



ANNUNCIATION GREEK ORTHODOX CATHEDRAL

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My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I pray this message finds you all well and healthy.

Today, March 27th, we celebrate the feast day of the Holy Cross, which concludes the third week of our journey of spiritual and physical fasting for this blessed and holy period of Great Lent this ecclesiastical year. During this intense time of fasting and prayer the feast day of the Holy Cross of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ becomes for us an invisible armor of protection against any temptations of the evil one to return to our sinful ways and alter our course in this spiritual journey of Great Lent. Today, the Holy Cross of Christ rises in church in front of us, all the faithful, to give us strength as a holy symbol of victory over death and sin.

Jesus Christ is the New Adam. For our salvation, He sacrificed His sinless self on the Holy Cross and conquered death through His Resurrection, restoring and healing our fallen humanity. As the spotless sacrificial lamb, Christ did away with the old wood of disobedience, which was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and through the wood of His Holy Cross he opened to us the Gates of Paradise so that we may be united eternally with Him in Heaven. The Holy Cross reminds us of Christ's love for us and it symbolizes to others that we are His followers. As followers of Christ, we must patiently endure our own cross (which is given to us according to what each of us can carry), repent of our sinful ways and seek to do His Holy Will in thought, word and deed. In this way, we can be reunited with our Creator in the life to come. Through baptism, we enter a new life in Christ, and, as part of God's family, the Holy Cross is and will always be our protection against evil and our hope for eternal life.

On March 29th we celebrate the feast day of St. Mark, Bishop of Arethusa. He lived during the 4th century and participated in the Councils of Antioch, Philippopolis, Sirmium, and Selefkia of Isavria, which took place during the middle of the 4th century. Under Emperor Constantine, St. Mark tore down a temple and established a church in its place; however, when the pagan emperor Julian 'the Apostate' came into power the pagans sought after St. Mark for revenge. At first he hid from them, but, then, he surrendered himself and was subjected to their various tortures. By God's providence, the hearts of many pagans softened as they witnessed St. Mark's loyalty to Christ and his pious, forgiving and peaceful acceptance of the torments inflicted upon him, which led many of them to convert to Christianity. In the end, the disposition of St. Mark's torturers changed and they repented and set him free.

On April 1st we celebrate the feast day of St. Mary of Egypt who lived during the 6th century. From her early youth, she lived a sinful life of prostitution and fornication. Her thirst for sin was so great that she sinned not because she needed to make a living but because she took pleasure in it. But one event led to St. Mary's repentance and a change in her ways. One day, St. Mary noticed a group of people journeying to Jerusalem for the feast day of the Exaltation of the Precious and Life-giving Cross and she wished to join them.

Throughout the entire journey she did not miss the opportunity to sin even more. On the feast day of the Holy Cross, she followed the crowd and attempted to make her way through the church doors, but an invisible power stopped her from entering. When she unsuccessfully attempted to enter several more times, St. Mary realized her sinful and unclean life prevented her from seeing and venerating the Holy Cross. With tears in her eyes and deep repentance in her heart, she turned to an icon of the Holy Theotokos and prayed to her asking for her intercession to remove the invisible obstacle that was holding her back. In return, she promised to renounce her sinful life. After her prayer, she approached the church doors and entered without difficulty. Returning to the same icon, she thanked the Most-Holy Theotokos for her intercessory prayers and wishes to fulfill her promise. It is then that she heard a voice instructing her to depart to a remote area of the desert across the Jordan River. There, St. Mary of Egypt lived in isolation from any human contact for 47 years, with no other clothing than what she wore coming that day and with no other food than a few loaves of bread that she brought with her the herbs and foods that she foraged in the desert. According to St. Sophronios of Jerusalem's account of St. Mary's life, she struggled spiritually for 17 years through fasting and prayer to overcome and cleanse herself from her intense desires and passions. Her 17-year ascetic struggle edified her body and soul to the point that even St. Zosimas, a holy man of his own right, was unknowingly guided by God's Providence to meet St. Mary in the dessert and learn from her life, which benefitted him spiritually at a time when he was seeking such edifying experiences.

On April 2nd we celebrate the feast day of St. Titus the Wonderworker who lived in the 9th century. St. Titus was a holy monk who pursued an ascetic life at the Studion Monastery near Constantinople. He dedicated his entire life to God, for the Glory of God and for the benefit of God's people, through his self-denial, self-sacrifice, fasting and prayer. These practices helped him attain a mild disposition and the Christian virtues of honesty, humility, obedience, patience, self-control, kindness, love and piousness. The holy Christian virtues that St. Titus attained drew many faithful Christians to him who sought his guidance, blessings, intercessory prayers, and his holiness inspired others to, likewise, struggle spiritually towards the goal of Theosis.

Let us all venerate the life-giving Holy Cross of Jesus Christ and raise it high in our God-fearing hearts and let this symbol of Christ's victory over death become a secure shield of armor protecting us against our sinful temptations. Let us all be like St. Mark, Bishop of Arethusa, and be fearless and God-strengthened confessors of our true faith in thought, word and deed. Let us all find hope and holiness by imitating the true repentance of St. Mary of Egypt through our continuous self-examination and confession of our sins, turning away from them and seeking Christ in times of weakness and sinful temptations. And let us all imitate the philanthropy and love of St. Titus the Wonderworker by dedicating our lives to the fountain of divine love and mercy, our Lord, and Savior Jesus Christ, for the Glory of God and for the salvation of our souls.



+Rev. Economics Fr. Georgios Manias

