

June 1 - Saturday of the Fourth Week of Pascha
Acts 12:1-11

Standing Firm When Attacked: Acts 12:1-11, especially vs. 1: “Now about that time Herod the king stretched out his hand to harass some from the Church.” The Prophet David writes that “the kings of the earth were aroused . . . against the Lord” (Ps 2:2). Now, we read about one of the first politically motivated assaults on the Church. The mention of Herod the king in verse 1 places these events just after AD 41, for in that year Emperor Claudius enlarged Herod Agrippa’s kingdom in southern Syria and Galilee to include Judea. Agrippa chose to move his capital to Jerusalem.

Judea had been directly governed by the Romans for thirty-seven years. Every agent of government answered to the imperial procurators, of whom Pontius Pilate is the best known. Now, with the Jewish king Herod Agrippa’s ascension to the throne, those Jews who opposed the Church gained a political ally in their violent campaign against the Jewish Christians.

Saint Luke records this political shift toward violence, which begins with the execution of the Apostle James. “And because he [Herod] saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to seize Peter also” (Acts 12:3). When those with worldly power oppose the will of God, Christians are often made to suffer as a result of those beliefs and choices.

Even in modern times government authorities may turn against the Church, as happened in Soviet Russia, and the faithful must answer for their loyalties. Saint Luke makes it clear that Herod’s goals are political: the king is playing for the favor of his citizens in a nation with a nearly all-Jewish population. The Jewish supporters of Christ compose an unpopular minority, and thus make a useful target.

Ten years earlier their leader, Jesus of Nazareth, had been executed. Now the followers of Jesus are admitting Gentiles into their synagogues, ignoring the sacred laws dividing Jews from other ethnic groups. Their actions offend the traditional values of Israel’s citizens (e.g., see 1 Chr 16:34).

In Herod Agrippa, upholders of Jewish tradition now had a king of acceptable lineage, a ruler supported by imperial Rome. They could argue that Christian synagogues threaten the stability of Jewish privilege with the Romans by admitting Gentiles. Recall the Prophet David’s words concerning the kings of the earth: “The rulers were assembled together, against the Lord, and against His Christ. Let us break their bonds asunder, and let us cast away their yoke from us” (Ps 2:2-3).

Government necessarily depends upon control and the power to enforce the law. By pleasing most people through the oppression of the Christians, King Herod aimed to build up his popular support, solidify his power, and keep his newly restored kingdom in the hands of his family.

The God-given goal of the Church, on the other hand, is the redemption of all people who choose Christ, no matter what their ethnicity. Access to God’s kingdom belongs to everyone on the face of the earth. Furthermore, since God is Ruler of all, the Lord’s will is to be honored (Acts 12:11), no matter what governments have to say. Even we may be asked to resist for the truth some day.

The early Church unites in the face of Herod’s arrests and executions, trusting in “constant prayer” (vs. 12). Although Herod’s attacks are popular with society, the hand of the Lord proves greater, for “He that dwelleth in the heavens shall laugh them to scorn, and the Lord shall deride them” (Ps 2:4). What truly matters is our stance before the Judge. May we always stand with the Lord, and welcome people of every ethnic group into our churches (Is 60:3)!

Preserve Thy holy Orthodox Church, keep it in peace and unconquerable forever.

**June 2 – Fifth Sunday of Pascha (Sunday of the Samaritan Woman)
Acts 11:19-30**

The Way of the Lord: Acts 11:19-26, 29-30, especially vs. 21: “*And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord.*” The British poet William Cowper penned the well-known line: “God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.” The present passage from Acts reveals the diverse ways in which God illumines our darkness, so that in spite of our failures to see, we still understand that the Lord’s hand is at work (Is 41:20).

We know that some Jewish members of the early Church refused to share the gospel with Gentiles, contrary to Christ’s mandate that “all the nations” are to be brought into the Church (Mt 28:19). Although Saint Peter’s ministry focuses on the Jews, God leads him to preach to a group of Gentiles and baptize them (Acts 10:9-48). When Greek-speaking Jewish Christians scatter abroad after the stoning of Stephen, God uses them to reach the Gentiles.

At Antioch, God moves some of these Greek-speaking disciples to speak “to the Hellenists [Greeks], preaching the Lord Jesus” (Acts 11:19-20). News of this prompts the Jerusalem Church to send Barnabas to Antioch. When he, in turn, sees “the grace of God” (vs. 23), he “departed for Tarsus to seek Saul” (vs. 25). He brings this former foe of the Church into her assemblies, and together they “taught a great many people” (vs. 26).

Let us note the many ways God moves in His disciples’ lives, for our Lord is active in every aspect of our own life. He may act through a conflict we are now facing, or a persecution we must endure for Christ, or an exile we must endure far from our homeland or family of origin. During our travels and while we are at home, in formal interviews and small talk, in planned meetings and chance encounters, God works on our dispositions and understanding.

Nothing in this world remains outside His purview. The way of the Lord is to be everywhere present, filling all things. Let us be attentive to what He is doing and saying at every moment.

The Church calls certain Fathers neptic, meaning “watchful.” Their lives teach us to be alert to the Lord’s promptings at all times. In the *Philokalia*, Archimandrite Ioannikios reminds us of “three giants of the devil, who demolish the spiritual life . . . to its very foundation . . . forgetfulness, ignorance, and indolence.” Yet “watchfulness . . . shows itself much stronger than these three treacherous malefactors.”

However, although “the Christian can stay free from the bonds of forgetfulness and ignorance . . . that alone is not enough for an awakened conscience.” In the spiritual life, theory must always be practiced. We must be diligent in working at the divine commandments and remain as energetic as possible in obeying Christ.

Take the case of Barnabas in the present reading. Why does the Church in Jerusalem send him out? Surely one reason is his record of industry. When the Church must care for many who are in need, he sells his land “and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (Acts 4:37).

This shining example of due diligence shows us why the Church selects him “to go as far as Antioch” (vs. 11:22). Clearly, he seeks to follow the commandments of God when he looks for Saul, finds him, and brings him to Antioch (vss. 25-26).

Attentiveness and watchfulness are precious gifts of the Holy Spirit. We read of Barnabas: “For he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (vs. 24). Such grace may be ours, if we only make an effort. “The grace of the Holy Spirit is the light which enlightens man,” Saint Seraphim tells us, for this is the way of the Lord whose grace is meant to be ours!

O Holy Spirit, mysterious Light, fill me with the streams of Thy knowledge! – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

June 3 – Monday of the Fifth Week of Pascha
Acts 12:12-17

Living the Apostolic Life: Acts 12:12-17, especially vs. 12: “So, when [Peter] had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying.” During the Divine Liturgy we petition Christ to heed the intercessions of the apostles. What a privilege we enjoy when we seek the prayers of Saint Peter, “head of the honored apostles and rock of the faith!” His manner of life and his intimate communion with the Lord Jesus inspire us to beseech him to intercede for our salvation.

The present passage from Acts further encourages us to imitate his actions so that we might acquire something of his great virtue. The chief apostle here reveals traits which ought to characterize our own manner of living: prudent reasoning, submission to one another in love, and solicitude for the Church.

Let us begin with Saint Peter’s situation at the beginning of this passage. Without warning, in the middle of the night, an angel leaves him alone in the midst of a hostile city. What should he do? Surely he cannot remain where he is, right around the corner from the prison from which the angel has just released him.

Once before, after another supernatural release, an angel told him to show himself publicly in the Temple (vs. 5:20). That event, however, took place nearly a decade earlier. Since then social and political conditions have shifted and Jerusalem is now a more ominous place for the faithful.

This time the angel gives him no instructions. As Peter deliberates, his chief concern is to ascertain God’s will. He considers the facts (vs. 12:12): God has “delivered [him] from the hand of Herod” Agrippa (vs. 11). That king, however, recently murdered his fellow apostle James in order to ingratiate himself with the enemies of the Church (vs. 3). Surely Peter himself is now slated for death.

Where ought he to go now? He chooses the home of Mary, mother of John Mark (the future Evangelist Mark). By going to Mary’s home, Peter may send a message to James, the brother of the Lord and head of the Jerusalem church, without jeopardizing James’ safety if the authorities seek him there.

At Mary’s house “many were gathered together praying” (vs. 12), so Peter stops only briefly at this Christian gathering place. His effort to contact James is done cooperatively, not unilaterally: he arranged for messengers to inform James of what he is doing, perhaps even where he is going.

Note how closely the apostle adheres to the admonition to submit “to one another in the fear of God” (Eph 5:21). Although he is chief of the apostles, he manifests humility, obedience, and cooperation, all virtues understood by the Church as true marks of the life in Christ. He lives the Lord’s commandment: “But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Mt 23:11-12).

Finally, we observe the care Peter takes to protect the little community. When Rhoda runs off to tell the others (Acts 12:14) he does not raise his voice, but quietly persists in knocking. He shows concern for the gathering as well as for James. Even when the disciples come to the door he does not go inside, but leaves a message and departs so as put no one at risk.

O Lord our God, grant that we may glorify Thee in the manner of Thy holy apostles: by prudent reasoning illumined by Thy Holy Spirit, by submitting ourselves to one another in love, and by solicitude for the well-being of Thy holy Church in all we say and do. – Feast of Saints Peter and Paul

June 4 – Tuesday of the Fifth Week of Pascha
Acts 12:25-13:12

The Holy Spirit: Acts 12:25-13:12, especially vs. 2: “*As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’*” While the ministry of Christ our God is at the forefront of the Gospels, the ministry of the Holy Spirit is prominent in the Book of Acts. The Holy Spirit is named in nearly every chapter. Where He is not specifically identified, His presence and work are evident between the lines for the perceptive reader (vss. 14:9, 23; 27:10).

The present passage offers three instances of the Holy Spirit at work: ordaining, sending, and bestowing charisms. In each case, we notice how the Spirit of God carries out His ministry in cooperation, or synergy, with flesh-and-blood human beings who are open to Him and seeking His graces. Should it not be the same for us?

Let us first consider the ordination of Barnabas and Saul as apostles. The action of the Holy Spirit comes upon these two while they are serving as prophets and teachers in the church at Antioch (vs. 13:1). The faithful already know of their godliness and spiritual illumination (vss. 9:19-20, 27; 11:22-26). Their election as missionaries is an example of how leaders move from lesser to greater ministries, which is still the Spirit’s way within the Orthodox Church.

Next, we observe the liturgical setting for these actions: they take place “as they ministered [in Greek, *leitourgounton*] to the Lord and fasted” (vs. 13:2). In other words, “as they *performed the liturgy* to the Lord and fasted.” This pattern continues today, for the mystery of ordination always occurs within the context of the Divine Liturgy.

What about the mention of fasting? We do not know if their ordination occurred during a fasting season, or if they fasted in anticipation of the ordination. Saint John Chrysostom affirms the latter: “A great, yes a great good is fasting: it is circumscribed by no limits. When need was to ordain, then they fast: and to them while fasting, the Spirit spake” (“Homily 27 on Acts,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 12, p. 230).

How do we understand the next part of verse 2, “the Holy Spirit said”? Within the good order of the Church, we know that devout members and leaders of pure heart still hear the Holy Spirit speaking within them; and they in turn speak and act in obedience.

God has instructed the Church to proclaim the Gospel to all nations (Mt 28:19; Acts 11:18). The church in Antioch does so; their pagan neighbors see the Spirit at work, for “a great number believed and turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21).

And what about the millions beyond Antioch? When the Holy Spirit speaks to the church in Antioch, He moves in their hearts. Together with the prophets and teachers at Antioch, the faithful agree in the Spirit, for He pours His wisdom upon them. They open themselves through worship and fasting so that the Spirit may reveal His candidates.

Thus the community *hears* and understands that these men are worthy. After additional fasting and prayer, they “laid hands on them” (vs. 13:3). Today, our bishops present a candidate for ordination before the faithful and say to the congregation, “Wherefore, let us pray for him, that the grace of the all-Holy Spirit may come upon him.”

The Holy Spirit ordains Paul and Barnabas and extends their ministry, for as men they are in need of the Spirit’s grace. Indeed, as the service of ordination says, the life-giving Spirit “completeth that which is wanting . . . through the laying on of hands.”

Afterward, wherever Barnabas and Saul go, they follow the Spirit’s lead (vs. 13:4), relying on His charisms for knowledge and insight. Thus, according to Saint John Chrysostom, “it shows that the Spirit did all.”

Through communion with Thee, O Blessed Spirit, may we ever serve Christ our God. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

June 5 - Wednesday of the Fifth Week of Pascha
Acts 13:13-24

Modus Operandi: Acts 13:13-24, especially vss. 14-15: *“They came to Antioch in Pisidia, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and sat down. And after the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, ‘Men and brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say on.’”* The arrival of Saint Paul and his companions at this synagogue is consistent with the pattern of missionary outreach throughout Acts (e.g., vss. 13:5, 14:1). When the Sabbath comes, the apostolic teams attend services at the local synagogue or another Jewish gathering for worship. We find eight instances of this type of missionary contact scattered through the Book of Acts.

Today, visitors attend our churches to inquire about the faith. We may derive several principles from the apostles’ presentation of the Christian message in this passage. First, we naturally use the existing beliefs of those who seek information about our faith. We then consider the experience and knowledge of those who ask and, lastly, keep the focus on the Lord and the Gospel.

The very act of going to services on the Sabbath represents a conscious effort by the apostles to connect with people in the most natural way available to them. They do not go up to the rulers of the synagogue and ask to speak. Rather, they come honestly and correctly as fellow Jews. They then use whatever opportunities develop, based on shared beliefs and background.

In any encounters with visitors at our parishes, we should seek imitate the apostles. We begin with the beliefs we hold in common with others and work from this natural base. Then, when it becomes appropriate, we may rightly proceed to what may be new and unfamiliar.

If we establish a link with those who come seeking, they will be able to follow our presentation of Orthodox truths more easily. When Saint Paul speaks, he begins with the well-known history of Israel (vss. 13:17-22). Such an approach affirms his listeners and helps them to overcome any barriers to understanding by fostering an open atmosphere of inquiry.

The apostle’s very first words show that he has taken into account the composition of his audience. He immediately sees that, in addition to Jews, there are also “God-fearers” present – Gentiles who are sympathetic to Judaism.

Such devout non-Jews were common in first-century Greco-Roman synagogues, for Judaism’s monotheism and morality attracted many who were dissatisfied with the superstitions and excesses of paganism. However, barriers such as circumcision, dietary laws, and the rejection of idolatry stood in the way of these inquirers. It is well for us to be sensitive to – and honest about – our notable differences from our listeners, whether it be age, social status, religious affiliation, etc.

Even though today’s reading gives us only the opening lines of Saint Paul’s speech (vss. 17-24), the apostle clearly directs his message to a central theme: the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior of mankind. What about our own churches? What stands out, above all else, in our worship?

Icons of Jesus Christ surround us. In almost every prayer, He is named or addressed directly. We identify the Eucharist as His Body and Blood, which we receive for the cleansing of our souls, the hallowing of our thoughts, the enlightenment of our hearts – for establishment in Him. Following Saint Paul, let us strive to keep the Lord Jesus Christ at the forefront whenever we share with others about our Orthodox Christian faith.

Lord, Thou art our life and salvation. Glory to Thee who hast shown us the light!

June 6 – Thursday of the Fifth Week of Pascha
Acts 14:20-15:4

Oversight: Acts 14:20-15:4, especially vs. 23: “So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” In this reading from Acts we follow the Apostles Paul and Barnabas on their first “church planting” journey. Saint Luke records only the highlights, omitting many tedious details of first-century travel via Roman sailing ships and on foot. Likewise, he gives us a brief outline of how the apostles trained wise leaders for their congregations. Then, as now, leaders are essential in Christian communities to answer questions, correct errors, and encourage the faithful. Providing ongoing oversight was – and is – a major apostolic activity (vs. 15:36).

Our New Testament word “oversight” derives from the Greek verb *episkopeo*, to “watch over.” During the earliest decades, oversight was carried out by the apostles themselves (2 Cor 11:28). The local shepherds they appointed continued watching over the new congregations after the apostles’ martyrdom.

Oversight still is a chief function of our bishops (*episkopoi*) today. How is apostolic-style oversight carried out in practice? Today’s reading covers several major facets of oversight, including the strengthening of souls (Acts 14:22) and the ordination of additional leaders who are called elders (*presbyteroi*) – that is, priests (vs. 23).

When Saint Paul’s missionaries return to congregations they have formed, their foremost goal is to “[strengthen] the souls of the disciples” (vs. 22). They accomplish this task through exhortation, encouragement, and commendation (vss. 22-23).

Exhortation is important because the pagan environment around these tiny new churches is rife with immorality and temptations. Does this situation sound familiar? At all times it is important for us to establish a distinctly Christian life and follow truly godly conduct. We exhort members of the Church to live always in a manner worthy of their calling in Christ (2 Thes 1:11).

So, for example, Saint Paul tells the members of the new Corinthian church, “I wrote to you . . . not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world . . . since then you would need to go out of the world. But . . . not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater” (1 Cor 5:9-11).

Similarly, we all need *encouragement* to live in Christ, so that we may love one another, cope with life’s difficulties and sorrows, and manifest the words and deeds of the saints and apostles (1 Cor 11:1). When the apostles plead with their new disciples, they also plead with us: “Walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:1-3).

The apostles also exercised *commendation*, praying earnestly for their friends and converts in the Lord Jesus. We do the same in the liturgy when the priest says, “Let us commend ourselves, and each other, and all our life unto Christ our God.”

Saint Paul acknowledges his own dependency on the Lord. “Therefore most gladly I will rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor 12:9-10).

Likewise, the Church earnestly encourages us to make use of the Jesus prayer, acknowledging our need of God. Let us cry out to Him in our necessities, infirmities, and temptations!

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.

June 7 - Friday of the Fifth Week of Pascha
Acts 15:5-34

Living Boundaries: Acts 15:5-34, especially vss. 28-29: *“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: that you abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.”* In the first millennium of the Christian era, the nascent Church faced a churning sea of Gentile cultures and conflicting morality. The early Fathers held firm to the charge of discipling all nations, but they were forced to carefully delineate between Christian practices and those of the Judaism of their origins and of the pagan world.

As Gentiles – the word’s Latin root means “peoples” – entered the Church, the requirements of the Mosaic Law caused a crisis within the community. Some Christians devoutly believed that unless one is “circumcised according to the custom of Moses, [one] cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). These disciples not only asserted that “it is necessary to circumcise [Gentile converts]” but also “to command them to keep the law of Moses” (vs. 5).

The present passage from Acts briefly describes the meeting of the first apostolic council “to consider this matter” (vs. 6). The decisions of this Jerusalem council (summarized in verses 28 and 29 above) show us how the young Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, remains faithful to the revelation given to Moses as well as to the new and final revelation received from Jesus Christ.

As Orthodox Christians living two millennia later, we find the council’s decision helpful in our own struggles to remain “unspotted from the world” (Jam 1:27). First, note that the council directs Gentiles to abstain from idolatrous sacrifices, to the point of not eating any meat offered to idols. Here, we see that Christianity shares with Judaism a sense of the purity central to the worship of God (Dt 5:7-9).

As we come into daily contact with worshipers belonging to other sects and to non-Christian religions, we guard our holy faith by avoiding the meetings and worship services of such groups. After all, how can we expect to grow in truth if we indulge in the superstitions and “unorthodox” practices that some of them promote?

There may be useful spiritual insight in what others say, but we do best if we approach truth through the Church’s worship, through Scripture, and by studying the words of the Church Fathers. Rather than going outside to learn the faith, let us attend to the spiritual resources provided at home.

The apostles are keenly aware of the conflicting sensitivities of mixed congregations of Jews and Gentiles. Jewish Christians, for example, were raised to eat meat only if it had been drained of blood (Lv 17:10-12). The Gentile Christians had no such concerns.

Today, Orthodoxy is a worldwide faith that embraces a variety of ethnic traditions. The need for mutual respect continues to be important. Like the apostles, we are to carefully delineate what is essential to the faith and what is not. Also, let us never give offense to a fellow Christian (1 Cor 8:12).

Finally, the Council orders all Christians to keep themselves “from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:29) – in the original Greek, *porneia*. This prohibition extends to all extramarital relations and obscenity, for we know that pagan worship incorporated sexual libertinism.

Among Christians, for whom marriage is an icon of the mystery between Christ and the Church (Eph 5:22-33), the sanctification of both private and public behavior is essential. We are to be holy as our Lord Jesus is holy.

Enlighten the eyes of my heart to keep Thy commandments with love unfeigned. – Post-communion Prayer

June 8 - Saturday of the Fifth Week of Pascha
Acts 15:35-41

Differences of Opinion: Acts 15:35-41, especially vs. 39: “Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus.” What are we to make of the difference of opinion between the Apostles Barnabas and Paul over whether John Mark should join their missionary journey? The Greek word translated as “contention” in verse 39 is also the root word for “paroxysm,” suggesting that the feelings dividing the two leaders were strong.

In response to the proposal that Mark should accompany them, Saint Paul finds him not worthy. Earlier, the young man “had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work” (vs. 38). However, according to Saint John Chrysostom this dispute was “not enmity nor quarreling. The contention availed so far as to part them” (“Homily 34 on Acts,” NPNF First Series, vol. 11, p. 213). They simply go their separate ways.

Perhaps Barnabas is influenced by concern for his cousin, John Mark (Col 4:10). At the same time the Church’s mission is also furthered, for the apostles divide the work, one focusing on Cyprus and the other fortifying the churches in Syria and Cilicia – all to the glory of God.

Elsewhere, the record shows no negative effects on the relationships among the three (see 2 Tim 4:11; Phlm 24). Indeed, differences of opinion are not something to be avoided at all costs in the Church. Every aspect of truth, whether touching on discipline, revelation, or worship, is ultimately known fully and completely only to God. We are merely the vessels through whom teachings come to fruition. Any single individual can embrace only part of the truth.

God blesses the whole Church with the presence of the Holy Spirit, which guides the Body of Christ into all truth (Jn 16:13). Remember, the Church took centuries to resolve disagreements about essentials of the faith and to establish sure, dogmatic statements such as the Nicene Creed.

Over time a graduated scale for classifying the teachings and statements concerning the truth has evolved, from tentative opinion (*theologoumenon*) through doctrine and finally to dogma. On lesser matters we recognize differences and allow for varied opinions and styles among those who hold firm and invariable “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

Many influences shape our perspective on issues in the Church, such as age, gender, culture, education, spiritual development, and experience, to name a few. The Holy Spirit adapts these factors through the extended process of decision-making that has resulted in balanced truth, the hallmark of Orthodox theology and living.

In the ongoing life of the Church, our Lord Jesus Christ is the constant. He precedes all clarification of the truth in the midst of disputes, for He is ever the Lord and Master. As the Life, the Way, and the Truth, He is prior to all theology worthy of His name.

Thus disagreements within the Church are sometimes resolved as they were by Paul and Barnabas, by separate efforts that allow God to manifest the fullness of truth. In time the Holy Spirit revealed John Mark to be worthy, for he authored the earliest written Gospel and served Saint Paul in prison (Col 4:10).

Let us always labor in humility, not hiding our differences but approaching our mission with candor and submitting to the will of God. As Saint John Chrysostom says, “No evil did come of it [the parting of Barnabas and Paul] . . . but a great good. . . . For in many things they acted upon their human judgment, for they were not sticks or stones” – nor are we!

Lord, grant us wisdom to resist self-will and always to walk the path of Thy truth.

**June 9 - Sixth Sunday of Pascha (Sunday of the Blind Man)
Acts 16:16-34**

Highest Authority: Acts 16:16-34, especially vss. 20-21: “*And they brought them to the magistrates, and said, ‘These men, being Jews, exceedingly trouble our city; and they teach customs which are not lawful for us, being Romans, to receive or observe.’*” The message of Jesus continues to evoke conflict, just as the Lord foretold (Mt 10:34). Today’s account illumines the inherent conflict between Christianity and human cultures.

When we are baptized, we commit ourselves to follow our King and God in every dimension of life, making Christ our first and highest authority in all things. “There shall be no different gods before My face” (Dt 5:7). Even today, our allegiance to Christ can sometimes bring us into conflict with various laws and customs. In reading these verses, let us meditate on the potential for conflict that faces all Christians and pray that our focus remains on the Lord.

We observe that the Apostle Paul becomes impatient with the persistent crying of the demonized slave-girl, even though what she says is true (Acts 16:16-18). As “servants of the Most High God,” the apostles are indeed proclaiming “the way of salvation” (vs. 17).

However, Saint Paul recognizes the anguish of a soul tormented by an unclean spirit. He understands that an oppressive demon possesses her and aids her divination. The source of her powers comes straight out of hell. Such demonic powers remain active in our secular, godless culture. As Christians, we must be alert to potential conflict with them, for demonic powers will always oppose the Church and the gospel.

Yet as Saint Paul faces a persistent demon, he is confident that the power of the Holy Spirit is greater than the powers possessing a wretched slave. He boldly cries, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her” (vs. 18).

The owners of the slave-girl appeal to the magistrates on the grounds that non-Romans had no right to teach foreign religions and deny the sacred Roman deities (vs. 21). Their appeal brings the apostles into direct conflict with the Roman authorities.

Actually, the Roman Empire tolerated many foreign religions as long as they took their place alongside the Roman pantheon of gods. Christians, however, declare that the Lord Jesus is the reigning authority who stands above all rulers.

Christ’s exclusivity challenges all illicit authority. Our Lord commissions us to teach, live, and bring this truth to all people (Mt 28:19). As we face cultural forces requiring us to deny Christ as our supreme authority, let us pray we understand what is at stake in such conflicts.

The jailer’s response illustrates how the struggles of Christians may engage others. An earthquake breaks open the jail, and the guard is certain he has lost his prisoners. He is ready to commit suicide rather than be executed by his superiors for the escape, but the apostles intervene and save him (Acts 16:27-28).

The jailer assumes that his prisoners would flee, but they did not! Rather, they call out to him and save his life. Here is a new teaching in the form of men caring for others above self, which clashes with the mores of Greco-Roman culture. He begs the apostles for instruction, asking, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (vs. 30).

When we stand for Christ as the highest authority, we may well behave in ways that may surprise or even shock others. As Christians, we ought to expect our loyalty to the faith to overturn many assumptions held by others about life. Let us prepare our hearts and souls to stand for the truth that is in us, and perhaps to save others around us.

O Lord, deliver Thy servants from all bondage to the enemy, and receive us into Thy heavenly kingdom. Open the eyes of our hearts that Christ may ever shine brightly in us. – Baptismal Prayer

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June 10 - Monday of the Sixth Week of Pascha
Acts 17:1-15

The Upside Down World: Acts 17:1-15, especially vs. 6: *“These who have turned the world upside down have come here too.”* Contrary to the assertion of the Jews at Thessalonica that the apostles were turning the world upside down, they merely identified how inverted our world truly is. The Apostles Paul and Silas proclaimed that “Jesus . . . is the Christ” (vs. 3) in whom and through whom God restores all things (see Acts 3:21). God is with us, bringing the world back to its upright position, putting all things in order, and inviting us to join ourselves to Christ and be restored.

The gospel declares that Christ our Savior lived in the flesh, just as we do in this upside down world, for He was born from the Virgin Mary. In this very out-of-kilter existence He walked uprightly, divulging the disorientation of the world and exposing the delusion that life is as it should be.

Our Lord Jesus promises that a right-side-up world is coming, a world which He calls the kingdom of God. Furthermore, He undertakes the essential corrective action to straighten out the present disorder. Let us rejoice, for the restorative power of our Lord is available to everyone today!

Why are the Jews in Thessalonica offended at the apostles’ message? They know God made man in His own image (Gn 1:27). From Moses, they know that the Lord “will have mercy on whom [He] will have mercy, and . . . will have compassion on whom [He] will have compassion” (Ex 33:19). They understand that God is Lord “Most High over all the earth” (Ps 82:17), a majestic and awesome King “sitting on a throne, high and lifted up” (Is 6:1).

They know also what the Lord makes clear: “My counsels are not as your counsels, neither are your ways My ways. . . . As heaven is distant from the earth, so is My way distant from your ways” (Is 55:8-9).

However, the apostolic message confronts these Jews’ conclusions about God and overturns what they had believed for generations. While it might be acceptable to declare that “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power” to do good (Acts 10:38), it was offensive to assert that He was the Messiah, who was then crucified and “killed by hanging on a tree” (vs. 39).

A suffering Messiah seems like an affront to God. How could they accept the idea that the Messiah “had to suffer and rise again from the dead,” or that “this Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ” (vs. 17:3)? They are accustomed to an upside-down universe.

The proclamation of a suffering Messiah even sounds blasphemous to their ears. That God’s world is inverted might be clear, but to suggest that the Almighty God would right it through the suffering and death of His Messiah is still a “stumbling block” for many (1 Cor 1:23). How can one believe in the Resurrection if one expects the kingdom of God come about by God restoring the throne of King David by military means? Crucifixion and resurrection seem like fanciful, far-fetched, upside-down thinking.

Yet God is in Christ, and He as Lord makes all things right! Death is defeated, and Jesus our Savior sits forever at the right hand of the Father. We may live in the upside-down state of the human enterprise, but in Christ we know the longsuffering mercy and compassion of God.

When we consider the wars and revolutions of men, we discover that none of these victories ever stood this world right side up for very long. Perhaps some improvements came about, but they proved only temporarily. One eternal fact stands over history: Christ is risen, and the eternal kingdom of God is at hand!

Rejoice, O Jerusalem and leap for joy, in that thou beholdest Christ the King like a bridegroom come forth from the grave. Receive the glad tidings of the Resurrection of Christ! – Paschal Orthros

June 11 - Tuesday of the Sixth Week of Pascha
Acts 17:19-28

Some New Thing: Acts 17:19-28, especially vss. 24-25: “God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men’s hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things.” The Apostle Paul, “as his custom was” (vs. 17:2), visited the synagogues in Athens (vs. 17) and also the agora – the city’s market center. There the masses mingled with philosophers from the classical schools, spending “their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing” (vs. 21).

As the primary bearers of Hellenistic culture, the Athenian philosophers naturally wish to bring the visiting apostle to a gathering at the Areopagus or Mars Hill (vs. 19). According to Saint Luke, the Stoics and Epicureans who “encountered him” (vs. 18) are especially curious about his “new doctrine” (vs. 19). Among the pagan schools of philosophy, these two dedicated the greatest effort to illumining the uncertainties of life and seeking truth concerning the divine. However, their efforts were based solely on human reasoning.

Saint Paul’s words undercut the Athenians’ basic assumption that the ultimate truth about life can be found by men through reason, using trial and error. We recall that in the Garden of Eden the serpent suggests this very approach, promising Adam and Eve “you will be like gods” (Gn 3:6).

Ultimately the Church, in the person of the Apostle Paul, brings the true light to Hellenized world, which “received the heavenly Spirit” and acquired “the true faith, worshiping the undivided Trinity,” as we sing during the liturgy after holy communion. This new faith made profound advances upon Western culture until the Enlightenment.

Gradually, the idea that mankind has the capacity to discern its own truth gradually regained ascendancy. Today, we are once again living in a world where the ancient lie rules. Scientific materialism and secular humanism openly attack the truth which Christ and His apostles taught.

What Paul shares with the Athenian philosophers is truly “some new thing” (Acts 17:21): the Word of life, sent by God’s own initiative, to enlighten mankind (vss. 30-32). The Athenians’ “unknown God” (vs. 23) is the Christ who has revealed Himself to the Church.

Christ is disclosed as the Maker of all things, visible and invisible (vss. 23-29). Saint Paul proclaims that the Lord has revealed Himself openly. As the psalmist says, “God is the Lord and hath appeared unto us” (Ps 117:26).

The ancient Hellenists and modern materialists alike believe we can decipher “the unity of all things contrary to the appearance of diversity.” Metropolitan John Zizioulas repudiates this view and its corollary position that God does not rule over the material world since “He too is bound by . . . necessity to the world and the world to Him” (*Being as Communion*, p. 29).

Saint Paul’s *new thing* directly counters this error, for he declares, “God . . . made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth” (vs. 24). God needs nothing, for “He gives to all life, breath, and all things” (vs. 25). The Creator existentially contradicts the ancient and modern lie that leads mankind on the impossible quest to know everything.

The apostle also addresses a related lie, initiated by Plato: “The world does not exist for the sake of man, but man exists for its sake.” Herein we find a denial of God’s infinite freedom as well as His gift of free will to us as persons who are intended to be “like” God.

Instead, the Apostle Paul says, “We are also His offspring,” i.e., free beings (vs. 28). If we have accepted the lies of materialism, let us hasten to repent (vs. 30)!

O Lord, Thou hast made all things new. Help us live in Thy likeness to eternal life.

June 12 - Wednesday of Sixth Week of Pascha
Acts 18:22-28

The Fullness of the Faith: Acts 18:22-28, especially vs. 25: *“This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord, though he knew only the baptism of John.”* If we carefully read through the services of baptism, chrismation, and holy communion – the mysteries of initiation into the life in Christ – we notice many prayers asking God to aid His new servants in actualizing and preserving their salvation.

For example, we pray that the catechumen “may render praise unto Thee,” “ascribe unto Thee glory,” and “be no more a child of the body, but a child of Thy kingdom.” We ask that “he may prove himself a child of the Light” and “put away from him the old man.” Indeed, we are to work “out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling [knowing] . . . it is God who works in [us] both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil 2:12-13).

Such prayers help explain why the Christian faith was at first called “the Way” (Acts 9:2). Today’s reading describes a man traveling on this way of faith. Apollos is quick to grow in the truth and to show others “that Jesus is the Christ” (vs. 18:28).

A future apostle and bishop of Smyrna, Apollos exhibits three qualities needed in order to attain to the fullness of the faith. We too need to become “mighty in the Scriptures . . . instructed in the way of the Lord, and . . . fervent in spirit” (vss. 24-25).

In calling Apollos “mighty in the Scriptures,” Saint Luke states that “he spoke and taught accurately the things of the Lord” (vs. 25). It is easy to understand how Apollos acquires those skills: he is humble, for he allows Aquila to instruct him. In the words of Saint John Chrysostom, “This man lets himself be taught (“Homily 40 on Acts,” NPNF First Series, vol. 11, p. 247).

Such a learning process involves an ongoing, cooperative, synergistic struggle on the part of the faithful. It requires us to find teachers who know the truth and are able to impart what they know, and it requires us to be students who are open to learning.

Our success in this endeavor depends upon our attitude as trainees. We need to acquire a thirst for ferreting out the truth, and cultivate minds and hearts that are willing to dig down deep into the substance of the faith.

However, we must take care that we do not confuse the fullness of faith with acquiring information “about” the faith. Rather, we are to work at living “in the way of the Lord” (vs. 25), for as Christ reminds us, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Mt 7:21).

To know and actualize the fullness of the faith thus requires us to be “fervent in spirit” (Acts 18:25). We are to seek to receive the Holy Spirit, who “doth overflow with streams . . . of grace, and doth water all . . . with refreshing life” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

According to Saint Seraphim of Sarov, it is the faithful man who “seeks . . . salvation and . . . is resolved for its sake to . . . offer true repentance for all his sins and . . . practice the virtues which are opposite to the sins committed, [who] then . . . will acquire the Holy Spirit who acts within us and establishes in us the Kingdom” (*Russian Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 104).

May we dedicate ourselves to cleansing the corners of our souls in order to become whole, and may the hearts of our teachers overflow with joy! And may we ever be thankful for the Scriptures and teachings of the Church Fathers, and for the many excellent teachers and instructors who live and share with us the wisdom they have gained in the faith.

O Christ, look with mercy upon us Thy servants who boweth the head unto Thee, and keep us as warriors invincible and victors to the end through Thy crown incorruptible. – Chrismation Prayer

June 13 - Feast of the Ascension Acts 1:1-12

The King of Glory: Acts 1:1-12, especially vs. 9: “Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.” The apostles watch the Lord Jesus visibly ascend, returning to the eternal heavens beyond the boundaries of space, time, and creation. Let us rejoice as Christ is “taken up [as] a cloud received Him out of their sight” (vs. 9), for the Lord’s Ascension establishes humanity’s place in the heavens.

Centuries before the birth of Christ, the Prophet David perceived Him with the eye of his heart: “Comely art Thou in beauty more than the sons of men; grace hath been poured forth on Thy lips, wherefore God hath blessed Thee for ever” (Ps 44:2). After His Ascension, the Lord continued to reveal Himself in many times and places.

When the Lord Jesus comes again, everyone “shall see Him as He is” (1 Jn 3:2). Thus Isaiah’s promise remains true: “All of you will see a King with His glory, and your eyes will see a land from afar” (Is 33:17). Like the first disciples at the Ascension, however, we need to receive the assurances of the Holy Spirit so that we – and all the faithful – may find the power to live for Him “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Indeed, we greatly depend on the Holy Spirit! Christ “presented Himself alive” (vs. 3) after the Resurrection. After the Ascension, however, “He through the Holy Spirit [gave] commandments to the apostles whom He had chosen” (vs. 2) so that those mortal men might fully understand the weight of His words.

Even now, in this present existence, our God and King still communicates with us through the Holy Spirit. He speaks to our human, spiritual capacities, for He made us as creatures who are both spiritual and physical.

Before the outpouring at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was already at work illumining and enlivening Christ’s growing flock. Now, every time we celebrate the Divine Liturgy, we join our priests in praying for the Spirit of God “to descend upon us.” The Spirit’s quickening presence remains essential if we are to understand and obey Christ our Lord. Apart from the Holy Spirit, we would remain in darkness and confusion. Therefore, let us be attentive and heed the Holy Spirit whom Christ sends.

In today’s passage from Acts, we read that the risen Lord “presented Himself alive after His suffering by many infallible proofs” (vs. 3). “Infallible proofs” is a translation of the Greek word *tekmeriois*. This word was used by the philosophers Plato and Aristotle to connote the strongest proof of which a subject is susceptible.

As we study the appearances of the risen Lord in the Gospels, it becomes clear that Christ our God uses many circumstances and gatherings of the apostolic Church to *assure* the apostles’ hearts and minds of the truth of the Resurrection. If we consider these manifest physical appearances in light of Saint Luke’s observation that our Lord still acts through the Holy Spirit, the meaning of *tekmeriois* in Acts becomes clear. As we pray to Him, our Savior uses tangible means to remove lingering shadows of doubt from our minds (Jn 20:27-29).

He continues working with us today, assuring us who believe in the apostles’ witness “through their word” (Jn 17:20). Let us open our hearts to Christ our God that He may build up our faith, and open ourselves to the Spirit who gives us faith, virtue, and power to be faithful witnesses “to [Christ] . . . to the end of the earth” (vs. 8).

When we seek the Spirit, we are drawn to the Lord “through the promise of good things to come.” Then everything we say and do leads others to turn to Christ the Savior in the joy of His truth.

O Lord, show me as the abode of Thy Spirit only, and in nowise the habitation of sin.

– Post-communion Prayer

June 14 - Friday of the Sixth Week of Pascha
Acts 19:1-8

Pluralism: *Acts 19:1-8, especially vss. 1-2:* “And finding some disciples [Paul] said to them, ‘Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?’ So they said to him, ‘We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.’” In a pluralistic society, diverse ethnic, religious, and social groups participate independently in their own traditions within a common political order. Pluralism aptly describes the Greco-Roman world into which the apostles introduced the Church, for Rome’s social structure was in many ways similar to that of the contemporary West.

The present reading provides us with a glimpse into the methods used by the Apostle Paul when encountering people with a potential attraction to Christianity. His approach should be of particular interest for us as Orthodox Christians, for we live amidst many Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church which shares many elements of the true faith.

Although the apostle welcomes his contact with other disciples (vs. 1), he first carefully inquires into the nature of their knowledge and experience of the faith (vss. 2-4). He is clearly laboring to fulfill the Lord’s desire for “all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4).

When Saint Luke refers to the men whom Paul finds as *disciples* (Acts 19:1), he is using a term reserved for those who, to some degree, “had been instructed in the way of the Lord” (vs. 18:25). This passage merely informs us that the Apostle Paul *found* these men, without telling us how the meeting came about. Instead, Saint Luke focuses on the Apostle Paul’s delight at a chance to discuss the faith with those who have an evident sympathy for the gospel.

As Orthodox Christians, we have similar encounters with our neighbors, work colleagues, and social acquaintances. Some may express interest in touring our church or attending services, while others come to weddings or funerals. Likewise, we may be invited to participate in local interfaith projects.

The apostle’s response to “finding some disciples” (vs. 19:1) is to talk willingly, inquire carefully into their beliefs and practices, and share fully the truth of the faith. We should never fear our encounters with others of friendly persuasion, nor hesitate to reach out in friendship. Let us be open to such persons while keeping our feet firmly planted in Orthodox truth, without any trace of defensiveness or argumentativeness.

The Apostle Paul is especially interested in these disciples’ knowledge and experience of two essential doctrines of the faith: the Holy Spirit and the work of “Christ Jesus” (vss. 2-4). The early Church was much concerned with clarifying, correcting, and defining the relationship of the Persons of the Holy Trinity, the two natures of Christ, and the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Let us never assume that another disciple necessarily has an adequate or complete theology concerning God.

Note the positive outcome of the apostle’s discussions and inquiries: “They were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And . . . Paul . . . laid hands on them” (vss. 5-6). They enter the Church and the life in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.

After we receive holy communion during the Divine Liturgy, we hear this hymn: “We have seen the true light, we have received the heavenly Spirit; we have found the true faith, worshiping the undivided Trinity: for He hath saved us.” Let us emulate the apostles and share our faith with all who are open and interested. As our relationships with other Christians develop, we quietly but firmly uphold the fullness of the faith without compromise, belligerence, or defensiveness.

Grant, O Lord, that many may be found worthy to flee unto Thy name for refuge. – Prayer for Catechumens

June 15 - Saturday of the Sixth Week of Pascha
Acts 20:7-12

Curing the Heart: Acts 20:7-12, especially vs. 10: “But Paul went down, fell on him, and embracing him said, ‘Do not trouble yourselves, for his life is in him.’” God will heal us from our slavery to sin so long as we sustain our life in the Church, read Holy Scripture, and partake of the mysteries of confession and holy communion. We may be heavy with sleep because of our passions, yet we rise to life within the Church. The Lord is among His people, embracing us and restoring us to life.

However, we must resolve to confess our sins and seek God’s grace if we are to be blessed like Eutychus in today’s passage from Acts. God longs to heal us, and He will heal!

When we discover our deep enslavement to the passions, it can be shocking. Yet it is also an occasion for joy. Even though our lives are disordered, we only need accept that we are sick. Then, according to Saint Diodochos of Photike in the *Philokalia*, the Holy Spirit discloses to us that deep place “where the grace of God is hidden” (vol. 1, p. 279). This inner place becomes our gateway to the path of true healing.

If we seek out “where the grace of God is hidden” in our hearts, we discover that there “God meets with man, there He imparts His knowledge, there man gains a sense of His being,” according to Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos. And yet “in order for this communion and vision of God to come about, the heart must be pure, which the Lord affirms as well: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’ (Mt 5:8).”

Metropolitan Hierotheos describes several actions involved in the curing of the heart. He emphasizes watchfulness and courage, for “only courage . . . gives a man heart to revive his nous, dead from sin. . . . Even if he bows to the devil . . . he hopes in God” (*Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 139).

We first embrace *repentance*, which Saint John Climacus defines as “the renewal of baptism . . . a contract with God for a fresh start in life. Repentance goes shopping for humility [and] is ever distrustful of bodily comfort. Repentance is critical awareness and a sure watch over oneself. . . . Repentance is reconciliation with the Lord . . . the purification of the conscience” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 5.1, p. 54).

Contrition follows: “A sacrifice unto God is a broken spirit; a heart that is broken and humbled God will not despise” (Ps 50:17). Saint Mark the Ascetic recommends “vigil, prayer, and patient acceptance” for realizing contrition, but we must also confess our sins and the Lord’s Passion on our behalf (*Philokalia* vol. 1, p. 111).

Contrition leads to *pain in the heart*. Any growth without spiritual pain is bogus and fruitless. Only “through many tribulations may we enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22).

Pain in the heart leads to *tears*: “Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Mt 5:4). Abba Poemen tells us to “weep . . . [for] there is no other way than this” (*Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, p. 184). Tears cleanse the heart like the waters of baptism. If we, as children of this age, have become estranged from tears, let us learn to cry for help!

God then brings a *fire engendered in the heart* to burn out our spiritual sicknesses. We labor until this fire enters the sanctuary of our heart to consume every passion, predisposition, and hardness found within. God’s gift of fire creates an inner *warmth* of love toward the Savior, concentrating the powers of the soul in undistracted prayer. Let us persist in purifying the heart!

O Master, grant me healing of soul, unto the enlightenment of the eyes of my heart. – Post-communion Prayer

**June 16 - Seventh Sunday of Pascha (Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council)
Acts 20:16-18, 28-36**

Savage Wolves: Acts 20:16-18, 28-36, especially vss. 29-30: *“For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.”* The attentive reader of Acts soon recognizes the Holy Spirit as the lead actor in the Church, for He is named in nearly every chapter as the director and master of all that transpires, as well as being the Author of Life.

The Orthodox Church continues to call upon the Holy Spirit as our heavenly King. The visible authorities in the Church – our priests and bishops – pray for the protection of the flock of Christ and build up the faithful by relying on the Holy Spirit. The health of the Church depends upon the Spirit as the true, unseen authority operating within every pastor, synod, council, and faithful member.

In Acts, as throughout Church history, the Holy Spirit is known by His work in the visible life of the Church, incarnating the presence of the Holy Trinity amongst the people. The holy icons, Scriptures, and writings of the Fathers, the canons, ecumenical councils, and liturgical rites and their texts receive particular honor and reverence because they reveal the Spirit’s presence.

If we accept the Holy Spirit as head of the Church, how does the Church then function to protect God’s own against the “savage wolves” of heresy? Predators of the hearts of the faithful have come among us repeatedly during the last two thousand years. Heretics and schismatics appear from the first century onward, a fact that both New Testament history and current events amply demonstrate.

The Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council, whom we celebrate today, met at Nicaea to address the threat of the heretic Arius. A brilliant clergyman with many followers, Arius “[drew] away the disciples after [himself]” (vs. 30). The Arian controversy thus exemplifies what Saint Paul prophesied to the Ephesian clergy.

At Nicaea “the God-mantled Fathers, having . . . come together with energy, and burning with zeal, did cut with the sword of the Spirit him who is marked with confusion because of his blaspheming belief, being prompted by the directing Spirit” (vespers for the Sunday of the Holy Fathers). These holy Fathers submitted themselves to the Spirit and applied their energies against destructive partisans, heeding Saint Paul’s warnings.

Because the errant priest Arius was not “sparing the flock” (vs. 29), Bishop Alexander of Alexandria assembled the clergy of that city. He then called a regional synod of bishops from Egypt and Libya. These gatherings, whose goal was to “support the weak” (vs. 35), called on Arius to recant the heresy that there was a time when the Son of God did not exist.

Arius, however, continued “speaking perverse things” (vs. 30). He even convinced a synod of bishops in Nicomedia to declare his views orthodox. The Emperor Constantine then sent Hosios, a bishop faithful to “the word of . . . grace” to build up the Church (vs. 32). The result was the first great council at Nicaea.

There the bishops, as true shepherds of the Church, took “heed to . . . all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit [had] made [them] overseers” (vs. 28). Both Arius and his teaching were rejected, and the Nicene Creed took form with the Holy Spirit’s guidance.

By celebrating today the memorial of the divine Fathers, O all-compassionate Lord, we implore Thee, through their petitions, to deliver Thy people from the harm of all heretics, making us worthy to glorify the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, as one God. – Festal Hymn

**June 17 - Seventh Sunday of Pascha (Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council)
Acts 20:16-18, 28-36**

Savage Wolves: Acts 20:16-18, 28-36, especially vss. 29-30: “*For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.*” The attentive reader of Acts soon recognizes the Holy Spirit as the lead actor in the Church, for He is named in nearly every chapter as the director and master of all that transpires, as well as being the Author of Life.

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June 18 - Tuesday of the Seventh Week of Pascha
Acts 21:26-32

Meeting Opposition – Consideration: Acts 21:26-32, especially vs. 26: “Then Paul took the men, and the next day, having been purified with them, entered the temple to announce the expiration of the days of purification, at which time an offering should be made for each one of them.” In some parts of the world, being a Christian carries the possibility of bodily assault on a daily basis. This threat may take the form of violence to person and property, or even death at the hands of intemperate people who hate us for not believing as they do. Yet Christ our God, the apostles, and our pastors teach us to be considerate of others, never compromising our commitment to “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self control” (Gal 5:22-23).

In today’s reading the Apostle Paul’s life is under threat in the Temple, underscoring this point and begging our thoughtful reflection. The apostles and elders in Jerusalem know Paul is a walking target because of his association with non-Jews. They take great care to defuse public opinion and to present him in the most acceptable light as possible through acts of piety highly esteemed in Jewish society, even by the most conservative element (Acts 21:23-24).

The plan almost works (vs. 26). Then Saint Paul is noticed by some “Jews from Asia” (vs. 27), a region where he actively led Gentiles to Christ Jesus. These most vigorous opponents of Christianity “stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him” (vs. 27), putting the whole city “in an uproar” (vs. 31).

Saint Paul reminds us that we should not “share in other people’s sins; keep yourself pure” (1 Tim 5:22). When threatened, our foremost concern is for our spiritual health. We are to maintain a Christ-like spirit, so that even if assaulted we do not lose our salvation through imprudence. For this reason we pray to gain gentleness, goodness, and faithfulness; we strive to be modest, prudent, and honest at all times.

By all means we should consult with our spiritual elders when a confrontation is likely, as the Apostle Paul does. Note that this passage records no sinful reactions from him – even when he is slandered (Acts 21:28), mobbed (vs. 30), and beaten (vss. 31-32). He contains himself like the Lord Jesus, who was “led as a sheep to the slaughter” (see Is 53:7).

We see how considerate the Christians are of the sensibilities of their fellow Jews who reject Jesus as the Messiah. Paul’s supporters develop an honest plan to quell the rancor against him. Four of their members have taken Nazirite vows (see Nm 6:2-21), and are now completing their sacred oaths. A highly honored custom among devout Jews was to cover the expenses of the sacrifices required of those concluding Nazirite vows. Herod Agrippa, for example, was famous for providing such pious aid, and gained much popularity by doing so.

Hence the plan to have Paul pay the offerings of the four men serves as a straightforward show of piety (Acts 21:24). Saint Paul embraces the proposal. He takes the men, is purified with them, enters the Temple to announce the expiration of their vows, and arranges payment of their offering (vs. 26).

After the seven-day waiting period is over, he returns to the Temple. However, fanatic enemies “stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him” (vs. 27). Their attack leads to his being taken into protective custody by soldiers from the Roman garrison (vss. 32-34).

None of us can foresee or prevent any attack that may arise against us. However, we can pray to live our faith mindfully and honestly, holding to the Lord Jesus’ promise: “The Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say” (Lk 12:12).

O Christ, grant us the spirit to think and do always such things as are right: that we who cannot do anything good without Thee may, by Thee, live according to Thy will. – Western Rite Prayer for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity

June 19 - Wednesday of Seventh Week of Pascha
Acts 23:1-11

Meeting Opposition, continued – Godly Knowledge: Acts 23:1-11, especially vs. 6: “*But when Paul perceived that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, ‘Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee; concerning the hope and resurrection of the dead I am being judged!’*” Reading and meditating daily on Holy Scripture is a practice greatly commended by the Church Fathers. “And we, too . . . should devote ourselves to [the Scriptures] and meditate on them so constantly that through our persistence a longing for God is impressed upon our hearts. . . . The wisdom of God renders what is difficult easy, so that gradually it deifies man,” writes Saint Peter of Damascus in the *Philokalia* (vol. 3, p. 123).

Reading Scripture regularly leads us deeper into the ways of Lord, so that we may acquire His perspective on the activities of the world. Scripture provides a light to our minds amidst the swirl of popular opinion, trends, and fads. Let us consider Saint Paul’s experience during the twenty-four hours described in this passage as a guide for the right use of Scripture as the “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph 6:17).

Naturally, the Apostle Paul received thorough training in the writings of the Old Testament; the eloquence of his epistles confirms this. Saint Paul explains that this intimacy with Scripture began when he was “brought up in [Jerusalem] at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers’ law” (Acts 22:3).

Gamaliel was a highly honored teacher and also a member of the Sanhedrin (vss. 5:33-40). In the Mishnah, a Jewish commentary on the Old Testament, Gamaliel is called *Rabban*, meaning “our teacher,” a title even more respected than Rabbi.

Saint Paul’s understanding would go beyond what he learned from this great master, however. After he encountered Christ on the road to Damascus, the Holy Spirit illumined his existing knowledge of Scripture and further opened his heart to knowledge of the wisdom of God.

We observe the apostle using his God-given knowledge five different times in the events surrounding today’s verses from Acts. First, divine wisdom leads Saint Paul to speak Greek to the commander of the Roman garrison. This man intervenes with a squadron of soldiers as a mob is beating him to death, and grants Paul permission to address the throng (vss. 21:37-40).

The same godly wisdom prompts the Apostle Paul to speak to the crowd in Hebrew. They fall silent when they hear the sacred language of the synagogue and Temple (vs. 22:2). As a result, he gains an opportunity to preach the gospel to the crowd (vss. 22:3-22).

Later, when the soldiers prepare to examine him by scourging, he wisely asks, “Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?” (vs. 22:25). He uses knowledge of his status as a Roman citizen to halt a painful and illegal interrogation.

Facing the members of the Jewish council, he twice more uses his divinely given wisdom. First, he quotes from Exodus, which gains his listeners’ respect even though he speaks against the high priest (Acts 23:5).

Then, aware of the existing disagreements between the Sadducees and the Pharisees on the council, he appeals to the Pharisees’ bias (vs. 6). This move quickly divides the assembly. The subsequent quarrel leads to his return to the protective custody of the Roman military, and protects him from stoning or assassination by his enemies.

Grounding in Scripture will always draw God’s servant closer to Him. Let us empower ourselves with this most effective knowledge (Jn 16:1, 13).

Master, grant us true knowledge, that we may ever think and do what pleases Thee. – Prayer of the Priest at Orthros

June 20 - Thursday of the Seventh Week of Pascha
Acts 25:13-19

Illumination or Allegation: Acts 25:13-19, especially vss. 18-19: “When the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation against [Paul] of such things as I supposed, but had some questions against him about their own religion and about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive.” This passage gives us a glimpse into the mind of the Roman authorities who oversaw the district of Palestine in Syria during the first century. Festus, the newly appointed regional procurator, receives a courtesy visit from King Agrippa, head of the local Jewish satellite state, and his sister Bernice (vs. 13).

The royal presence seems to offer Festus further insight into the status of the prisoner, Paul, whom the procurator inherited from his predecessor, Felix (vss. 14-15). Already, Festus has been through two hearings with Paul’s accusers among the Jewish chief priests and elders. These witnesses fail to clarify the question of why Paul should be sent to Rome to appear before the courts of the emperor (vss. 16-18).

What troubles Festus is that the only “questions against him [arose from] their own religion . . . about a certain Jesus, who had died, whom Paul affirmed to be alive” (vs. 19). The New English Bible helpfully translates verse 19 to read “certain points of disagreement . . . about their peculiar religion, and about someone called Jesus, a dead man whom Paul *alleged* to be alive.”

To Festus, the rancor against Paul seems to be merely an internal Jewish religious issue. It apparently has nothing to do with governance, or with the good peace and order of the empire. In this light, the standing order to send Paul to Caesar at Rome seems petty and untoward (vss. 11-12).

As Christians, however, we are perceive in these verses from Acts 25 the profound energy that Jesus’ Resurrection brings into the world. We understand that Christ is among us, and likewise present in the events in Caesarea. We are illumined, for Christ is risen, trampling down death by death and filling us “with the pure light of . . . divine knowledge, and [opening] the eyes of our mind to the understanding of [His] gospel teachings” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

Christ is among us, implanting in us “the fear of [His] blessed commandments, that trampling down all carnal desires, we may enter upon a spiritual manner of living, both thinking and doing such things as are well-pleasing unto” Him. By contrast, the Roman official Festus is still groping in the quandaries of the world, considering how someone can be charged with worshipping a dead man who is somehow *alleged* to be alive.

In truth, Christ is “the illumination of our souls and bodies . . .and unto [Him] we ascribe glory together with [His] unoriginate Father and [His] all-holy and good and life-giving Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages.”

According to Saint Gregory of Nyssa, “The man who sees God possesses in this act of seeing all there is of the things that are good. By this we understand life without end, eternal incorruption, undying beatitude. With these we shall enjoy the everlasting kingdom of unceasing happiness; we shall see the true Light and hear the sweet voice of the Spirit; we shall exult perpetually in all that is good in the inaccessible glory” (“The Beatitudes,” Ancient Christian Writers 18, p. 144).

For us, there are no allegations that require our careful consideration. We ourselves have beheld the Resurrection of Christ and boldly sing the Paschal hymn.

Thy Cross do we adore, O Christ, and Thy holy Resurrection we praise and glorify, for Thou art our God, and we know none other beside Thee. – Paschal Hours

June 21 - Friday of the Seventh Week of Pascha
Acts 27:1-44

Telling the Truth: Acts 27:1-44, especially vs. 11: *“Nevertheless the centurion was more persuaded by the helmsman and the owner of the ship than by the things spoken by Paul.”* Most of us have neighbors, acquaintances, or friends – even beloved family members – who live their lives without faith in Christ. Many of these unfortunate people exist without the benefit of the essential wisdom that our faith provides. Others may have rejected what they once learned of Christianity in favor of secular philosophies, exotic religions, or worldly ideologies.

What can we do when we see such people facing life’s momentous decisions bereft of the guidance of Christ? How do we share the truth with those in need?

Today’s account from Acts follows Saint Paul on a journey with 276 souls aboard an ancient Roman cargo ship. They are sailing for Italy from the southwestern coast of the Anatolian peninsula, part of modern Turkey (vs. 6). Twice during the voyage, the ship’s company faces circumstances requiring life-and-death decisions (vss. 9, 30).

The Apostle Paul’s responsibilities are intensified by the fact that in both instances God extends insight to him concerning the decisions to be made (vss. 10, 21, 23). If we read carefully, this passage provides insights to guide us as we speak to others, especially to those who lack the resources of a strong faith.

After first setting sail from Anatolia, the ship advances slowly because of contrary winds. The crew is forced to head southward across the Mediterranean to the coasts of Crete, arriving at a port unsuitable for spending the winter (vs. 12). The experience of the sailors and the desire of the passengers concur on the need to continue sailing to a more suitable harbor, farther up the island coast (vss. 11-12).

However, the Lord reveals to the Apostle Paul that this move will result in shipwreck (vs. 10). Often, in our pluralistic modern world, the insights of technology and human knowledge run counter to our traditional Christian morality, experience, and wisdom. Let us observe how Saint Paul handles such a case.

First, he listens; then he shares his insights and convictions in a simple, friendly, and calm manner. Nevertheless, as Saint Luke reports, “the majority advised to set sail from there” (vs. 12). Once this decision is reached, the apostle keeps silent. He does not demand that they follow his advice, nor does he rail against them or ridicule them for continuing. Sometimes it may be best to allow the will of God to prevail through ensuing events, so that He may teach others the wisdom of His way and confirm the word given to His servants.

When the ship is hit with tempestuous winds, the vessel is in serious jeopardy (vss. 14-20). The sailors make every effort to deal with these harsh conditions. They allow the ship to run before the wind, strengthen the hull with cables, drop the sails, and throw all unnecessary cargo overboard to prevent swamping.

In the midst of these extreme conditions, the Lord again reveals useful insights and wisdom to Saint Paul (vss. 22-25, 30-31). Furthermore, God creates an openness and receptiveness among the company to heed the apostle’s words.

The apostle restates what God has revealed to him, and also witnesses to his faith by action: “He took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of them all; and when he had broken it he began to eat.

“Then they were all encouraged, and also took food themselves” (vss. 35-36). Shipwreck follows, yet all hands survive. In the end, Paul’s counsel prevails to save the prisoners’ lives (vss. 42-43). May our speech imitate his kindness, modesty, and truth, guided by our trust in the Lord.

O God, let my hearing be inaccessible to idle words, but establish me in Thy grace. – Priest’s Prayer, Divine Liturgy of the Pre-sanctified Gifts

June 22 – Saturday of the Seventh Week of Pascha
Acts 28:1-31

Sharing the Faith: Acts 28:1-31, especially vss. 23-24: *“He explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening. And some were persuaded by the things which were spoken and some disbelieved.”* Now that we have nearly completed our meditations on the Book of the Acts, we are reminded that the Apostle Paul seems never to have presented the gospel in a new community without dividing his listeners pro and con. Such is the nature of truth!

Indeed, Acts documents ten instances of divisive reactions to Saint Paul’s proclamation of the gospel, covering a period of fifteen years of laboring for the Lord. What were the effects of such mixed results on the apostle himself? What were his expectations as he “explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God” (vs. 23)?

The Apostle Paul is rightly called God’s “dauntless witness,” for he never tired of sharing the faith, knowing that some would hear him while many would not (vs. 26). Why should we expect different results? Let us learn from Saint Paul, and from the Lord Jesus as well, that the fallen world forever stands in opposition to the gospel.

At the same time, we are encouraged by the zeal of this apostle who is constantly ready to share the faith. This holy man teaches us some ground rules for our own sharing and witnessing. First, we must start from common assumptions; second, we must possess a thorough knowledge of the faith; and third, we approach anyone who is open to the good news of the “faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. That good thing which was committed to you . . . by the Holy Spirit who dwells in us” (2 Tim 1:13-14).

Note that the Apostle Paul appeals to his fellow Jews at Rome on the basis of what they hold in common: “the hope of Israel” (Acts 28:20). This hope is the shared expectation of God’s people scattered across the earth, based on God’s promise to fulfill His plan in history.

When Saint Philip meets the Ethiopian eunuch (vss. 8:27-35), he finds the man puzzling over a portion of Isaiah. He takes that passage of Scripture as his starting point to explain the gospel (vs. 35). We can never be certain which aspect of the faith will attract our listeners’ attention. In Athens, Saint Paul points to the altar dedicated to “the unknown God,” telling the Athenians, “the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you” (vs. 17:23).

We may think of the wisdom of starting from common ground – from what is already known – as the “gateway” rule. That is to say, we ought not share the faith except from common ground, where a natural basis exists, for we are instructed not to push our faith on those who are not ready to hear (Mt 13:15-17).

Second, the Apostle Paul knows the faith well and believe firmly in the message he is presenting. He has first-hand knowledge of the truth of God’s revelation in the Scriptures (Acts 28:23). If we lack rudimentary experience of the life in Christ, then let us be modest like Andrew, and bring our friends and acquaintances to those who are more likely to help enlighten their hearts and minds (Jn. 1:41-42).

As Christians, we persist in our efforts to gain a living understanding of Holy Scripture, the Church, and our traditions. We invite friends and neighbors to our local parish, if they show an honest interest, or we may share a pamphlet or article on a topic of interest to them. Ultimately, we trust on the Holy Spirit to touch men’s hearts, for all is up to Him.

Finally, we learn from Saint Paul to remain sensitive to those who are open and will come freely (Acts 28:30). Let others dispute among themselves (vs. 29); the unspoken maturing life in Christ is the most effective evangelical gift we have for inquirers (vss. 30-31).

O Christ, grant us the light yoke, and make us honorable members of Thy Church. – Prayer for Catechumens

June 23 – Feast of Pentecost
Acts 2:1-11

Wind, Fire, and Language: Acts 2:1-11, especially vs. 6: “*And when this sound occurred, the multitude came together, and were confused, because everyone heard them speak in his own language.*” The Holy Scriptures give ample evidence that the Holy Spirit “is everywhere present and filleth all things.” When He comes upon the faithful, He gives the very life of God to our hearts and souls and bodies. His indwelling cleanses and saves us.

As Saint John Chrysostom observes, “Now that Man has gone up on high, the Spirit also descends mightily from on high” (“Homily 4 on Acts,” *NPNF First Series*, vol. 11, p. 27). The Holy Spirit descends to transform and make all things new.

However, let us be cautious here, for the Spirit’s descent is not a material phenomenon. “Observe . . . that you may have no gross sensible notions of the Spirit,” says Chrysostom. “Also, ‘as it were of a blast,’ therefore it was ‘not’ a wind, ‘like as of fire.’ For when the Spirit was to be made known to John [the Baptist], then it came upon the head of Christ as in the form of a dove: but now, when a whole multitude was to be converted, it is ‘like as of fire.’ And it sat upon each of themthat wind was a very pool of water” (p. 25)

The image of a pool of water conveys the copiousness of the fire that engulfs the apostles. True, what happens to the Church, as its members gather and wait in obedience to the Lord’s command (vs. 1:4), is similar to an encounter with physical wind, water, or consuming flame; but let us reverently consider what Saint Luke conveys in this passage.

The atmosphere enveloping the earth is constantly stirred by immense forces such as the radiation of the sun, the rotation of the earth, heat differentials on earth, sea, ice, and growing vegetation. As a result, the air swirls and shifts, and we call the result wind. Wind may come silently, in a whisper, or shrieking and howling. At times the wind roars like a mighty engine of destructive force, as in hurricanes and tornados.

The Evangelist Luke reports, “There came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting” (vs. 2:2). The Church is gathered “with one accord in prayer and supplication” (vs. 1:14). Whenever the Church is assembled the Holy Spirit moves with force, but His power is spiritual in nature. On some occasions the wind of the Spirit is gentle, but at other times He comes forcefully.

The gathering of the faithful on Pentecost includes the Twelve, the Theotokos, the Myrrhbearers, many of the Seventy, and others. All had seen, talked, and eaten with the risen Lord. This is the unique gathering that Christ our God commands to pray and wait for the Spirit: an assembly of the faithful who, with the “ears of their hearts,” hears the Spirit come like a rushing, mighty wind, manifest and moving.

Our Lord Jesus Christ called this wondrous gathering together to engage in pure prayer until He returned, and while they are at prayer the Spirit opens their eyes to see the heavenly throne and before it “a sea of glass mingled with fire” (Rv 15:2). The Heavenly King, the Comforter, sets them ablaze with supernatural fire, with His divine and heavenly energy.

That company is deified in the same manner described by Saint Seraphim of Sarov. By the grace of God, they acquire “the Holy Spirit, who acts within us and establishes in us the Kingdom of God. The word of God does not say in vain: ‘The Kingdom of God is within you’ (Lk 17:21)” (*Little Russian Philokalia* vol. 1. p. 104).

This same Spirit works in and through this gathering to bring others to life. The apostolic members of that blessed community preach in Jerusalem, where others are drawn to them, even hearing them speak in their own languages (see Acts 2:6).

O Thou Light most pure and blest, shine within the inmost breast of Thy faithful people.

**June 24 – Monday after Pentecost (Monday of the Holy Spirit)
Ephesians 5:8-20**

Be Filled with the Spirit: *Ephesians 5:8-20, especially vss. 17-18:* “Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And . . . be filled with the Spirit. . . .” The Apostle Paul exhorts us to acquire the Holy Spirit so that we may be saved. In today’s passage from Ephesians, he outlines twelve means for opening ourselves to the Spirit’s infilling of our thoughts, moral choices, and actions, as we seek to gain “goodness, righteousness, and truth” (vs. 9).

First, to find out “what is acceptable to the Lord” (vs. 10), we must strive to yield our choices and actions to Christ our God. Then the illumining grace of the Holy Spirit will reveal what is *acceptable* to God – and life-giving for us. The truths of the gospel, as explored and taught by the Church Fathers, are especially helpful in discerning Christ’s mind.

“Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them” (vs. 11). We need to stop dwelling on the elements of this life that lead to sin. Rather, let us confess these works of darkness so that the Holy Spirit may aid us in rebuking them.

“Awake, you who sleep” (vs. 14). The Lord Jesus is calling us even now from moral and spiritual sleep. We need to listen, repudiate the deadening thoughts suggested by our flesh, the world, and Satan. Alertness helps us resist dark pleasures and tantalizing appeals.

“Arise from the dead” (vs. 14). Christ urges us to risk courageously. He is the Resurrection, having destroyed death. May He lead us up to the heaven of heavens!

“Christ will give you light” (vs. 14). Let us accept the Paschal invitation, “Come ye take light from the Light that is never overtaken by night.” Jesus is the Light and the Way before us.

“See then that you walk circumspectly” (vs. 15). In turning away from the old life to the new way that God illumines before us, we need to walk prudently and mindfully.

“[Redeem] the time” (vs. 16), for our moments on earth fly past and life is brief. We reject the evils of this world and embrace the gift of the Holy Spirit, glorifying God.

“Therefore do not be unwise” (vs. 17). As we refuse the inducements the world offers, we are to look neither to the right nor left. Let us follow Christ each step on the narrow way.

“Understand what the will of the Lord is” (vs. 17). As we struggle to purify our hearts, we need to test them against the will of Christ, guarding and watching them carefully.

“Do not be drunk with . . . dissipation” (vs. 18). We must brush away the sweet but fleeting pleasures of this fallen life so that we do not lose the fruits of the Spirit.

“[Make] melody in your heart to the Lord” (vs. 19). We pray and worship with the faithful as an antidote to spiritual darkness, error, and sin. We receive the Lord’s healing in the Divine Liturgy, offering our praise to God, “giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 20).

How deeply we need the Eucharistic life of the Church! According to Saint Ignatius of Antioch, “For when [we] frequently come together, the powers of Satan are destroyed, his destructive force is annihilated by the concord of [our] faith. Nothing is better than peace, by which all warfare among heavenly and earthly beings is abolished” (Sparks, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 81).

“In Thy courts shall I praise Thee, O Savior of the world, and bending my knee I shall worship Thine invincible might. In the evening, in the morn, at midday, and at all times shall I bless Thee, O Lord” (Orthros for the Monday after Pentecost).

O Thou, All-holy Spirit, who from the Father dost proceed, and through the Son hast descended on the unlettered disciples: Do Thou now sanctify and save all that acknowledge Thee as God. – Hymn from the Monday after Pentecost

June 25 – Tuesday of the First Week after Pentecost
Romans 1:1-7, 13-17

Apostolic Teachings – The Gospel: *Romans 1:1-7, 13-17, especially vs. 16:* “*For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes. . . .*” Secular materialism, which is the pervasive mindset of the modern world, views religion as a human invention. The holy apostles present us with a very different view, however. Saint Paul’s letter to the Christians at Rome thoroughly outlines this unique and distinctive message. He announces and describes God-given theology and practices – truths incomprehensible to the materialists of this age.

In today’s reading, we are introduced to the essential themes of Paul’s epistle. Its main topic is “the gospel” (vs. 1): the message Christ sent the apostles to proclaim “among all nations” (vss. 4-5). The original Greek word *evangelion*, translated as “gospel” or “good news,” is the same word found in Isaiah 61:1. The Lord Jesus declares this prophetic passage “fulfilled” when He visits His hometown synagogue at Nazareth (Lk 4:18).

The Epistle to the Romans develops this “good news” systematically. In the introduction, found in this reading, we encounter six facets of Saint Paul’s teaching concerning the gospel. It is indeed good news; the fulfillment of God’s earlier promises to the prophets; a message centered on Jesus Christ; a declaration of divine power to help us to gain eternal salvation; a disclosure of righteousness that God alone can give; and a transforming way of life for all who commit to faith in Christ.

First and foremost, the difference between the gospel and the modern secular view of religion lies in the former’s declaration that the good news is “of God” (Rom 1:1). During the Orthros service we hear the verse, “God is the Lord which hath shown us light.” In contrast to the suggestion that Christian faith is a human invention, the gospel holds that God takes the initiative of revelation.

Second, we learn that God “promised [the gospel] before [Christ] through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures” (vs. 2), i.e., the Old Testament. According to Saint John Chrysostom, “Both the name of the gospel expressly and the temper of it [were] laid down in the Old Testament. . . . For when God is about to do openly some great things, He announces them a long time before” (“Homily 1 on Romans,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 11, p. 339).

Third, the gospel concerns Christ and the work He accomplishes (vss. 3-6). Saint Paul here asserts two truths about the Lord Jesus: He is human, “born of the seed of David according to the flesh” (vs. 3) and divine, “the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (vs. 4).

The apostle adds that “we have received grace” from and through our Lord Jesus Christ “for obedience to the faith among all nations” (vs. 5). Note the universality of the gospel, as declared in this verse!

Fourth, the gospel “is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” (vs. 16). If we hear and obey Saint Paul’s message, the gospel brings “grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 7). Salvation begins in this life, but will be completed in the age to come.

Fifth, the gospel shows us that “the righteousness of God” (vs. 17) is a gift from Him. As Chrysostom says, it is “not thine own, but that of God. . . . For you do not achieve it by toilings and labors, but you receive it by a gift from above” (p. 349).

Finally, the gospel is unique in its revelation that God saves us and makes us righteous before Him. As a gift from God, the gospel comes from above (Eph 2:8) so that we may commit ourselves fully to Christ. Praise and thanksgiving attend true belief in the gospel.

Open the eyes of my mind to the understanding of Thy gospel teachings, O Christ. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

June 26 - Wednesday of the First Week after Pentecost
Romans 1:18-27

Apostolic Teachings – Sin: Romans 1:18-27, especially vs. 18: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. . . .” Saint Paul initially focuses on the good news in Romans. Now he turns to the predicament of mankind – the tragedy of sin which the gospel addresses in hope. By exposing sin’s ugly nature and its power to ensnare us, the apostle’s message is urgent, warning us that we disdain God to our great peril!

If look back to the preceding verse 17 and compare it to today’s opening verse, we discover that these two verses operate like a seesaw. The upside is the saving righteousness of God, revealed to us in faith (vs. 17); the downside is the wrath of God against our ungodliness and unrighteousness – that is, our sin (vs. 18). Let us follow the saint’s exposition of sin and its profound impact on our hearts, minds, wills, and bodies.

As we read today’s passage, we note that the apostle does not explicitly use the word *sin* in any of its verses. Yet there is no doubt as his topic, for he describes sin in all its familiar dimensions: impiety, unrighteousness, suppression of the truth, failure to glorify and give thanks to God.

Impiety (*asebia*) means to depart from God and His ways. The Greek root word means to “step back from,” as one does out of respect for another. It connotes godliness and fear of the Lord. However, “those without discernment, since they are desirous of arrogance, and are become ungodly (*asebia*) . . . hate perception, and are become subject to reproofs” (Prv 1:23).

Moses warns ancient Israel against developing this very attitude. “It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to inherit their land, but because of the ungodliness of these nations, the Lord will destroy them from before your face” (Dt 9:5).

Impiety, then, is the scriptural equivalent of unrighteousness. These two concepts are inextricably bound with a third: “suppressing the truth” about God, or “[exchanging] the truth of God for the lie” (Rom 1:25). The end result always is failure to glorify and worship God.

When the Apostle Paul declares that we “[do] not glorify Him as God” (vs. 21), he uses the word *doxa*, “glory.” Combined with *orthos* (“correct”), this word is also the root of our English word “orthodox,” meaning “correct worship” and “correct teaching.” Failure to worship rightly and to live God’s truth constitutes sin.

We depart from God “because, although [men] knew God, they did not glorify Him as God” (vs. 21). While enjoying Paradise, says Saint Symeon the New Theologian, Adam for no “good reason at all, but solely out of disdain for the commandment of God” disobeyed and sinned against his Creator (Manley, *The Lament of Eve*, p. 26).

We are all familiar with this inclination: instead of worshiping and living in praise and thanksgiving [*eucharistia*], we abandon proper thankfulness toward God (vs. 21). Saint Paul shows us that sin is the direct opposite of the Eucharist, for praise and thanksgiving to God are the very fabric of the Divine Liturgy.

Sin wreaks disorder within our hearts and souls (vs. 28). Our thinking becomes *futile*, our spirit *darkened* (vs. 21) in the center of our being (the *nous*). We become *debased* deep within ourselves, instead of enjoying communion with God as He intends (vs. 28). We thus “[exchange] the truth of God for the lie” (vs. 25) and serve the creature rather than the Creator (vss. 23, 25). Idolatry – an obsession with things – and perversion follow in our hearts (vss. 22-27).

O Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, my God, forgive me all transgressions that I have committed in knowledge or in ignorance, for Thou art a God of mercy and compassion. – Saint John of Damascus

June 27 - Thursday of the First Week after Pentecost
Romans 1:28-2:9

Apostolic Teaching, continued – Separation from God: Romans 1:28-2:9, especially vs. 3: “*And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?*” In today’s passage from Romans, the Apostle Paul speaks about the judgment of God, which results in “honor, and immortality” (vs. 7) or “tribulation and anguish” (vs. 9). We will receive one or the other of these judgments.

Saint Paul also addresses the insidious action of sin within us, for we gloss over our misdeeds and focus on the wrongs of others. Sin is at work in all of us. If we indulge it, we are cut off from God, who is the source of life, and consigned to death.

Saint Paul’s list of sins begins with glaring, obvious wrongs such as sexual immorality, covetousness, malice, envy, and murder (vs. 29). He continues with actions we might consider commonplace, and therefore less serious, such as being disobedient, unloving, unforgiving, and unmerciful (vs. 31). These wrongs are not always visible; rather, they hide in our mind and heart.

And yet, when we do “not . . . retain God in . . . knowledge” (vs. 28), we cut ourselves off from Him just as surely as the murderer, the prostitute, the perjurer or the one who cheats unwary customers. When sins are not visible, we all too easily rationalize and deny their existence. Let us be forthright in confession and never deny our sinful thoughts and feelings. If we suppress our hidden sins, we acquire “the boldness, the audacity, the arrogance, the gracelessness to judge and blame others rather than ourselves” (Manley, *The Lament of Eve*, p. 68).

God intends for the deep place of our heart to reflect His image and be luminous with His uncreated light. However, “when [the *nous*] withdraws from God and loses its natural state, it is blackened, darkened So we can speak of the blindness and inability of the *nous* to see things clearly. And . . . we do not have a pure and open passage to our neighbor” (Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, p. 134-35).

When we close ourselves off from others, we feel free to blame them while excusing ourselves. Worst of all, because we are corrupted inwardly, we delude ourselves and try to remake God in our image. “Thou didst think an iniquity, that I should be like unto thee,” God replies, “I will reprove thee, and bring thy sins before thy face” (Ps 49:22).

As sinners, we fall into a terrible fixation or obsession which the Apostle Paul describes. “Knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, [we] not only do the same but also approve those who practice them” (Rom 1:32). In such a state we garner the same reward as the disobedient receive for unrighteousness: “indignation, and wrath, tribulation, and anguish” (vss. 2:8-9).

The invariable consequence of sin is separation from God. Saint Paul does not teach that God is a wicked being who is seeking divine vengeance totally devoid of love. According to Saint Isaac the Syrian, “God punishes with love, not defending Himself – far be it – but He wants to heal His image, and He does not keep His wrath for long.”

Likewise, the apostle invites us to be healed. He asks, “Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?” (vs. 4). According to Alexandre Kalomiros, “God is a loving fire, and He is a loving fire for all: good or bad. . . . The same loving fire brings the day to those who respond to love with love, and burns those who respond to love with hatred.”

O God our Father, who desirest each one to enter into Thy truth, release us from the bondage of sin, for Thou alone canst unbind what has been bound. In Thee alone is our hope.

June 28 - Friday of the First Week after Pentecost
Romans 2:14-29

Apostolic Teaching, continued – Form and Truth: Romans 2:14-29, especially vs. 29: “*But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.*” We receive great blessings from our holy Orthodox faith, for “we have seen the true light, we have received the heavenly Spirit; we have found the true faith, worshiping the undivided Trinity: for He hath saved us” (Divine Liturgy). However, in today’s passage from Romans the Apostle Paul sternly warns us against becoming complacent in our faith.

Those who are outside of the Church and lack the true faith, and yet who *by nature do* what our faith demands, are also considered to be of the faith. They demonstrate that the work of the faith is “written on their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them” (vss. 14-15).

This point leads to a sobering question concerning our own membership in the Church and our belonging to Christ. What part of being “Orthodox” assures us of the hope of receiving “praise . . . from God” (vs. 29)? Is it simply that we follow the true forms of the faith? Or is it that we keep the commandments of Christ our God in our hearts, so that we worship the Trinity in our every thought, word, and deed?

This issue matters greatly to us if we are to call ourselves Christians. In Orthodoxy we necessarily place emphasis on correct doctrine and right worship (“ortho-doxa”). We celebrate the Eucharist with great solemnity. We pay strict attention to the words, actions, forms, and material elements of the liturgy. We understand these forms as holy icons of the faith, and a reflection of the light that is in us as well.

Our efforts to rightly observe the forms of worship and faith serves the Church well, and helps us to avoid many of the distortions and errors found in other faith confessions. We correctly call the Orthodox Church “one, holy, catholic and apostolic.” We bring our children into this true faith through the mysteries of baptism and chrismation. We rear them to worship the Lord, reverencing the Gospel, the icons, and the clergy.

When Christ our God became man, He revealed Himself to our hearts and souls in physical form. Hence we have good reason to treat all external forms seriously. Christ, “being in the form of God . . . made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. . . . And . . . He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Phil 2:6-8).

However, Saint Paul urges us to be careful not to detach the forms of faith from heartfelt worship. “Pharisaism” can overtake us as readily as it did pious Jews in the first century. Simply claiming to know God’s will, verbalizing Orthodox truth, and identifying ourselves as members of the faithful is not enough (see Rom 2:17-18)!

A total, lived conversion to Christ is required. If we lay claim to this holy faith that rejects stealing, adultery, and other sinful deeds, we must avoid dallying with such evils even in our minds – let alone practicing them (vss. 19-24)! Having received Christ, we humble ourselves before Him and enter into the struggle for purity of heart, by God’s grace.

Let us wash the Master’s feet with tears of repentance in the manner of the harlot (Lk 7:38. “Do not be self-confident until you hear the final sentence passed upon yourself,” says Saint John Climacus, “bearing in mind the guest who got as far as joining in the marriage feast, and then was bound hand and foot and cast out into the outer darkness. Do not lift up your neck, creature of earth!” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 23.17, p. 140).

Make straight my path; establish me in Thy fear; and make firm my steps, O Lord. – Post-communion Prayer of Saint John Chrysostom

June 29 - Saturday of the First Week after Pentecost
Romans 1:7-12

Apostolic Teaching, continued – Fellow Christians: *Romans 1:7-12, especially vs. 8:* “*First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all. . . .*” As members of Christ, we are never solitary. As the Apostle Paul says, “By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free – and have been all made to drink into one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13). Let us strive to imitate Saint Paul’s concern for those with whom we share the faith.

In this passage, Saint Paul identifies several opportunities to show such concern in our relationships with our fellow Christians. He even reveals some of the blessings that may follow if we carry out his advice. First and foremost, he encourages us to treat other Christians as *beloved of God* (Rom 1:7), following God’s lead.

“Let us love one another,” exhorts the Apostle and Evangelist John, “for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 Jn 4:7-8).

In urging us to love others in Christ, the apostles are not referring to warm fuzzy feelings, but to the genuine care and concern Saint Paul has in mind when he says, “Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth” (1 Cor 13:4-6).

Let us apply this standard in examining our interactions with our fellow members. “Do I suffer long with John and act kindly to him?” “Do I envy Marie?” Let us likewise remember how many of our fellow Christians patiently endure with us – there is a blessing! As the philosopher Philo advises, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.” Who knows, we too may receive kindness!

Second, we Christians are “called to be saints” (Rom 1:7). All of us are committed to becoming holy and pure; all are pledged in baptism to struggle for purification. Advancing together on this path of the Lord, let us exert ourselves to attain the prize of holiness.

Third, the Apostle Paul sends the Christians in Rome greetings of grace and peace “from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 7). Our great blessing, when we join with other faithful Christians, is choosing peace with God and within our family in Christ. We offer grace to the faithful by greeting them in peace. Let us give thanks when they return this greeting.

Fourth, we ought to give thanks for our fellow Christians (vs. 8), for they witness for us in a host of circumstances that we will never know ourselves. Each one brings the light of Christ to some unique corner of the world. Let us thank God for each one and pray for our brothers and sisters day by day, thanking them for their witness as well.

Fifth, Saint Paul prays to be with his fellow Christians (vss. 9-10). May God give us this apostolic longing so that we look forward to gathering in fellowship, remembering those who are absent even as they remember us.

Sixth, he suggests that we “impart . . . some spiritual gift” to our fellow Christians (vs. 11). Such gifts include ministering, teaching, exhorting, giving liberally, ruling diligently, showing mercy and cheerfulness, loving without hypocrisy, abhorring that which is evil, sharing joy and sorrow, and considering those thought to be unimportant (Rom 12:6-16).

As we encourage others, we will find that our own faith is strengthened (vs. 12). We enjoy being remembered, having the support of others, and supporting our fellow Christians who stands up for the faith with humility and honesty. It’s in the family!

O Lord, I commend to Thy care and protection all those Thou hast given me.

June 30 – First Sunday after Pentecost (Sunday of All Saints)
Hebrews 11:33-12:2

Cloud of Witnesses: Hebrews 11:32-12:2, especially vss. 32-34: “The time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.”

In the icon of the Resurrection called “The Harrowing of Hell,” Christ stands victoriously astride the gates of Hades, lifting Adam and Eve from their tombs. He has disarmed “principalities and powers,” making “a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them” (Col 2:15) and bestowing life on fallen mankind.

In today’s passage the Apostle Paul names six ancient prophets and warriors who, “having obtained a good testimony through faith” (Heb 11:39), met Christ the Victor in joy. Through faith, these leaders indeed “subdued kingdoms” while on earth (vs. 33).

The Prophet Gideon, for example, crushed a vastly superior coalition of Midianite forces by faith. After he reduced his army of 32,000 fighting men to a tiny band of 300, these men threw the Midianite camp into confusion although they were equipped with nothing by torches, clay jars, and trumpets (Jgs 6:33-8:21).

The Prophetess Deborah called upon Barak to lead Israel’s army on foot against a vast Canaanite force supported by nine hundred iron chariots. Barak went into the battle accompanied by Deborah. At a critical moment, acting in faith, he advanced against the Canaanite army and prevailed (Jgs 4:4-5:31).

The mighty warrior Jephthah led a coalition of the tribes of Israel against the Ammonites. Because he was full of faith and firm in his convictions, the Lord God gave him victory (Jgs 10:6-11:32).

Samuel the Prophet also “worked righteousness” (Heb 11:33). Conceived and born in answer to prayer (1 Kgs 1:1-20), he was reared for ministry in God’s sanctuary (vss. 1:21-3:21). God chose him to anoint the first two kings of Israel. Throughout his life he fought for personal integrity and intimate communion with God (vs. 12:1-5).

Of all these ancient leaders who by faith “subdued kingdoms” (Heb 11:33), Prophet David the Psalmist and King of Israel is best remembered. Around the memory of his feats the promise of a future Messiah developed (Ps 88:19-35). He too “worked righteousness” (Heb 11:33; 1 Kgs 24), “obtained promises” (Heb 11:33; see 2 Kgs 7), “stopped the mouths of lions” (Heb 11:33; 1 Kgs 17), and “escaped the edge of the sword” (Heb 11:33; 2 Kgs 15-18).

The Apostle Paul also mentions the Prophets Samson (Jgs 14-16) and Daniel (Dn 6), who likewise faced lions. When the apostle says they “quenched the violence of fire” (Heb 11:34), we recall the seventh and eighth odes of the Church’s festal canons, which speak of the “godly-minded youths who worshiped not the creature rather than the Creator, but trod the threat of fire in manly fashion” (see Dn 3).

In our own battles against *principalities and powers*, the devil and his minions stalk us like lions. They set fires of temptation raging in our weak flesh and make the worship of created things attractive to us. We may have fallen and gotten up time and time again, trying to please our Lord.

Be assured that Christ knows our losses as well as our victories, and also sees our faith. Let us not despair! Christ is risen! May we rise up in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection, and sing with triumph the hymns of celebration with all the saints.

O Redeemer who tasted the sentence of death and destroyed corruption in Hades, bring us together with Thy saints to praise and magnify the eternal triumph of Thy Resurrection.