

NATIVITY OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST CHURCH

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From the Desk of Father Michael

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SAINTS PETER AND PAUL FAST

The fast that precedes the feast day of Ss. Peter and Paul is one of the four major fast periods of the year, which include the period of Lent before Pascha, the Advent fast which precedes Christmas, the fast before the Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God in August, and the fast before the Feast of Ss. Peter and Paul. The length of the fast of Ss. Peter and Paul depends on the date of Pascha. This year the fast begins on Monday, June 4, and will end after the celebration of Ss. Peter and Paul on Friday, June 29.

Fasting is an integral part of our spiritual life and can never be understood as a recommendation by the Church but must be seen as a commandment of Christ, for He said "When you fast," not "if you fast or if you wish to fast." The Ss. Peter and Paul fast has the same prescription as do the other three fast periods: no meat or dairy products or anything that comes from an animal is permitted. Fasting is a spiritual exercise that must be taken seriously by those who consider themselves members of the holy Orthodox faith. **Those suffering infirmities and under doctor's prescription must follow their medical health regimen.**

The following are some examples of the benefits of fasting:

By fasting, a man lifts his soul above its earthly prison, and penetrates through the darkness of animal life to the light of God's Kingdom, to his own true homeland.

Fasting makes a man strong, decisive and courageous before both men and demons.

By fasting, Daniel was saved from the lion's den, and the Three Children from the burning fiery furnace.

By fasting, King David lifted up his heart to the Lord, and God's grace descended on him and he sang the sweetest and most surpassing of prayers that any man, before the coming of Christ, has ever raised to God.

By fasting, King Jehoshaphat crushed his enemies, the Ammonites and the Moabites (II Chronicles 20:23).

By fasting, the Jews were saved from persecution by Haman, the imperial deputy (Esther 4:3).

By fasting, the city of Nineveh was saved from the destruction that the prophet Jonah had prophesied for it.

By fasting, John the Baptist became the greatest of those born of woman.

Armed with fasting, Saint Anthony overcame all the hordes of demons and drove them from him. What? Only Saint Anthony? An uncountable army of Christian saints, both men and women, have purified themselves by fasting, strengthened themselves by fasting and became the greatest heroes in human history. For they conquered that which it is most difficult to overcome--themselves. And, in conquering themselves, they conquered the world and Satan.

Saint Basil says: "Fasting strengthens the mind."

Saint Diodore: "True ascetics refrain from food, not because they consider that it is evil in itself, but in order, through restraint, to bridle the body's burning members."

And Blessed Jerome: "To God, the Creator and Lord of the universe, the sound of a rumbling stomach is not necessary, but without it there cannot be chastity."

THE NATIVITY OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

On Sunday, June 24, our parish will celebrate its patronal feast day the Nativity of St. John the Baptist. St. John is called the greatest ever born of a woman and also by the following other names and titles: An angel in human flesh, the forerunner, a prophet, martyr, the Baptist because he baptized our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In addition, he was called an apostle even though he was not one of the twelve apostles.

Let us honor St. John in the words of the Troparian: 'O Prophet and Forerunner of Christ's coming, we are unable to give thee worthy praise yet we lovingly honor thee, for the sterile one has given thee birth and the muteness of thy father was broken by thy glorious and honorable birth, and the incarnation of the Son of God was preached to the world.'

The following is a brief overview of the nativity and the young life of St. John the Baptist taken from the Prologue from Ochrid written by St. Nicholas Velimirovic:

'Six months before his appearing to the most holy Virgin Mary in Nazareth, the great Gabriel, archangel of the Lord, appeared to Zacharias, the High Priest in the Temple in Jerusalem. Before he revealed the miraculous conception by a virgin who had not known a man, the archangel revealed the wondrous conceiving by an old and barren woman. Zacharias was unable at once to believe the words of God's herald, and for this his tongue was bound in dumbness and remained thus until the eighth day after John's birth. The kinsfolk of Zacharias and Elizabeth gathered together on that day for the infant's circumcision and naming. When they inquired of the father how he wished the child to be called, he, being still dumb, wrote on a slate: 'John'. At that moment his tongue was loosed and he began to speak.

Zacharias's house was on the heights between Bethlehem and Hebron. The news of the angel's appearing to Zacharias, of his dumbness and of the loosening of his tongue at the exact moment that he wrote 'John', was carried throughout all Israel, coming to Herod's ears. So, when he sent men to kill all the infants around Bethlehem, he sent men off to Zacharias's family house in the hills, to slay John also. But Elizabeth hid the child in good time. The king was enraged at this and sent an executioner to the Temple to kill Zacharias (for it was then his turn to serve in the Temple again). Zacharias was killed between the court and the Temple and his blood clotted and solidified on the paving slabs, and remained as an enduring witness against Herod. Elizabeth hid herself and the child in a cave, where she soon died. The young John remained in the wilderness alone, in the care of God and His angels.'

THE GLORIOUS AND ALL LAUDABLE APOSTLES

SAINTS PETER AND PAUL

On Friday, June 29, we will celebrate the glorious feast of Saints Peter and Paul. To have as intercessors before the throne of God these two giants of Christian apostleship should be for all of us always a humbling and awesome experience.

We are still in the shadow of the Feast of Pentecost, and the commemoration of these two great apostles at this time is no accident. The apostles in general and Saints Peter and Paul in particular, through their witness, prove the reality of the Holy Spirit working with and through them.

The fast period that precedes this glorious commemoration helps to remind us of the great solemnity placed on this feast by our holy Church. These two saints reflect the epitome of the Christian gospel message where it is revealed how the Lord manifests His strength in the midst of human weakness and where He reveals the redeemable fallen nature of man by making saints from sinners.

The Holy Apostle Peter

The son of Jonah and brother of Andrew the First-Called, he was of the tribe of Simeon and resided in the town of Bethsaida. He was a fisherman and was at first called Simon, but the Lord was pleased to call him Cephas, or Peter (Jn 1:42). He was the first of the disciples to give clear expression to his faith in the Lord Jesus, saying: 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Mt. 16:16). His love for the Lord was very strong, and his faith in Him went from strength to strength. When the Lord was put on trial, Peter denied Him three times, but afterwards once he looked into the Lord's eyes, his soul was filled with shame and repentance. He was crucified upside down in Rome by the Emperor Nero who also had St. Paul beheaded.

The Holy Apostle Paul

Born in Tarsus and of the tribe of Benjamin, he was formerly called Saul and studied under Gamaliel. He was a Pharisee and a persecutor of Christians. He was wondrously converted to the Christian faith by the Lord Himself, who appeared to him on the road to Damascus. He was baptized by the Apostle Ananias, named Paul and enrolled in the work of the Great Apostles. He preached the Gospel everywhere with burning zeal, from the borders of Arabia to the land of Spain, among both the Jews and the heathen, and receiving the title of 'the Apostle to the Gentiles.' His fearful sufferings were matched only by his superhuman endurance. Through all the years of his preaching, he hung from day to day like a thread between life and death. Filling his days and nights with toil and suffering for Christ, organizing the Church in many places and reaching a high level of perfection, he was able to say: 'I live; yet not I but Christ liveth in me' (Gal. 2:20). He was beheaded in Rome in the reign of Nero, at the same time that St. Peter was killed.