CHALLENGE

THE PULSE OF ORTHODOX YOUTH

Behold Your Mother

by Steven Christoforou

A lot of things about the Church, which seem so natural to us, can appear strange to someone who isn't Orthodox. There are about 1,5 million Greek Orthodox in the U.S.

In a country where Christianity usually means either Protestantism or Catholicism, it's no surprise that so many people know so little about who we are or what we believe.

On Aug. 1, we began a period of fasting and prayer for the greatest of saints, the Mother of God, in preparation of her Dormition, which we observed Aug. 15. To millions of non-Orthodox, our deep love for the Panagia is odd. To these Christians, Orthodoxy can be a strange thing. They don't understand the role saints play, and see our reverence for the Theotokos in particular as troubling, even idolatrous.

So why do we reverence the Panagia so deeply? Notice, the answer has more to do with her Son than with her.

There is something earth-shaking and momentous in the simple words Mother of God. The Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Son of God, True God of True God, had no mother. Nor did He have a body. Yet, in the fullness of time, God the Father sent forth His only-begotten Son. He who had no flesh put on flesh. God became man. Christ is born, glorify Him!

As all children are born of mothers, Christ was born of a blessed woman. Yet, as loving and pious and holy as she is, we honor her not simply for her own sake. The Theotokos is important because her life is a testimony to our salvation. God became man! Salvation has come to the world! And it came through the greatest of missionaries, the Theotokos herself, who shared God's Word with the world.

To reverence her is to remember: the wall of alienation between God and man has been shattered.

We take the Panagia seriously because the Incarnation of Christ is a serious matter. Nothing is as it was.

Salvation has come to the world!

Salvation is not abstract. It is real, and very personal. It is the transition from mere survival to true life, as we share in Christ's true life. To be baptized in Christ is to literally put on Christ, to become a member of His very Body.

We see this, as we see all truth, at the foot of the Cross. When the rest fled, terrified, the Beloved Disciple remained and stood at the foot of the Cross as his beloved Master washed the world in His blood.

When Jesus therefore saw His mother, and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, "Woman, behold your son!" Then He said to the disciple, "Behold your mother!" And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home.

If, in baptism, we are Christ, then His mother is our mother, as His Father is our Father.

And His mother, our mother, deflects all honor we offer her and directs it back to Christ. To confess her as the Mother of God is simply to confess the reality of baptism, the reality of the Church, the reality of our salvation in Christ. It is no accident that we very, very rarely see her depicted in an icon apart from her Son. She is a signpost, steering us back into God's loving embrace.

As we stand at the foot of the Cross, as we are thrice submerged into the waters of baptism, we are incorporated into Christ Himself.

One day, we will stand before God the Father as his sons and daughters, and by our side will stand our mother, Christ's mother, praying for us and encouraging us every step we take.

Truly you are worthy to be blessed,
Mother of our God,
the Theotokos,
You the ever blessed one,
and all blameless one,
And the Mother of our God.
You are honored more
than the Cherubim,
And you have more glory,
When compared, to the Seraphim;
You, without corruption,
Did bear God, the Logos;
You are the Theotokos;
You do we magnify.

The Nativity of the Virgin Mary

On Sept. 8, we celebrate the Nativity (birth) of the blessed Theotokos and Mother of our Lord. The birth of the Virgin Mary was a miraculous answer to the prayers of her parents, Joachim and Anna, who were unable to have children for many years. Although we hear about these feast days, do we truly understand their significance? Do we really understand how important and relevant her birth is to our faith and to our salvation? Check out this reflection from The Ladder, the official blog of the Department of Youth and Young Adult Ministries. Originally posted at the beginning of the Dormition Fast, it captures the reasons we honor the beloved Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary. We realize that her birth is a miracle for all humanity.

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He is a 2013 graduation of Holy Cross School of Theology and also graduated from Yale University and Fordham University School of Law. Steven's original post can be found at http://orthodoxyouthministry.blogspot.com/2013/08/behold-your-mother.html

OCF College Student Sunday

Over the last several weeks, Orthodox Christian students arrived on college campuses throughout the country. OCF (Orthodox Christian Fellowship) has been organizing resources and programs to help students stay connected to Christ and His Church. On Sept. 15, parishes celebrated College Student Sunday and recognized students of their communities.

OCF's mission is to support fellowships on college campuses, whose members experience and witness to the Orthodox Christian Church through community life, prayer, service to others and study of the Faith. College Student Sunday is a way for each person to get involved and support this effort. Through OCF and its many leaders, clergy, student advisors, supporters and volunteers, young people are not only staying connected to the Church, but their faith and commitment to Christ is deepened and strengthened.

For more information and resources regarding College Student Sunday and how parishes can get involved throughout the year, visit this link: www.ocf.net/wikis/programs/college-student-sunday.aspx. Visit www.ocf.net for more information, including a list of chapters, resources, and a calendar of events.

Camp Week 2013 – A Tribute

Thanks to all who joined us as we took a look back on the Summer 2013 and all the incredible experiences we had at GOA camps around the country (and even in Greece!). Hundreds of counselors, and thousands of campers, had the best summers of their lives! We hope you had a chance to see some of the reflections posted on "The Ladder" (orthodoxyouthministry.blogspot.com) and our new YouTube Channel, Y2AM. If you haven't subscribed to The Ladder, do it today! Don't miss out on all of the incredible posts, videos, and helpful links regarding Orthodoxy and other relevant topics!

Turning Over a New Leaf

Easy Ways to Grow in Faith This New Ecclesiastical Year

Sometimes we can get overwhelmed thinking of all the ways we could improve our spiritual lives. That's why New Year's resolutions are so hard to keep! There is too much pressure to achieve our sometimes impossibly high goals. Instead, make a few simple goals that we can quickly achieve and grow from there. Here are some examples:

1) Pray more! If you already pray in the mornings and at night, make sure to pray at dinnertime or make your prayer time a little longer.

2) Serve more! If you already participate in service projects or philanthropic activities, consider organizing a project or offering more of your time and talent to these efforts.

3) Worship more! If you already attend Divine Liturgy and other services pretty frequently, make a more focused attempt to be on time or make it even earlier for the Orthros (Matins) service.

4) Read more! You might be bogged down with school and work. But take an hour out of your video game or Facebook time to read something that is relevant to your Orthodox Christian faith. The Holy Scriptures are a GREAT place to start. You can also ask your priest about reading recommendations! You could even drop by and read the latest blog from the National Youth Office at www.orthodoxyouthministry.blogspot.com.

5) Love more! – Love is not just a noun; it is also a verb… an action! Make an effort to love your neighbor by respecting rather than judging. Make an effort to love your family by learning how to be patient and understanding, even when they get on your nerves! Make an effort to love those who might be different than you because they, too, were created in God's image.