

The Orthodox Parish of the Holy and Life-Giving Cross, Lancaster

Meeting at the Chaplaincy Centre of Lancaster University

Newsletter



*Ἐθρονος Χριστός, Ζωοδότης.
(Φ. Κόντογλου, 1962)*

*The Parish of the Holy and Life-Giving Cross,
belongs to the Antiochian Orthodox Deanery of the United Kingdom and Ireland,
which is part of the Antiochian Orthodox Archdiocese of Western and Central Europe.*

*Our Metropolitan is His Eminence Archbishop John.
The Patriarchate of Antioch is third senior of the Orthodox Churches.
The Patriarch is His Beatitude Ignatius IV.*

*The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch
(Acts 11:26)*

BYZANTIUM 330-2008

(Connecting the past and the present)

The term Byzantine in today's language often takes on the pejorative meaning of inflexible and convoluted even of unwieldy and corrupt. Yet those who have been to the "Byzantium 330-1453" Exhibition at the Royal Academy of Art in London could not help but stand in awe at the intricate wonders of Byzantium. Those from a non-religious background could take from these images an awareness of a period of history where there was a heightened appreciation and execution of artistic expression, whereas the Orthodox would see the dynamic of tradition, the vehicle of ritual and the fruit of faith.

The 'west' in history has had a multiplicity of views about Byzantium ranging from absolute rejection and hatred, through intellectual dismissal, to laudable jealousy. The sack of Constantinople in 1204 by the fourth crusade wanted the treasure and wealth but ignored the faith which gave it birth. There was a cynical disregard for the spiritual content of such prizes and loot. It was Oscar Wilde who said "a cynic knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing."

Another Irishman who deplored the "evils and excesses in religion" the historian William Lecky writing in 1869 wrote: *"Of that Byzantine Empire the universal verdict of history is that it constitutes without a single exception the most thoroughly base and despicable form that civilisation has yet assumed."*

Well not quite "universal verdict" for yet another Irish poet W. B. Yeats could write in his poem "Sailing to Byzantium":

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

John Ruskin in "Stones of Venice" saw Byzantium through the prism of Venetian acquisitions: *"Whatever in San Marco arrests the eye, or affects the feelings, is either Byzantine or has been modified by Byzantine influence; and our inquiry into its architectural merits need not therefore be disturbed by the anxieties of antiquarianism, or arrested by the obscurities of chronology."*



Gospel book with an embossed icon of the Archangel Michael, Constantinople, 12th century.

Faint praise I am afraid, but he illustrates a western world view which is captured by mystery often interpreted as myth and glory which is understood as sentiment. Politics, law, art, administration and creed were united in Byzantium. Perhaps it is because of the dislocation of these in today's society that causes that

cynical, partial and incomplete perspective on Byzantium and what it stood for.

We should not be surprised by the reactions to things Byzantine. I was reminded of how in St John's Gospel Our Lord Jesus Christ makes claims about who he is and such claims are attended by signs. The claim *I am the Light of the world* is placed next to the Healing of the Blind man, *I am the Resurrection and the Life* accompanies the raising of Lazarus. It is interesting to see the reactions of those who witnessed these signs. Some make the connection and believe, others are hostile but there is no neutrality!



Mosaic icon of Saint Stephen, c. 1108-1113

Was I the only person making the sign of the cross as I stood in front of these beautiful Icons of our faith? Maybe not, for I did overhear a not a few Greek-speaking commentaries in that crowded gallery! But for me, this was not some far off time and some far off land, it was home, it was the present and it was life in Christ!

To visit an Orthodox (Byzantine) Church today is still to enter heaven on

earth. I wanted to let people know this! Ironically, it is Ruskin's words about the *obscurities of chronology* that informs the west's view and that fails to locate the expression of faith in the past and the present. Robin Cormack's excellent guide notes to the exhibition are exact in every detail but one, he refers to everything including the description of the Church's celebration of Easter itself as happening in the past tense. True he is writing about a period of history and about an Empire but perhaps unconsciously he expresses the west's prevailing view of Byzantine worship as antiquarian, and belonging to the past rather than the intersection of all time by eternity.



Icon of St. Theodore Tero slaying the dragon, 1425-1450

It is interesting to pose the question how those who visited the exhibits viewed the Icons and holy artifacts? Did they see them as works of exquisite beauty? I am sure many did, but one needs to make another step and make the connection between beauty and truth, between sign and claim! Philokalia is

defined as, love of the beautiful, the exalted, the excellent, understood as the transcendent source of life and the revelation of Truth. It was faith in Christ that prompted such beautiful revealed and inspired handiwork. One grandmother open-eyed, pointing out an icon to her grandchild gasped, "Just look at all that gold!" whereas we Byzantines close our eyes in prayer at the transcendent glory of the uncreated Light of God.

To paraphrase William Blake: *And was Byzantium builded here.....?* Well, the foundations were laid long ago, the living stones are prepared and the building continues with its extensions and conversions! The Empire may be past but the Kingdom is very much alive!

JAH

PISCULESTI, ROMANIA

We are including some photos of the construction of the Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God in Pisculesti, Romania. Fr. Bogdan Georgescu is supervising this holy task, for the completion of which, we would like to send our best wishes in Christ.



Building on Byzantine foundations / extending the Kingdom (Workers at the construction site of the Church).



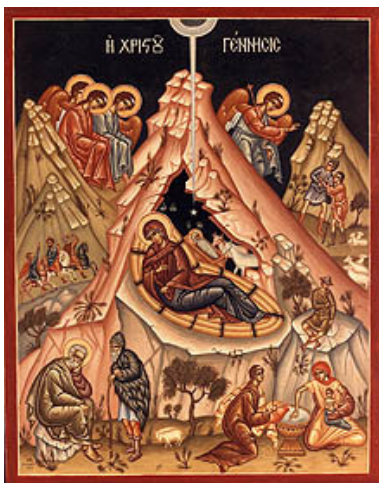
The foundations of the Church have been laid.

THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST

The incomprehensible and inexplicable Nativity of Christ came to pass when Herod was reigning in Judea; the latter was an Ascalonite on his fathers' side and an Idumean on his mother's. He was in every way foreign to the royal line of David; rather, he had received his authority from the Roman emperors, and had ruled tyrannically over the Jewish people for some thirty-three years. The tribe of Judah, which had reigned of old, was deprived of its rights and stripped of all rule and authority. Such was the condition of the Jews when the awaited Messiah was born, and truly thus was fulfilled the prophecy which the Patriarch Jacob had spoken 1,807 years before: "A ruler shall not fail from Judah, nor a prince from his loins, until there come the things stored up for him; and he is the expectation of the nations" (Gen. 49:10).

Thus, our Saviour was born in Bethlehem, a city of Judea, whither

Joseph had come from Nazareth of Galilee, taking Mary his betrothed, who was great with child, that, according to the decree issued in those days by the Emperor Augustus, they might be registered in the census of those subject to Rome. Therefore, when the time came for the Virgin to give birth, and since because of the great multitude there was no place in the inn, the Virgin's circumstance constrained them to enter a cave which was near Bethlehem. Having as shelter a stable of irrational beasts, she gave birth there, and swaddled the Infant and laid Him in the manger (Luke 2:1-7). From this, the tradition has come down to us that when Christ was born He lay between two animals, an ox and a donkey, that the words of the Prophets might be fulfilled: "Between two living creatures shalt Thou be known" (Abba-cum 3:2), and "The ox knoweth his owner and the donkey his master's crib" (Esaias 1: 3).



But while the earth gave the new-born Saviour such a humble reception, Heaven on high celebrated majestically His world-saving coming. A wondrous

star, shining with uncommon brightness and following a strange course, led Magi from the East to Bethlehem to worship the new-born King. Certain shepherds who were in the area of Bethlehem, who kept watch while tending their sheep, were suddenly surrounded by an extraordinary light, and they saw before them an Angel who proclaimed to them the good tidings of the Lord's joyous Nativity. And straightway, together with this Angel, they beheld and heard a whole host of the Heavenly Powers praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will towards men" (Luke 2:8-14).

NEWSLETTER FOR 2 YEARS

Our newsletter becomes 2 years old this December! You are all invited to send us articles for inclusion in the next issues.

ST. HERMAN OF ALASKA, THE FIRST SAINT OF AMERICA

Saint Herman (his name is a variant of Germanus) was born near Moscow in 1756. In his youth he became a monk, first at the Saint Sergius Hermitage near Saint Petersburg on the Gulf of Finland; while he dwelt there, the most holy Mother of God appeared to him, healing him of a grave malady. Afterwards he entered Valaam Monastery on Valiant Island in Lake Ladoga; he often withdrew into the wilderness to pray for days at a time. In 1794, answering a call for missionaries to preach the Gospel to the Aleuts, he came to the New World with

the first Orthodox mission to Alaska. He settled on Spruce Island, which he called New Valaam, and here he persevered, even in the face of many grievous afflictions mostly at the hands of his own countrymen in the loving service of God and of his neighbour. Besides his many toils for the sake of the Aleuts, he subdued his flesh with great asceticism, wearing chains, sleeping little, fasting and praying much. He brought many people to Christ by the example of his life, his teaching, and his kindness and sanctity, and was granted the grace of working miracles and of prophetic insight. Since he was not a priest, Angels descended at Theophany to bless the waters in the bay; Saint Herman used this holy water to heal the sick. Because of his unwearied missionary labours, which were crowned by God with the salvation of countless souls, he is called the Enlightener of the Aleuts, and has

likewise been renowned as a wonder-worker since his repose in 1837.

MAJOR CELEBRATIONS THIS MONTH

4th Dec: **St. Barbara the Great Martyr**

6th Dec: **St. Nicholas the Wonderworker**

12th Dec: **St. Spyridon the Wonderworker**

13th Dec: **St. Herman the Wonderworker of Alaska & First Saint of America**

22nd Dec: **St. Anastasia the Great Martyr**

25th Dec: **The Nativity of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ**

27th Dec: **St. Stephen the First Martyr**

For the lives of Saints please visit the Calendar of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America: www.calendar.goarch.org

“We have been called to become unknown heroes,
visible only to the unsleeping eye of God”

- Elder Ephraim -



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