifted up by them because of the words of the Father which he conveyed. For him, the crucifixion was a "going away" where they could not follow because they were from below, of this world, whereas he was from above, not of this world. The listeners were puzzled at his words, but the Lord seemingly expected them to understand his allusions (to the Old Testament messianic prophecies). Because they did not

grasp his meaning, he got upset and noted the futility of his attempts to communicate with them.

WISDOM There are two different languages corresponding to two different mentalities, from below and from above: the worldly speech of worldly people and the mind of God's people, whose speech, endeavouring to capture the divine wisdom of the Gospel, shows strange features. The good news is about salvation; it is about retrieving and recasting things otherwise considered useless. The apostolic letter makes this plain by showing that God made his own people out of whom the world rejected. The world does not believe in return, retrieval, and redemption. The world goes happily by its entrenched divisions, opposing rich and poor, educated and uneducated, men and women, old and young, secular and religious, sinners and righteous. The world has neither the time nor the heart to seek the lost sheep or to wash the wounds of one fallen into the hands of robbers. It despises the weak and outlaws the foreigner. It belittles the powerless and the voiceless. It takes advantage of those who cannot defend themselves and does nothing to assist them. When it does do something, the world is very selective. As we see in our own age, the world shows little compassion to Christians persecuted and slaughtered in many parts of the world. It is true that the speech of Christians is not easy to swallow: they preach a higher wisdom. They preach humility, forgiveness, and compassion. No wonder the noble, the powerful, and the wise of this world could not grasp this message. But this does not mean that the world should offer hatred in exchange for love, contempt in exchange for humility. Yet this is how things are, were, and will be for Christians in the world. The Lord may have lost temper from time to time, but he gave his life for this world and those whose thinking is worldly. Such is the way of Christ. Such is the path of his disciples.

MESSAGE Of the two ways, that from above and that from below, one leads to salvation and the other does not; believers must choose wisely and live accordingly.

KEYWORDS divisions, compassion, humility, wisdom, world

Sunday after the Elevation of the Holy Cross

GALATIANS 2:16–20 People cannot become righteous by accomplishing the works of (Mosaic) law. Being already crucified with Christ, namely, recapitulated in the Lord's crucifixion, people become righteous through faith in Christ and through living for God. When they walk after the Son of God, they have Christ living within them. Thus, they participate in the love of the One who gave himself for all of us. There is no way of belonging to Christ if people lead a life incompatible with him.

MARK 8:34–38; 9:1 Being disciples of Christ entails renouncing ourselves and our rebellious will. It entails taking up our cross and following him. Only people who walk on Christ's path, which is not easy, can save their soul; otherwise their soul is lost. And nothing can compensate the loss of our soul, even if someone were to win the universe in exchange. Furthermore, if people are ashamed to stand up for the Gospel and walk alongside Christ, the Lord will ignore them at his second coming. But there is hope: some of those standing by shall not die before seeing the power of God's kingdom.

WISDOM What is at stake is our soul, our life. God wants us saved, healed, and restored. God wants us to attain the fullness to which we are called. God demands nothing for his own sake. What God demands is for us and must be seen as pedagogically and therapeutically imposed on those who, not yet understanding God's purpose, still aspire towards restoration and perfection. Truth be told, the Old Testament pedagogy of ordinances and prescriptions no longer matters for the experience of God's new people. God our Father does not command. Through Jesus Christ, Son of God in truth, Son of Man for our sakes, God delivered the Gospel to guide and instruct us. The Gospel teaches both explicitly through advice and implicitly through the example of Christ's life, but it never issues ordinances. It is at this juncture that the two readings of this Sunday point out that Christ's life and death substantiate all divine advice. Christ calls us to walk like him and with him because he walked on that sacrificial path before us, through his crucifixion. Saint Paul

knew this very well and, showing his commitment to Christ and his way of life, declared himself crucified with Christ and as living a life centred on God. For us later disciples, walking this path entails willingness to renounce our old ways, to be renewed by imitating the Lord and his saints. The old self and its ways are incompatible with a God-centred life and with the dwelling of Christ within the temple of our lives. No wonder people who live in opposition to Christ or merely without him have no perception of the bountiful grace he pours upon the hearts of believers. That abundant grace, concretely manifested in so many ways in the lives of Christ's disciples, exceeds all expectation and all earthly gain. Nothing can match it. Nothing can replace it. Therefore, we should live accordingly, as though crucified, so that we might gain the only thing that matters—that which heals, fills, comforts, and fulfils our life.

MESSAGE The disciples do not receive commandments; they are given the example of Christ, which they should mirror in a corresponding way of life.

KEYWORDS commandments, crucifixion, life, imitation, sacrifice

The Third Lenten Sunday

HEBREWS 4:14–5:6 Christ is the eternally appointed high priest of God's people. That said, like any priest, he is gentle towards his people and shows understanding for their shortcomings. During his own earthly life, he experienced weaknesses and temptation like all of us. He is different, however, from other priests. Whereas other priests share in the sins of the people, on earth Christ experienced weaknesses and temptations without sin. As a result, other priests must purify themselves first and then the people. The sinless Christ needs no purification. Being pure and God's anointed, he grants purification, mercy, and grace to those in need.

MARK 8:34–9:1 Discipleship is denying oneself and following the Lord. The test of discipleship is commitment to Christ and his Gospel. If we deny the Lord and his Gospel, whether out of fear for our lives or in order to gain wealth, we are no disciples at all. But discipleship is rewarded: some will behold the arrival of the kingdom with power in this very life.

WISDOM The scriptural testimonies about Christ being the Son of God and Son of Man cohere with the revelation of his priesthood. As it happens, one of the passages prescribed for today explores his priesthood. The apostolic letter speaks about his eternal priestly appointment in contrast to his experiencing weakness and temptation following the incarnation. Experiencing our condition made him gentle and understanding—a generous support for those who grapple with weakness and temptation. But it is his eternal, thus divine, priesthood which ultimately springs forth healing. That said, providing healing for his people is not the end of his ministry. Equally priestly is the example of his earthly life, which is on display for all to believe in and imitate so that all might have life in his name (John 20:31). One way in which a priest can impact people is the change of life of those who imitate the priest's behaviour. Christ's sacrificial love, the core of his ministry, was undoubtedly instrumental in effecting that outcome; people's lives changed. He made his entire life a spiritual bread (John 13:1–15), a sacrifice for us and for our salvation. It is for this reason that he could describe the nature of discipleship as a Christlike way of life. In contemplating his example, along with the witnesses of ages past, present-day disciples are likewise called to walk on the path of Christ by denying their old selves, thus becoming his icons. As Saint John Climacus (sixth century) had it, "a Christian is one who imitates Christ in thought, word, and deed" (*The Ladder of Divine Ascent* 1.4). By becoming imitators and icons of the Lord, believers produce further evidence of the efficacy of his priesthood. We must stay the course of the Christian life, therefore. Our weaknesses, temptations, shortcomings, and sins should not deter us from the path. We must stay the course. Christ's mercy, understanding, and grace are with us. He knows us; he knows what is in all of us (John 2:24–25). This is where he descends to meet us, on our turf, in our hearts. This is also

where he brings us back to the path if we wish to keep going. We must remain committed, regardless of the obstacles. We must be Christians, his icons. That is how we venerate his cross, not by ritualising all things. We must be disciples of the crucified Lord. The end is glory, the vision of the kingdom, here and now.

MESSAGE Christ the high priest walked exemplarily among us, showing us how we are to overcome weakness and temptation.

KEYWORDS change, discipleship, icons, imitation, priesthood

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Continuing the first part of this project, the author considers the significance of the passages read for the liturgies of the major festivals in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. After summarising the two prescribed texts from the Apostle and the Gospel books, he then ponders their common message against the backdrop of the respective festivals. The reflections are followed by brief sentences meant to capture the wisdom of the readings and recapitulations of the message in five keywords.

The author works with the assumption that the two readings are not gathered at random and have in fact been chosen because they convey shared wisdom. The reflections collected here are meant to serve as a starting point for both personal contemplation and preaching. To assist the more assiduous readers, the reflections are accompanied by a bibliographical list and a thematic index.

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