



EDIFICATION AND CONSOLATION

“But he that prophesieth speaketh unto men for edification and exhortation and consolation.”
(I Corinthians 14:3)

Simple Catechism Through the Experience of the Orthodox Church

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✠ CONTENTS ✠

- **Text 1:** A Festal Embrace
The Mystical Wedding of the Uncreated with the Created
- **Text 2:** Let opportunities not be wasted
Patience in Works of Love
- **Text 3:** Let us keep our Guardian Angel at our side
Simplicity in Our Food and Tableware
- **Text 4:** We should not pass by our Cross
The Cross of His Love and Our Personal Cross
- **Text 5:** Even animals keep the Divine Commandments
The Sanctity of Sunday As a Day of Rest
- **Text 6:** The Holy Icon of the Panagia of Kazan
Courteous Compassion and Gratitude
- **Text 7:** Importance and Usage—Symbolism and Life
Incense
- **Text 8:** Our attitude at prayer time
Attentive Prayer
- **Text 9:** “Judge not according to the appearance”
External Appearance and the Depths of the Heart

A Festal Embrace

The Mystical Wedding of the Uncreated With the Created

With an embrace of love, peace, and joy,

I convey to you, with sincere respect, my humble best wishes on the gladsome Feast of the Incarnation of the Word—the **Mystical Wedding** of the Uncreated with the created.

The union of Heaven and earth...

The circumincession of the Divine and the human...

The Mystery of Compassion...

Our loving **response** to the tender **approach**

of Christ our Bridegroom...

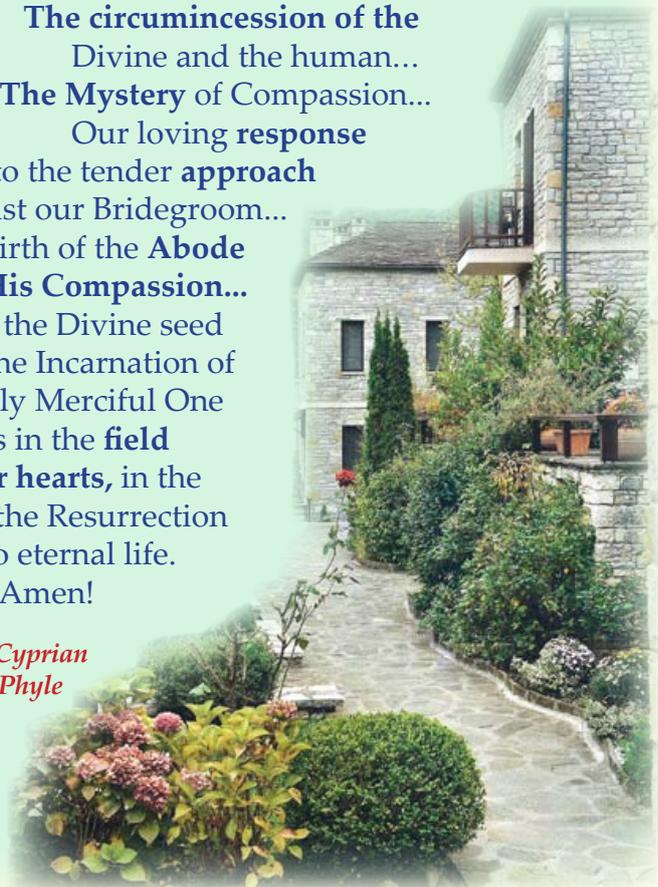
The birth of the **Abode of His Compassion...**

Behold the Divine seed which the Incarnation of the Only Merciful One sows in the **field of our hearts**, in the hope of the Resurrection unto eternal life.

Amen!

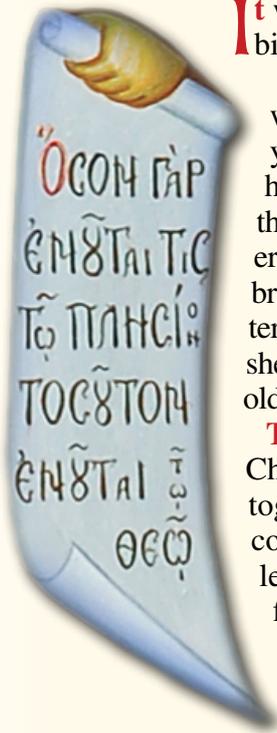
† *Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos and Phyle*

† Holy Nativity of our Savior Jesus Christ,
December 25, 2014



Let opportunities not be wasted

The Lord Guides Us To Heaven By Means of Patience In Works of Love*



It was a funny sort of coenobium, if not exactly original.

Kyra [Mrs.] Basilike, who was a widow, and her younger sister Maria, who had never married, were in their sixties and lived together. Upon the death of their brother, they took in their sister-in-law, Kyra-Olga, “so that she would not be alone in her old age too.”

Together they would go to Church and to the market, together they would drink coffee on the balcony. At least, that is how it was at first.

After a few months, things started to go awry.

Kyra-Olga was crotchety. Or so she seemed to them. The two sisters simply could not get used to her. There was always something she would dirty a bit, she never seemed to help out enough.... The coenobium did not last even a year.

After eleven months, they told her to go back home, now that she had supposedly “gotten over her mourning.” The parting was not without some unpleasant insinuations on either side.

In the afternoon, the two sisters would sit leisurely in their living room. **Kyra-Basilike** would knit, while **Maria** would read aloud from an edifying book.

“Listen here, Basilike, how nicely the Elder puts it: ‘If at some point Christ were to send us an Angel to ask us to change our lives and repent, we would certainly accept to do so. If, on the other hand, instead of an Angel He sent us our ‘neighbor’ (and especially if it were precisely the person whom we do not love and who makes our life difficult), then most likely we would not re-

pent. We might even lash out at him. And thus the opportunity that God has given us to understand our sins would be wasted. Wasted on us would be the person whom the Lord sent to be a burden to us, thereby taking us by the hand and leading us, by means of our forbearance, to the Kingdom of Heaven....”

“Indeed, very nice!” **Kyra-Basilike** murmured, nodding her head pensively. She then took up her knitting again, with a satisfied contentedness.

Not for a fraction of a second did it cross their minds that the passage had anything to do with them at all.

(*) Basiles Argyriades, *As Much As You Can* [in Greek] (Athens: Ekdoseis “En plo,” 2013), p. 17.

Let us keep our Guardian Angel at our side

Simplicity in Our Food And Tableware*

Father Vitaly's food was very simple.

He would say: “**If we have more than three different dishes on the table, our Guardian Angel leaves.**”

Father Vitaly himself ate little, but he liked to see others eat their fill.

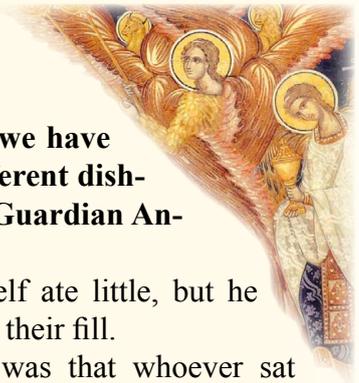
The strange thing was that whoever sat with him at table would feel satisfied on a very small amount of food.

One of **Father Vitaly's** spiritual daughters recalled: “**When we would visit Father Vitaly, we almost always ate nothing but potatoes, but even the choicest dishes could not compare with that simple food. You could not find such warmth and love anywhere else on earth.**”

When Archimandrites and Bishops would visit **Father Vitaly**, they would eat the same food as everyone else, and the tableware was quite cheap.

“**We have to learn humility throughout our entire lives,**” **Father Vitaly** was wont to say.

(*) *The Wondrous Elder Vitaly: His Life, Struggles, and Spiritual Gifts* [in Greek] (Thessalonike: Ekdoseis “Orthodoxos Kypsele,” 2008) p. 99.



“For sixty years of comfort here on earth, could I pass by the Cross that He sent in His love for me?”

The Cross of His Love and Our Personal Cross

My child, I have a great drama in my life.

Twenty days after I became engaged to my future wife, she fell ill with a high fever.



In a word, she was suffering from a severe form of tuberculosis.

I did not change my mind. I married her, and instead of his best wishes, my father bestowed on me an... insulting hand gesture and the honorific title “blockhead.”

Anyone in my place would have been par-

doned for leaving.

I, however, understood at that time that my Cross lay before me.

Did I have the right to turn a blind eye?

How would I justify myself to Him Who was crucified in His love for me?

No! The young woman’s feverish eyes would have haunted me my entire life.

For sixty years of comfort here on earth, could I pass by the Cross that Christ sent in His love for me?

I married her and have been nursing her for sixty years now, glory to God.

Even animals keep the Divine Commandments

The Sanctity of Sunday As a Day of Rest*

Monastics should set an example for laypeople

One day, a fisherman brought fresh fish to the pious Father Menas of the Skete of St. Anna [on Mt. Athos] for the Feast Day of his Church.

The Elder was puzzled as to when he could have caught the fish, since it was a Sunday.

“When did you catch them?” he asked the fisherman.

“This morning. They’re as fresh as they get!” he replied.

Father Menas then explained: “My child, I cannot buy them; they are accursed, since you caught them on a Sunday.”

The fisherman was unable to comprehend this, and so the Elder then said:

“Would you like to see for yourself? Give one of the fish to the cat and you will see that he will not eat it.”

And indeed, the cat did not touch it, but

turned away with disgust.

The fisherman was, of course, dumbfounded, and thenceforth did not work on Sundays and Great Feasts.

* * *

Father Menas was an exemplary monk and was distinguished by his piety and asceticism. He would eat once a day, at the ninth hour [3 p.m.], food prepared without oil. Being at the same time very humble, it was natural that the Grace of God should abide in him.



(*) Elder Paisios the Athonite, *Athonite Fathers and Athonite Matters* [translated from the original Greek] (Sourote, Thessalonike: Ekdotis Hierou Hesychasteriou “Evangelistes Ioannes ho Theologos,” 1998), pp. 132-133.

A Sacred Family Heirloom, Courteous Compassion, and Gratitude*



The Kazan Icon of the Mother of God, with the words “*Eta ikona budet hranit was wsu schizn,*” partially worn away in Latin letters, adorns the Church of the Joy of All Who Sorrow in St. Petersburg.

In a recent article, reprinted below, Irina Blinova told its astonishing story.

* * *

One day, an elderly woman came into the Church and began waving her arms when she saw the Icon of the Mother of God of Kazan.

“Where did that Icon come from? I gave it to a German soldier!” she exclaimed in amazement. “I recognize it by a certain dent in the frame.”

I [the Rector of the Church] explained that this Icon was given to the Church by the German Consulate in our city.

The woman broke into tears, said that her name was Vera, and told how her Orthodox family Icon ended up in Germany.

* * *

“I fled my native village, which ended up in the center of the battles. I wanted to leave with my sister and three children earlier, but mama fell seriously ill, and wouldn’t have survived the journey. ‘I will come later,’ I promised my sister, sending her with the children to a place near Ryazan, where our aunt lived in a collective farm village.

“Mama died a month later, but before her death was able to bless me with the family Icon of the Mother of God of Kazan. My reposed grandfather in his time had blessed

my mother before her wedding, and mama blessed Sasha and me with it fifteen years ago, even though my husband was in the Komsomol.

“Now the Icon lay in my threadbare refugee bag. I myself sat down under the awning of one of the station freight houses, watching the crazy dance of whirling snow. I couldn’t think about anything; I only tried to shove my fingers into the narrow sleeves of a light overcoat. Cold and hunger—that was all I could feel.

“A train rumbled up to the station, the doors of the cars opened, and the Fritzes stood in ranks handing long boxes along to each other. ‘They have brought weapons,’ the indifferent thought crossed my mind. But then suddenly I felt a painful stab: ‘It is going to the front! Where my Sasha is fighting! They will shoot at him with those rifles, and at other Russian soldiers.... Oh, the cursed ones!’

“It is strange, but the German patrols paid no attention to me, a lonely woman, emaciated with hunger. I don’t even remember when I had eaten last. I had long ago traded my watch, wedding ring, and mama’s earrings for food.

“I ran my hand over the brass frame behind the frosty cloth of the bag. ‘O Intercessor, Most Holy Mother of God,’ I whispered with my frozen lips. ‘Save and guard my little ones, my sister Nadya. Save and guard my husband, slave of God, soldier Alexander.’

“‘What? Something wrong?’ came the words just above my ear.

“I raised my head. Next to the bench stood a German soldier. I could feel sympathy in his words, and answered, ‘It’s bad.’

“The German sat down next to me. He set his bulging knapsack on the ground, fished around in it for a bit, then held out his hand. ‘Take!’ There was a square piece of bread on which lay a slice of lard, all pink. I took the gift and devoured it. The German pulled out a thermos, poured some steaming tea into the lid, and said, ‘Hot! Good!’

“Most likely, he was part of the watch here at the station. He looked about twenty years old, blue-eyed, with a guileless face. His hair

was probably light colored, like my son's, Andreika's, only you could not see it under his cap.

"The German pointed to the train engine, then at me, and, comically furrowing his brow, apparently trying to find the word, asked, 'Far?'

"Far! Now I won't make it there!' I immediately started telling him that I had hoped to go to my aunt but was now left without anything. Ending my story I said, 'I have children there. Kinder. Understand?' I traced with my hands, from high to low.

"The lad nodded, 'Oh, ja, Kinder!'

"But I won't reach them. I'll just freeze.' I was not even aware that I was crying.

"The German again reached into his knapsack and pulled out a weighty package. 'Here. Take.' He opened the package and touched its contents, then licked his finger and said, 'Good!' There was salt in the package.

"Salt... which was then worth more than gold. For salt you could get bread, milk, well, anything. There was no less than three kilograms in the package. And here he was just handing it over to me, a completely unknown Russian woman.

"Seeing the shock on my face, the lad smiled and said something I did not understand. Then he rose, screwed the lid onto his thermos, put it back in the knapsack, waved his hand, and left.

"Stop!' I ran after the soldier. 'This Icon will guard you all your life,' I said with firm assurance.

"He did not understand. Again I said, 'This Icon will guard you all your life!' The lad pulled a chemical pencil out of his pocket, wetted it with spittle, and turning over the

board asked me to say it again. As I repeated it slowly, syllable by syllable, he wrote it down on the back of the Icon in Latin letters: 'Eta ikona budet hranit wasu schizn.'

We were never to meet again.

"I was able to trade

the salt for warm clothes, felt boots, and bread, and I reached Ryazan. In 1945, my husband returned from the war."

* * *

After listening attentively to the woman, I joyfully told her what we had heard from the representatives at the German consulate who had given the Kazan Icon to our Church.

That German soldier went through the entire war. His comrades died before his eyes. Once, a truck that he was riding in exploded, but he was able to jump out of it only a moment before the explosion. The rest perished. At the end of the war, a shell hit their dug-out, which he had abandoned just a twinkling before.

The unseen power of the Russian Icon had surely saved him. He now understood and profoundly reevaluated his life, and his soul opened up to prayer.

He returned home, married, and raised his children. He placed the Icon in a beautiful glass case in a place of honor in his home, and prayed before it all his life.

When he grew old, he commanded his oldest son to take the Icon to the Russian consulate after his death. "This Icon lived in Russia and should return there. Let them take it to Leningrad, the city that withstood the blockade, dying from cold and hunger, but not surrendering."

That is how in the mid 1990's, to one of the newly-reopened Churches of St. Petersburg, where the Rector at the time was Archpriest Alexander Chistyakov, came the small Icon of the Mother of God of Kazan with a strange inscription in Latin letters on the back.



(*) Translated from the original Russian by Orthodox-Christian.com. Publication layout ours.

Importance and Usage — Symbolism and Life

As Orthodox Christians, in our daily devotional life, we make use of various objects such as candles, incense, oil lamps, Prosthora, Andidoron, and the Cross, and we take part in sacred Rites, such as the Blessing of Loaves, Memorial Services, and the Mysteries of the Church, etc.

While we make use of these things, however, we remain ignorant of their meaning and correct usage.

Incense*

Historical Background

Fragrant incense was beloved of the peoples of the Orient, and they would burn it before eminent people to show them honor.

For this reason, one of the three gifts that the Magi from the Orient offered to the King of Bethlehem was incense.

Incense from oriental palaces was used in their temples in the worship of their gods.

Likewise, the Jews used incense to pay homage to the true God.

The use of incense in Judaic rites was thereafter passed on to the Church of Christ.

Christians initially also used it for hygienic purposes. The catacombs were filled with noxious vapors from the tombs and the walls of the subterranean crypts were damp. They therefore had to use an antiseptic that would reduce the contamination of the air.

At the same time, however, the Church continued to use incense as a spiritual fragrance, in imitation of heavenly worship.

In the Revelation of St. John, the Evangelist beheld the prayers of all of the Saints as golden vials full of incense offered by Angels at the golden altar (Revelation 5:8).

Meaning and Symbolism

Incense symbolizes our prayer rising like smoke to the throne of God: "Let my prayer be set forth as incense before Thee" (Psalm 140:2).

That is, just as when incense comes into contact with lighted charcoal, it does not remain there, but rather, having become heated, ascends and gives off a fragrance, so also our souls, praying with warmth and fervent faith, must not be attached to the earth and material



things when we worship God, but rather flutter fragrantly upwards, free from material cares.

By the lifting up of our minds and souls—"let us lift up our hearts"—our prayer becomes purer and our communion with God more substantial.

Incense transports us to the place of worship of the Saints and emphasizes the presence of the Lord and the Saints in our lives.

Before the Divine Liturgy, the censuring during the *Prothesis* symbolizes the gifts of the Magi.

At the conclusion of the *Prothesis*, when the Priest covers the Holy Gifts with the *kalymmata* (veils), he censes "as an odor of spiritual sweetness," thereby prefiguring the descent of the Holy Spirit on the world and the Gifts being offered.

During the Divine Liturgy, the censuring before the Great Entrance denotes the myrrh and aloe of Nicodemus. During the Great Entrance, it symbolizes the Holy Spirit by the fragrance of the incense. After the Holy Gifts are placed on the *Antimension* and covered by the *Aer* (which symbolizes the stone at the entrance of the tomb), the censuring denotes the fragrant spices of the Myrrh-bearing women.

After the Communion of the faithful, the Priest places the Holy Gifts on the Holy Table and censes them, which denotes the breathing of the Holy Spirit onto the Apostles after the Resurrection of Christ.

* * *

What kind of materials should we use?

When censuring, we use a censer, charcoal briquettes or charcoal powder, and incense.

The censer used by the Priest in Church is a metal vessel in which the charcoal is placed. It is suspended on four chains, to which are attached twelve small bells, which represent the Church and the twelve Apostles.

Our attitude at prayer time

Attentive Prayer*

During the services of the Royal Hours and at other appointed times, a hand censer with bells called a “katzion” is used and accompanies the chanting.

In our homes, we use table censers that are either ceramic or metal. We light charcoal inside the censer, place a few grains of incense on top, and cense, after first making the sign of the Cross over it with three fingers.

What does the censer symbolize?

The base of the censer symbolizes the human nature of Jesus Christ within the womb of his All-Holy Mother. The lighted charcoal represents the fire of the Divinity; it is the bush that burned but was not consumed.

The fire also symbolizes Divine love, which burns in the hearts of the faithful like fire.

The sweet-smelling smoke reveals the fragrance of the Holy Spirit.

Where and when do we cense?

In our homes, we cense morning and evening before praying, when we read the Supplicatory Canon to the Theotokos, and when we bake prosphora.

We cense Icons, the inhabitants of the house, and their rooms.

In the Church, the Priest censes the Prothesis table, the Holy Table, the Altar, the Icons on the Templon, and the people at the beginning of the Great Doxology, because the Divine Liturgy will follow.

He also censes the entire Church in honor of the Theotokos, during the Epistle reading, the Great Entrance, and, immediately after Holy Communion, the Holy Table and the people of God.

When he blesses the censer, the Priest quietly says: “Incense we offer Thee, O Christ our

God, as an odor of spiritual sweetness, which do Thou receive upon Thy heavenly Altar, and send down upon us in return the Grace of Thine All-Holy Spirit.”



One day, Papa-Nicholas Planas was censing the Church during the Ninth Ode, when the choir was chanting “More honorable than the Cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the Seraphim.”

He passed in front of a woman who was standing next to a row of stasidia [Church stalls] without censing her. He did not cense her at all, but simply passed by her. A bit further down was an empty stasidion. He stopped there, censed it five or six times, and moved on.

When the Divine Liturgy had ended, the woman approached him and said:

“Papa-Nicholas, during the Ninth Ode you did not cense me, but went and censed the empty stasidion instead.”

Χριστῷ
τῷ Θεῷ
παρατίμηθα



“Um, Kyra-Georgia,” he replied, “you were not there! The empty stasidion was Kyra-Maria’s, who is sick.

She is home sick, but her heart and mind were here. You were here in body, but your mind was with the goats!”

(*) Protopresbyter Stephanos K. Anagnostopoulos., *Experiences During the Divine Liturgy: An interpretation of the Divine Liturgy based on actual events and experiences of Saints, Priests, monastics and lay people* [in Greek] (Piraeus: 2003), p. 166.

Do we make the sign of the Cross or not when we are being censed?

When we Christians are censed, we do not make the sign of the Cross, but instead bow our heads in a gesture of thanksgiving, since the Priest, after censing the Holy Icons, censes us, showing us honor as living Icons of God.

(*) Presbyter Georgios A. Kalpouzios, *Handbook for Orthodox Devotional Life (Self-Evident Matters of Which We Are So Ignorant)* [in Greek] (Athens: Ekdoseis “Photodotes,” 2008), pp. 15-19.

“Judge not according to the appearance”

External Appearance and the Depths of the Heart*



Two young women arrived....

It was the day before the Sunday of the Samaritan woman, who said in the Gospel, “I have no husband.”

So then, these two young women, dressed in a very modern way—indeed, quite provocatively dressed—showed up among the simple folk.

The first came forward for confession.

I asked her if she had children, and she responded, “I have two kids.”

“What work does your husband do?” I then asked.

“I don’t have a husband,” she said.

“What, you have children but no husband? Was he killed—did your husband die?” I asked.

“No,” she said, “I had the first child with one man and the second with another. You see, I’m a bar girl at a nightclub.”

* * *

I understood that I had before me a person who was living a life in the most dire of circumstances. And I was reminded of the Gospel passage that we would read the following day, when we would hear the

words that the Samaritan woman said to Christ: “I have no husband.”

I was indeed deeply affected by this young woman.

Continuing, I then asked her: “And how is it, my child, that you did not consider having an abortion, as so many women and so many couples do after having two or three children? But you, without a husband, without money, with limited possibilities, and living in a society that does not accept women “of the night” and unmarried mothers—how did you have the courage to keep those two children?”

She replied: “You know what I was thinking when I became pregnant with those children? Since God allowed it, I wouldn’t kill them. I have so many sins on my back and continue to sin every day because of my job. So at least, since God sent me those two children, I could spare them, and maybe, when I go before God, since I saved these two children, he will also save me... That’s what I was thinking...”

* * *

See, then, where virtue is hidden on earth today! In a bar!



(* From an article by Metropolitan Neophytos of Morphou (Cyprus), “Christ in Our Villages and Cities.”

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