

ANNUNCIATION GREEK ORTHODOX CATHEDRAL

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March 20, 2022

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I pray this message finds you all well and healthy.

Today, March 20th, we celebrate the feast day of St. Gregory Palamas. St. Gregory was born in Constantinople in 1296 A.D. into a wealthy family of the royal court. Although he was instructed by various masters of secular studies and excelled in his studies, from his early youth he was attracted to the monastic and ascetic life. Around the year 1316, St. Gregory entered into monasticism, in 1326 he was ordained a priest and joined a hermitage in Beroea where he practiced strict asceticism, only appearing to serve Divine Liturgy, to eat during common meals and to speak with his companions about spiritual matters. In 1335 he was appointed Abbot of the Monastery of Esphigmenou, he was a firm defender of the Orthodox faith and in 1347 he was made Archbishop of Thessalonica.

He was one of the most important ecclesiastical figures of his time who fought the heresy promoted by Barlaam and Akindynos. They taught falsely that the energies of God are created, that the essence of God is incommunicable and that matters of the Divine are understood only through the intellect. In defense of the true faith, Saint Gregory taught that the energies and essence of God are uncreated and that while we cannot take part in God's essence, we can partake of His energies so that, through the Holy Spirit, we can know God and see His Uncreated Light. He defended the possibility of experiencing the Uncreated Holy Light of the heavens which was witnessed mainly through Christ's life in our earthly world. In other words, he confessed that Christians or not are able to experience the heavenly realm of God and its paradisaical life even here in our hearts, minds, souls and physical senses. He protected the monastic habit by teaching about the importance of noetic prayer, which involves incessantly praying the Jesus Prayer: "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner." This prayer connects the nous with the heart and through this practice God's uncreated world can be revealed to man. St. Gregory of Palamas reposed in the Lord in 1359, leaving behind a tremendous spiritual legacy for Orthodox Christians not only of his time but, also, of today.

On March 20th we, also, celebrate the feast day of St. Photini the Samaritan Woman. In the Gospel according to John we read about St. Photini as the Samaritan Woman to whom Christ revealed Himself as the Messiah and Second Person of the Holy Trinity. At the site of Jacob's well, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ spoke to St. Photini and asked her for a drink of water. Perplexed, she questioned how Christ, a Jew, would ask her, a Samaritan woman, for a drink when Jews and Samaritans had no dealings with each other. And Jesus answered her: "If you knew the gift of God and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water." (John 4:10). Christ, revealed not only His identity to her, but, also, that she had been widowed five times and her entire life, which convinced her that He was the awaited Messiah. St. Photini's life-altering meeting with Jesus Christ resulted in her repentance and, later, baptism into Christianity. St. Photini became Equal to the Apostles in her fearless ministry to share the Gospel with others. And for this reason, she was arrested, tortured and sentenced to death by being thrown down a well.

On March 21st we celebrate the feast day of St. James the Confessor. From his early youth he fell in love with God and decided to dedicate himself to the monastic life. He became a disciple of St. Theodore the Studite who spiritually guided St. James in asceticism at the Monastery of

Studium in Constantinople. He lived during the iconoclast controversy, which was against the veneration of Holy icons in homes or in Churches. St. James the Confessor became Bishop of Catania and was a great defender of the Holy icons, which led to his imprisonment and various tortures by the iconoclasts. He died after patiently and bravely enduring these afflictions. By God's Grace he never gave in to the iconoclasts' false beliefs, but, on the contrary, with patience, humility and trust in God's Will he continued confessing the true faith, for the Glory of God.

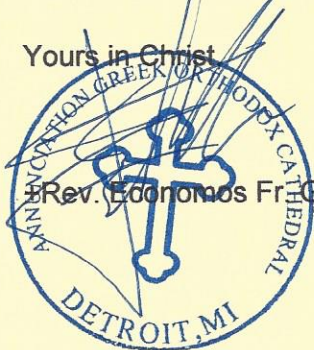
On March 25th every year we celebrate the feast day of the Annunciation of the Theotokos which is the day that gave life-giving hope to all of humanity. It is the day when Christ was incarnated by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary. God calls and we, humans, answer with a 'yes' in the person of the Virgin Mary. The Theotokos willingly participates in the incarnation of Christ and becomes the vessel through which our Lord and Savior takes flesh; as the Son of God, Christ fully takes on our human nature while, also, fully sustaining His Divinity.

The Ever-Virgin Mary was so humble, so loyal and so truly dedicated to our Trinitarian God that she instantly realized her role in the salvation plan of God and answered faithfully "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38).

It is important to remember that six months earlier St. John the Baptist and Forerunner was conceived through natural means in the womb of St. Elizabeth (cousin of the Virgin Mary) when the Virgin Mary, following Christ's Holy Conception, greeted St. Elizabeth. Upon hearing her greeting St. John leapt in St. Elizabeth's womb and she declares the Virgin Mary to be "the mother of my Lord." (Luke 1:43). In this way, St. John's role as prophet of God and Forerunner was revealed through the prophetic act of leaping in his mother's womb, fulfilling the Old Testament prophesy, "Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me." (Malachi 3:1). St. John paved the way for Christ's Ministry by preaching to all about a baptism of repentance in order for us to prepare to receive the Living Word of God and the Redeemer of humankind. Nine months following the feast day of the Annunciation of the Theotokos we celebrate the Nativity of Christ, which is the time typically needed for fetus development, further confirming Christ's fully-human nature.

Let us all, through the sacrament of Holy Confession, ask our spiritual father about how we can use a prayer rule and prayer rope to engage in noetic prayer, as St. Gregory Palamas encourages us to do, by praying "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner." Let us all honor our baptism in the name of the Holy Trinity and our catechism in the Christian faith within our daily lives by being fervent in our faith in thought, word and deed, as was St. Photini the Samaritan Woman after her conversion by our Lord, and God, Jesus Christ at Jacob's well. Let us all show our respect, love and honor for those depicted in the Holy icons of our Church by making our cross three times and venerating them, as did St. James the Confessor who faithfully defended their rightful place in the Orthodox Church. And let us all rejoice for the feast day of the Annunciation of the Holy Theotokos, which is the day that, through Christ's conception, the gates of Heaven are open to those who repent of their sins and with all their heart, mind, body and soul seek to be united with God by following Christ's example and doing God's Will.

Yours in Christ



Rev. Ekonomos Fr. Georgios Manias

