

August 1 - Thursday of the Sixth Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 3:18-23

Growth in Christ, continued – Attaining True Wisdom: 1 Corinthians 3:18-23, especially vs. 18: *“Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.”* In this epistle, the Apostle Paul expresses deep concern about the spiritual state of the Corinthian Christians. He perceives that these disciples’ grasp of the gospel, the Church, and the mores of personal conduct is still immature.

The disciples at Corinth are under the delusion that they have attained true wisdom in Christ, but the apostle undercuts this false confidence, saying, “If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool” (vs. 18). He seeks to awaken them to the difference between their ideas about wisdom and the true wisdom taught by the Church to all believers.

We face a similar problem today, for we live in a culture that places priority on the technological acumen offered by our secular universities and colleges. The belief is widespread that education will solve all problems, since society’s maladies are the result of ignorance.

This dangerous notion does nothing to address mankind’s ills. Indeed, our belief in the “solution” of education blinds us, making the Apostle Paul’s message as pertinent to us today as it was during the first century.

Let us look carefully at Saint Paul’s alternative, for he reveals how growing in Christ helps us gain genuine wisdom. Beginning with the phrase “among you” in verse 18, Saint Paul contrasts the ethos, values, and orientation of the Church with that of the world. Problems arise when this contrast becomes blurred in our minds. The ethos of the Church is very different from that of human society, whether we are talking about Greco-Romans in the first century or our own secular culture.

Our Orthodox faith integrates every aspect of our existence. Its unique, inherent values encompass the spectrum of human behavior, whether we are concerned with marriage and family, art and music, or employment and recreation.

Contemporary culture, however, has lost touch with true spiritual life. We see increasing disorder in the conduct of business, community affairs, and personal morality. Indeed, there are many disturbing parallels with first-century Corinth.

How do we attain true wisdom in Christ? The Apostle Paul teaches us, first, about these two competing wisdoms. From him we learn the difference between them as manifested in thought and action. We may find it a struggle to gain this apostolic view of wisdom, discovering how thoroughly our lives are permeated by the wisdom of this disordered age. We require God-given insight if we are to turn away from the “good life” of this world. Truly, we must become fools “that [we] may become wise” (vs. 18).

Once we perceive the difference between true and false wisdom, then we can make true choices. “I set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. Therefore choose life, that both you and your seed may live” (Dt 30:19). To become fools for Christ, we must submit to the Lord and allow him to reshape our attitudes, thoughts, and desires, as well as every facet of our behavior and activities.

Such apostolic perception, guided by true wisdom, helps us counter the appeal of worldly behavior (vs. 19). True wisdom allows us to abandon futile fantasies by exposing them to the light of Christ (vs. 20), and abandoning our human boasting and pride (vs. 21). Choosing on the basis of true wisdom is possible when we understand that we belong to the Lord, for we “are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (vs. 23).

I have no life, no light, no joy or wisdom, nor strength except in Thee, O Lord. – Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

August 2 - Friday of the Sixth Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 4:5-8

Growth in Christ, continued – Judging: 1 Corinthians 4:5-8, especially vss. 6-7: “Learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive?” We soon discover how sins are intertwined in our hearts. Three closely related ones (judging, conceit, and contentiousness) work together to our detriment, and are difficult to defeat on our own.

Speaking of conceit, Saint John Climacus says, “I am vainglorious when I fast; and when I relax the fast in order to be unnoticed, I am again vainglorious over my prudence. When well-dressed I am quite overcome by vainglory, and when I put on poor clothes I am vainglorious again. When I talk I am defeated, and when I am silent I am again defeated by it. However I throw this prickly pear, a spike stands upright” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent* 22.5, p. 54).

The Apostle Paul, who took delight in the law of God according to his inward man, admits frankly, “And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me” (2 Cor 12:7). We see God’s hand in the struggle!

Having confronted the intermingling of judging, conceit, and contentiousness, Saint Paul addresses these sins in one helpful passage. He has been alerted “by those of Chloe’s household, that there are contentions” within the Corinthian church (1 Cor 1:11). Realizing that his Corinthian disciples are in spiritual danger, he knows that they must defeat this sinister team of enemies if they are to grow in Christ.

Each one needs to stop judging the others, resist conceit, and diligently follow the apostles’ model of cooperation. Above all, God must be acknowledged as the sole source of every gift, ability, and capacity. Such an admission puts conceit to death.

Saint Paul first addresses the judgmentalism in the community: “Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes” (vs. 4:5). This admonition, like the Lord Jesus’ caution in Matthew 7:1, must be read in context. Of course Christians make judgments concerning obvious wrongdoing. The world is rife with practices that are patently contrary to the teaching and will of God. We should never consider the lists of sins in the New Testament as antiquated problems limited to the first century. There is little novelty in sin, after all.

What the Lord and the apostles mean by *not judging* is that we should refrain from impugning the motives of other Christians on the basis of words and actions that differ from our own. We veer into the sins of judging, conceit, and contentiousness when we decide that what others think, say, or do arises from “the hidden things of darkness” and reveals the “counsels of [their] hearts” (1 Cor 4:5). We must take care not to see differences as a deviation from Church teachings or an indication of heresy, demonic influences, or evil motives.

Early in the epistle, Saint Paul offers himself and Apollos as models of what it means to work together despite differences (vss. 3:5-8). Now he refers back to those comments (vs. 4:6), urging the disciples to adopt a cooperative manner despite differences in style. He urges us to guard against superiority games such as telling ourselves that we are best, or believing that “their approach is wrong.”

Above all, we avoid the dark inner tendency toward self-importance and conceit by immediately acknowledging that our every capacity and insight comes to us from God (vs. 7). Only Lord, through the Holy Spirit, equips the saints for ministry (Eph 4:12). Without Him, we are empty and impoverished (2 Cor 4:7)!

Grant me to see my own sins, and not to judge my brother, for Thou art blessed, O God. – Saint Ephraim the Syrian

August 3 - Saturday of the Sixth Week after Pentecost
Romans 9:1-5

Israel's Legacy: Romans 9:1-5, especially vs. 3-5: *“My countrymen according to the flesh . . . are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came. . . .”* The tragedy of ancient Israel caused Saint Paul “great sorrow and continual grief in [his] heart” (vs. 2). Saint John Chrysostom observes, “They are now cast out and disgraced; and in their place are introduced men who had never known [God]” (“Homily 16 on Romans,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 11, p. 4-5.)

We are those ones who have been introduced “in their place” – peoples from many nations who are now the Israel of God, constituted on the foundation of the Lord Jesus Christ from a remnant of older Israel. A few Jews did gather to the apostles as they proclaimed Christ risen from the dead and “exalted to the right hand of God” (Acts 2:33), but the sevenfold legacy of Israel has passed to us, as Saint Paul sets forth in today’s opening quote.

Adoption to sonship became ours in the mystery of baptism: we are grafted into the people of God through union with Christ (Rom 11:24). We cease to be children of the body, but rather “members and partakers of the death and Resurrection of Christ our God” and children of the heavenly kingdom. As the Apostle Paul says, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus,” having “put on Christ” (Gal 3:27). We now “call upon . . . the heavenly God as Father, and say, ‘Our Father, who art in heaven’” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

The *glory* is ours as well, meaning the glory of the Lord. The theophanies by which God revealed Himself to Israel are now the legacy of every disciple of Christ. We are crowned by the most wondrous of divine revelations: the appearance of God in the flesh through the birthgiving of the Theotokos. Then, at the Lord Jesus’ baptism, God manifested His first complete theophany, revealing that He is one God in the three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Saint Paul reminds us of the legacy of the *covenants* we receive through the old Israel. Foremost are the covenants made by God with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and with the patriarchs’ descendants at Mount Sinai. Because the Lord “remembered His mercy to Jacob, and His truth to the house of Israel” (Ps 97:4), He now offers His people the cup of “the new covenant in [His] blood” (Lk 22:20), shed for all who confess Him as Lord and Christ.

Israel received the law by which Christ guides us to “love [our] enemies, bless those who curse [us], do good to those who hate [us], and pray for those who spitefully use [us].” By so doing, we may prove ourselves “sons of [our] Father in heaven” (Mt 5:44-45).

In former times, the offering of bulls and goats was the type of atonement and forgiveness, yet those sacrifices could not “take away sins” (Heb 10:4). In the Lord Jesus true worship is our legacy, for “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (vs. 10:10).

The *promises* are realized for us in Christ, for through Him “all the tribes of the earth shall be blessed” (Gn 12:3) with “an everlasting covenant” (vs. 17:19). He reigns forever over a kingdom of whose peace “there is no end” (Is 9:6).

That which began with the patriarchs is ours at the end of the ages, for Christ our “God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, [and] received up in glory” (1 Tim 3:16).

Shine, shine, O New Jerusalem; for the glory of the Lord hath risen upon thee. – Paschal Canon

August 4 – Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Romans 12:6-14

Christ is Among Us: Romans 12:6-14, especially vs. 6: “Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them. . . .” Father Dumitru Staniloae observes that “the spiritual ascent, even if it carries someone close to God in heaven, is an ascent within the Church, on the spiritual steps of the Church on earth, and on those of the Church in heaven. There is no other ladder to God” (*Orthodox Spirituality*, p. 66-67).

According to Staniloae, our actions as a community and our attitudes as Orthodox Christians either reveal Christ to the world, or obscure His presence. Indeed, if we adopt the attitudes that Saint Paul describes in today’s passage and manifest them authentically, we allow the world to encounter Jesus Christ.

Truly, the behaviors, attitudes, and lifestyle that the apostle seeks to instill in us are the Lord’s. If we read verses 6-8 as pertaining to Christ, we behold the source of the apostle’s words. It is Christ who, “according to the grace that is given to [Him],” prophesies, ministers, teaches, exhorts, gives, leads, and “shows mercy with cheerfulness.”

The point is that *we* are Christ’s tangible presence in history. We are His Body, the Church, maintained by the working of the Holy Spirit and ever growing toward deeper communion with Him. The apostle is simply urging us, as *members* of Christ (vs. 5), to be what we are. He wants us to reveal the Lord’s presence authentically – an honor and a challenge!

First and foremost, Saint Paul directs us to exercise the gifts we have received. He names those gifts common to a healthy Christian community: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, and showing mercy.

Prophecy exists when members of our parishes speak the truth – for example, when programs or interpersonal relationships slip off track, or become divisive and disruptive. The capacity God gives us to speak truth in critical moments is the gift of prophecy.

Our Orthodox communities are also richly blessed with ministry, or *diakonia*. Women’s groups, ushers, altar servers, choir singers, and those wonderful “fix-it” people minister to us all. God bless them for their efforts, for they make a parish work. Christ surely is the One ministering!

We expect our clergy to *teach*, but many others provide instruction. We need our church school teachers, youth workers, catechists, and parish members who share their specialized knowledge and training as we carry out parish programs and projects.

Blessed is our God who opens our hearts to “[give], with liberality.” All of us are called to tithe, but some give freely beyond the minimum ten percent. We see their contributions in countless ways, great and small, in the form of money, volunteer time, and the offering of skills.

The apostle opens the next section of the reading with a single command: “Let love be without hypocrisy” (vs. 9). He defines the shape and scope of Christ-like love: we are to “abhor what is evil,” and “cling to what is good,” always kind and affectionate to each other (vs. 10). Our diligence is “fervent in spirit,” neither lagging nor running hot and cold (vs. 11).

If we are the presence of Christ, let us be patient in tribulation, steadfast in prayer, responsive to the needs of God’s people, and hospitable in our actions. We are to let the world know and see that Christ is in our midst.

Verse 14 sets forth God’s expectation for all of us who unite ourselves to Christ. To “bless those who persecute” us is a norm of Christian life, as we learn from the Beatitudes. Such blessing is essential to us if we are to take up our cross and follow the Master.

Adorn me, teach me, and enlighten me. Show me to be a dwelling place of Thy Spirit. – Post-communion Prayer of Saint Simeon the Translator

August 5 – Monday of the Seventh Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 5:9-6:11

Responding to Immorality: 1 Corinthians 5:9-6:11, especially vs. 11: *“And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.”* We find in this verse the source of the prayer of ablution which read by the priest at the end of the service of chrismation. As the capstone of today’s reading, it reflects Saint Paul’s desire to help us maintain godly standards even though we live in the midst of non-believers.

Saint Paul confronted a situation very similar to that of Orthodox Christians in the contemporary West. The morals of first-century Greco-Roman society concerning sexuality, self-indulgence, and the accumulation of wealth were the opposite of what the Church teaches, and have much in common with the ethics of many Western societies today. As the gap between the Church’s moral standards and those of the world continue to widen, we must respond to members of our congregations who are caught up by the world’s standards – or who may be tempted to abandon Christian morality altogether.

The apostle here lists an array of sins: fornication, idolatry, adultery, homosexuality (vs. 6:9), drunkenness, gluttony, and extortion (vs. 10). All of us know fellow parishioners who have fallen into these sins, and even we ourselves have been guilty of them, if we are honest. Saint Paul offers three basic directives for how to cope with such immorality.

First, we are not to associate with Church members who choose to live otherwise than as God prescribes. The apostle is blunt about this: “But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner – not even to eat with such a person” (vs. 5:11).

He is not speaking here of those “who are outside” (vs. 12), such as members of other religious groups or unbelievers, but of fellow Christians who profess the faith and yet flagrantly defy its moral teachings. Obeying this apostolic injunction can cause us deep heartache, especially when close friends or family members are caught up in immoral behavior. We are wise to seek pastoral support and counsel when facing situations close to home.

The apostle’s second admonition addresses disagreements between Church members that arise from such things as personality differences, marital discord, parent-child conflict, business issues, or parish problems. He emphasizes that these things should not be dealt with outside the Church, but rather with pastoral guidance.

It is scandalous when Orthodox Christians seek judgments from secular courts against fellow Orthodox Christians, for society’s laws are Orthodox in neither word nor spirit. Saint Paul considers this issue so important that he asks, “Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated?” (vs. 6:7)

Let us turn to priests with wisdom and training to resolve the conflicts among us. The Lord Himself has given us a step-by-step method for working through disputes (Mt 18:15-35).

The apostle’s third directive underlies his discussion of moral issues. We may summarize it thus: with respect to unrighteousness, there can be no compromise. Saint Paul warns, “The unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God. Do not be deceived. Neither [will persons who persist in such behavior] inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor 6:9-10).

Finally, let us turn to confession when immorality entangles us! The Church considers confession as a way of restoration, akin to our first cleansing at baptism. As we truly repent and confess, we are strengthened and renewed in Christ.

O Christ our God, keep us ever warriors invincible in every attack of those who assail us; and make us victors, even unto the end, through Thy crown incorruptible. – Chrismation Prayer

August 6 – Transfiguration of Christ
2 Peter 1:10-19

Apostolic Urgency: 2 Peter 1:10-19, especially vs. 13: “Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding you. . . .” The Apostle Peter spent three years as a close companion of the Lord Jesus during the days He walked on this earth (vss. 16-18). As a result, he writes urgently, for he knows that eternal life hinges on living the Gospel truth upon which we are established (vs. 12). Furthermore, he knows that his earthly days are few (vss. 14-15) and that the temptations to abandon the life in Christ are constant – thus he writes with double urgency that we make our “call and election sure” (vs. 10).

This man, so intimately associated with God Incarnate, also speaks to us. During the three years he shared with the Lord Jesus, he himself was transfigured from an ordinary fisherman into the chief of Christ’s apostles. The charisma of Jesus of Nazareth compelled him to leave his livelihood behind in order to follow the new, itinerant Teacher. As the Lord Jesus’ disciple, Saint Peter soon discerned that his Master was the promised Messiah.

With his own eyes, Saint Peter saw the Lord receive “from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory” (vs. 17). He was an eyewitness to Christ’s betrayal and death, but he met the Lord alive! With his understanding opened so “that [he] might comprehend the Scriptures,” he saw Jesus exalted in the heavens (Lk 24:45, 51).

The apostle’s firsthand experience of the Lord Jesus was truly a transformation, for what he beheld on Mount Tabor confirmed incontestably that it is God’s will that many be called to life in our Lord (Acts 2:39). This revelation filled the fisherman’s heart full of burning desire to lead others to the life-giving entrance “into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pt 1:11). Saint Peter believed, with all the pious of the first century, in the possibility of an “excellence of the righteous . . . greater than the angels,” as one early writer of that age expressed it.

May God inflame our hearts with an urgency akin to that of the Apostle Peter! Many of those around us – and we ourselves, at times – are deluded by the pressing concerns of this present world, which is passing away. Yet true life is offered to everyone in the Person of the Lord Jesus, as proclaimed to us by Saint Peter and the apostles. Now that we have answered the apostolic call to embrace the eternal life of our Savior, let us seek the intercessions of Saint Peter and Paul that God would keep us from stumbling and failing to attain the heritage that is ours.

Saint Peter speaks urgently, for while we “know and are established in the present truth” (vs. 12), he also knows how incessantly we are pounded by the world’s very different priorities. It is easy to become negligent and neglect the true power that comes to us from holy communion, from reading the life-giving words of Holy Scripture and the Fathers, and praying and fasting. Do we wish to be healed and renewed? Let us not ignore the message of Christ’s Transfiguration and risk losing our opportunity to *be* transfigured!

Saint John, who was on the mountain with Peter, reminds us that “when the Lord Jesus is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is” (1 Jn 3:2). Our faith is not “cunningly devised fables,” but “the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Pt 1:16). The voice of God the Father speaks to us as His adopted children, calling us “My beloved . . . in whom I am well pleased” (vs. 17).

O Thou Word, the Light of the unborn Father, by Thy light which hath shown today on Tabor, we have seen the Father’s light and the Spirit’s light, lighting the whole creation.

August 7 - Wednesday of the Seventh Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 7:12-24

Christian Marriage, continued – Non-believing Spouses: 1 Corinthians 7:12-24, especially vs. 20: *“Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called.”* In the year 593 BC, a young slave living in the Babylonian empire attained his thirtieth birthday. Had he been free he would have begun serving as a priest, after the tradition of his fathers, but such was not to be. Instead, God placed His hand upon him to fulfill the work of a prophet among his fellow slaves, who “sat down and . . . wept” by the waters of Babylon, remembering far-off Zion (Ps 136:1).

That young slave was the Prophet Ezekiel (Ezk 1:1-3; 2:1-8). Some of us, like Ezekiel, awaken in the course of life to discover that the hand of the Lord God is upon us: we are members of His people, called to be Orthodox Christians. When this realization dawns, our “first love” (Rv 2:4) compels us to re-examine our lives and relationships in the light of God’s claim upon us.

Likewise, the Apostle Paul directs us to consider our lives, our purpose, and God’s call upon us in Christ. Whether we were united to the Lord in infancy, growing up in the Church, or were drawn the faith as adults makes little difference. When a consciousness of our calling from God awakens within us by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the desire to abide in the Lord Jesus continues in us (Jn 15:4), then everything falls under the divine expectation that first things truly must be first.

What if we are married to someone who does not practice the faith, or have parents or children who are unbelievers? God calls us to the struggle of being faithful exactly where we find ourselves in this life.

The Apostle Paul affirms the supremacy of our identity as Christians. No matter what our position in life, we are “called . . . Christ’s slave” (1 Cor 7:22). Christ’s rule over us must be absolute, never subject to compromise. Even when a spouse is not a practicing Christian, or belongs to another religion, or has left the Church, we “do not become slaves of men” (vs. 23). We do not follow our spouses, but Christ our Master.

If false ideas, practices, and demands from a loved one intrude upon our call in Christ, we remember to whom we belong and to whom we must answer. However, married persons should not consider leaving their unbelieving partners for that reason alone. Even if a spouse scorns the faith, we are to remain together so long as our partner is “willing to live with” us (vs. 12).

Saint Paul asks us to consider the immeasurable good that God may accomplish through our relationships with unbelievers who are close to us, especially a spouse or family member. “For how do you know . . . whether you will save your husband” or wife (vs. 16)? There is always potential.

The Apostle Peter urges, “Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives” (1 Pt 3:1). Instead of giving up on the relationship, we are “rather [to] use it” (1 Cor 7:21). We should take our station in this life as a field of labor that sets before us. We participate with Him in His saving work, letting Him bring the results.

The primary task for us as Christians is to serve the Lord and “remain in the same calling in which [we were] called” (vs. 20). “If the unbeliever departs, let him. . . . God has called us to peace” (vs. 15). Departure may mean desertion, divorce, or what Saint John Chrysostom calls a bid to “take part in . . . ungodliness on account of thy marriage.” In such a case we let the other go, following Christ in all peace with God and others as we are able.

Unto Thee we commend ourselves, and each other, and all our life, O Christ our God. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

August 8 – Thursday of the Seventh Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 7:24-35

Christian Marriage continued – Service: 1 Corinthians 7:24-35, especially vss. 32 & 35: “*But I want you to be without care. . . . Serve the Lord without distraction.*” In previous readings from the last two days, Saint Paul reminds us that we were “bought at a price” (vs. 6:20); we seek to “glorify God” (vs. 7:23) and serve Christ as His worthy slaves (vss. 21-22). Regardless of our place of residence, family status, or employment, we are to use the grace we have received in Christ to “please the Lord” (vs. 32), for He governs all.

Serving God is *the* priority of every serious Christian. As the Church, we live in heightened awareness of the Lord’s imminent return. Saint Paul reminds us that “the time is short” (vs. 29). Every time we recite the Nicene Creed, we declare that the Lord “will come again to judge the living and the dead.”

Perhaps we do not consider His return to be an urgent matter, despite the fact that at the hour of our death – or at Christ’s return – we shall face His dread judgment. It is better for us to ask and keep asking how we may serve the Lord at this moment *without distraction* (vs. 35).

The Apostle Paul offers a starting point for our efforts. First, we place attention on serving the Lord in the context of our life and particular situation. We are to “remain with God in that state in which [we were] called” (vs. 24). If we are married, we “do not seek to be loosed . . . from a wife;” if single or divorced, we “do not seek a wife” (vs. 27). Rather, “it is good for a man to remain as he is” (vs. 26).

Worrying about getting married or fretting about being single are distractions from the primary issue of this life, which is *pleasing the Lord* (vs. 32). However, the apostle wisely understands that not all are able to be fully absorbed into the work of the Church, or to follow the life of virginity modeled by Christ.

Saint Paul foresees how the concerns of family life bring “trouble in the flesh” –from which, he says, “I would spare you” (vs. 28). Of course, he does not consider marriage sinful, for “even if you do marry, you have not sinned” (vs. 28). Rather, he desires each of us to emphasize the things of the Lord, “for the form of this world is passing away” (vs. 31).

The apostle states the obvious fact that “there is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world – how she may please her husband” (vs. 34).

Whether we are married or single, Saint Paul exhorts us to live with evangelical urgency. We are to be serious about the Lord’s work, making it our primary concern. Thus, in an ultimate sense, “even those who have wives should be as though they had none” (vs. 29).

The best way to focus our life on God is remain conscious of the transitory nature of this earthly existence. Even when we grieve, let us remember that all things are passing away. Even the grieving are to act “as though they did not weep, those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice, those who buy as though they did not possess, and those who use this world as not misusing it” (vss. 30-31).

To us, the Lord’s present-day disciples, Saint Paul’s advice may seem radical. However, we are always blessed when we urgently serve the Lord, for He is our true life. He is able to draw us out of the slough of secular indulgence. Christ will faithfully renew us as members of His eternal family so long as we strive to “serve the Lord without distraction” (vs. 35).

I am a pilgrim on this earth; direct my steps to the fulfillment of Thy will, O Master. – Prayer Before a Journey

August 9 - Friday of the Seventh Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 7:35-8:7

Christian Marriage, continued – Marriage vs. Monasticism: 1 Corinthians 7:35-8:7, especially vs. 38: “So then he who gives her in marriage does well, but he who does not give her in marriage does better.” Yesterday’s reading offers us a great truth: by embracing the apostolic call to please the Lord above all things, we may overcome the force of self-indulgence in ourselves and serve Christ faithfully. This is how we “serve the Lord without distraction” (vs. 35). That truth and challenge now become the basis for the further teaching in today’s passage.

Here, Saint Paul reviews our choice between two estates in life: celibacy and marriage. The apostle invites us to look more deeply at both vocations in order to recognize how both are worthy in the eyes the Lord.

We observe that the apostle does not try to rein in our choices, other than in terms of what is “proper” (vs. 35). The gospel imperatives restrain every Christians from improper behavior, thoughts, and passions. However, Saint Paul does not promote one state above the other, except as a pragmatic response to the “present distress” (vs. 26), since “the form of this world is passing away” (vs. 31).

The love of Christ constrains us to live rightly in this world until death comes, or until the Lord returns. Yet because of its fallen state, the world will always tend to draw us away from communion with the Lord Jesus.

How then should we live? Does being married pose a barrier if we wish to live as Christians? Is monasticism some sort of solution to this problem? Saint Paul reassures fathers that they do not sin by giving their daughters in marriage, or the daughters by marrying (vs. 36).

Likewise, the father who continues supporting his daughter when she is past the normal age of marriage “does well” (vs. 37). The issue for us is not which state of life we should embrace, but whether we are “steadfast in . . . heart” toward the Lord (vs. 37).

For what reason might one prefer the celibate life to the married life? Surely it is not because one state possesses greater purity than the other. Saint John Chrysostom firmly opposes this view, stating, “And if any persons have been hindered by the marriage state, let them know that marriage is not the hindrance, but their purpose which made an ill use of marriage” (“Homily 7 on Hebrews,” *NPNF* First Series, p. 402).

“The future of the world depends on a solution tailored to mankind,” states theologian Paul Evdokimov. “It is not ‘in spite of marriage,’ but in its fulfillment that spouses live the supernatural and holiness of their union. . . . The nuptial ‘kenosis’ unveils its secret only to the eyes of God and to no others.”

The key, according to Evdokimov, is not to accept the banality of the modern world and settle for the “licentiousness of legalized mating.” Nor should we flee to monasticism out of frustration with our corrupt and lustful culture.

In a classic Orthodox manner, he affirms that “a balanced asceticism helps one understand that the life of the body and the soul, in celibacy or in married life, is an art of the spirit; chastity stands at the beginning of these two expressions of an integral Christian humanism, turned toward the End” – which is Christ – “the priest of mystical and pure marriage” (*The Sacrament of Love*, p. 163-67).

What today’s epistle upholds is our free decision to marry or not, because of being “in the Lord” (vs. 39). In Christ, marriage and monasticism are one. When such life choices are open to us, we may resolve them only before Christ in prayer.

May all of us, Thy servants, shine like the stars of heaven in Thee, O Lord our God. – Prayer from the Marriage Service

August 10 - Saturday of the Seventh Week after Pentecost
Romans 12:1-6

Living Sacrifice: Romans 12:1-6, especially vs. 1: “*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.*” According to Saint John Chrysostom, we *present* our bodies to God in the sense of furnishing them to the Lord; we place our bodies at His disposal. He explains, “Ye have given them up to another. For even they that furnish the war-horses have no further interest in them. And thou too hast presented thy members for the war against the devil” (“Homily 20 on Romans,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 11, p. 497).

If we surrender our bodies to God, as Saint Paul exhorts us, we make ourselves a *living sacrifice* to Him. We hand over the control of our lives to the Lord, so that He may direct us. Such a spiritual and moral act nullifies our carnal tendency toward self-indulgence.

Within this context, Saint Paul equates our *living sacrifice* to God with “reasonable service” (vs. 1). The Orthodox Study Bible notes that the original noun, *latreia*, is closer to “worship” than to “service,” since the root of *latreia* is “to bow down.”

This worship differs from the sacrifices God established under the Old Covenant. Christian worship, notes Saint John Chrysostom, “needeth no wood or matter under it; but our fire liveth of itself, and doth not burn up the victim, but rather quickeneth it.” Living sacrifice is truly a kind of “spiritual ministry, conversation according to Christ.”

We reject conformity to this world in favor of working with the Holy Spirit for our personal renewal and transformation (vs. 2). We humbly embrace God’s will as the one “good and acceptable and perfect” way to live (vss. 3).

Although Saint Paul does not say it explicitly in this brief passage, it is the Holy Spirit who enables us to fight off conformity to the world in order that we may “be transformed by the renewing of [our] mind” (vs. 2). Earlier in Romans, the apostle refers to the Spirit dwelling within us to “give life to [our] mortal bodies” (vs. 8:11), enabling us to “put to death the deeds of the body” and live as never before (vs. 8:13).

With the aid of the Holy Spirit, which we receive at baptism and chrismation, we have the potential to become living sacrifices to God. It depends on what we choose to do with our bodies. We need to avert our eyes from evil, stop speaking filth, and avoid putting our hands to actions that are wrong. Instead, as Saint John Chrysostom says, we must “let [our] hands, and feet, and mouth, and all other members, yield a first-fruit unto God. Such sacrifice is well pleasing.”

As we work with the Spirit in such a manner, He will *transform* us by His grace and *renew* our minds. The Greek word *nous*, translated here as “mind,” does not refer to our cognitive faculties, but rather to what Saint John of Damascus calls the purest part of the soul. The *nous* is the deep part of our spiritual being, where we know and meet God.

When the Spirit is working in our *nous*, He enables us “not to think of [ourselves] more highly than [we] ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one” (vs. 12:3). We are thereby empowered to perform “what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (vs. 2).

True Christian faith does not consist of a gnostic, inward change detached from our outward behavior. Rather, our faith generates an inner transformation, a sober evaluation of ourselves, and tangible efforts at living a life worthy of our calling in Christ (Eph 4:1).

O Lord, make straight our path; establish us all in Thy fear; guard our life; make firm our steps by the power of Thy Holy Spirit and the intercessions of all Thy saints. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

August 11 - Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Romans 15:1-7

Building Up Others: Romans 15:1-7, especially vs. 2: *“Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification.”* In the third century, Origen anticipated resistance to Saint Paul’s admonition, suggesting that “perhaps someone will say that Paul is contradicting himself here, because elsewhere he says: If I please men, then I am not a servant of Christ [Gal 1:10].

“In answer it must be said that it is one thing to try to please others in order to get their praise and quite another to please them in order that one’s own life might ‘bear fruit,’ so that those who meet us may be edified by what they see and hear,” Origen continues. “We are not called to please others by doing things . . . against faith, honor, and piety. . . . Paul himself says this, when he adds that in pleasing our neighbor the purpose is to edify him” (“Commentary on Romans,” ACCS New Testament Vol. 6, p. 353-4).

Our standard for building up others is Christ Himself. His life and example, received and shared with others, will always edify them “according to Christ Jesus” (vs. 5). Let us measure every scrap of our intentions and actions toward others using the Lord as our standard.

In Christ we find sufficient reason to bear with the weaknesses of others (vs. 1), be patient (vs. 4), and labor at strengthening others in many different ways (vs. 4), sharing with them what we have in Christ (vss. 5-6). Our constant aim should be to glorify God and treat others with kindness, remembering how the Lord is kind and merciful to us (vs. 7).

Edifying others is not as overwhelming as it might appear at first, for God graciously gives us the Holy Scriptures to form our deeds and words aright (vs. 4). We have at our disposal a divine guidebook, along with many worthy pastors and fellow Christians who illumine our way. That gives us ground for hope (vs. 4). Let us not despair, then, but press on with the task of building up others.

Often, the weaknesses of others may seem insurmountable (vs. 1). But we are asked to bear with their limitations, even if they seem to inhibit the growth of other Christians. How do we do this? We trust that God will transform our paltry efforts into true edification, using even our stumbling and fumbling to His glory as long as we abandon ourselves to His hands.

It is much easier to put up with the failings of fellow Christians – and to do so humbly and gratefully – when we entrust the work to Him who does “all things well” (Mk 7:37). Building up others requires a depth of patience, strength, and comfort that God alone can give.

Let us remember that we are Christ’s, for He is the Master of this work. Let us quit troubling ourselves and find rest in Him. We put forward our best effort and leave the outcome to the Lord. If we the Scriptures (vs. 4), reading and learning from them, inwardly digesting their divine wisdom and strength, we see that God is indeed leading us.

Note Saint Paul’s prayer: “Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus” (vs. 5). If we ask, God will reveal the common ground we share with others. This is especially true at those times when we find ourselves in circumstances fraught with conflict or differences of opinion.

Indeed, if we intend to “glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” in speech and action (vs. 6), then our labor will not be wasted. We will be able to treat the most difficult persons we meet with kindness (vs. 7), and God will help us overcome anything that affronts or offends others.

Grant, O Master, who lovest mankind, enlightenment of my spiritual powers, faith unashamed, love unfeigned, increase of wisdom, and the fulfillment of Thy commandments. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

August 12 - Monday of the Eighth Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 9:13-18

Worship – Supporting the Clergy: 1 Corinthians 9:13-18, especially vss. 14-15: *“Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel. But I have used none of these things. . . .”* The Apostle Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth reveals an immature and troubled congregation, a community struggling with a wide variety of problems. Since worship is central to the life of the Church, it is not surprising that we find the worship of the Corinthian Christians to be fraught with serious issues.

Over the next few days we will follow Saint Paul as he addresses these various problems. Despite the passage of two thousand years and the vast cultural differences between then and now, we discover that many of the same problems still trouble the Church.

A cursory reading of the present passage shows the apostle pressing to establish the principle that congregations should support those who “minister the holy things” (vs. 13). He advocates this ancient rule even though he exempts himself from its benefits (vs. 15). Instead, he places himself in a special relationship with those to whom he first carried the gospel (vss. 16-18).

We are reminded that the obligation to support those who minister at the altar dates to the Mosaic Covenant, and operated in the subsequent temple era as well (vs. 13). The apostle pointedly reminds us that the Lord Jesus “commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel” (vs. 14). Here he refers to Christ’s standard in Matthew 10:10, another application of this well-known principle in the Church (1 Tim 5:18).

Unfortunately, despite these principles the Church has not always provided full support for her clergy. Sometimes circumstances make it difficult to keep this command of the Lord. For example, the 1918 Bolshevik Revolution cut off all funds from Russia to the North American mission, depriving many parishes of their major source of income. Today, mission parishes and parishes serving communities with declining populations understandably struggle to support their clergy.

Nevertheless, this basic, Scripture-attested tradition does extend to clergy salaries, pensions, and health coverage in this day and age. The entire Church should assure that older priests, when ready to retire from full-time ministry, are able to do so without concern for personal or family maintenance. Thankfully, serious efforts are being made in many archdioceses to correct existing inadequacies in clergy support.

Of course, as Saint John Chrysostom notes, “As in the case of the priests ‘of the temple’ . . . so we see here, ‘of the gospel;’ and, as there he says, ‘eat’ so here, ‘live,’ not make merchandise or lay up treasures” (“Homily 21 on First Corinthians,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 12, p. 122).

To put it bluntly, no one undertakes the solemn duties of the priesthood in order to become enriched. However, a balance must be struck between adequate provision by parishes and reasonable expectations by clergy.

Finally, let us observe how the Apostle Paul seeks to avoid applying this rule for his own support. He carefully states this principle so that the Corinthians will not think he is seeking anything from them (vs. 15).

His necessity to “preach the gospel” (vss. 16, 18) was given to him from the Lord. He is delighted to “present the gospel of Christ without charge” (vs. 18), because when he works and lives by God’s provision alone, he experiences often the nature of grace.

O Lord, enkindle the hearts of Thy people to make adequate provision for Thy priests so they may serve Thee freely in the work of Thine earthly vineyard for the salvation of our souls. – Prayer for the Priesthood

August 13 - Tuesday of Eighth Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 10:5-12

Worship, continued – Pure Worship: 1 Corinthians 10:5-12, especially vs. 11: “Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.” According to Constantine Cavarinos, “Regular church attendance, our presence . . . at orthros, Divine Liturgy, vespers, and at other services . . . contributes greatly to our acquisition of a robust spiritual *phronema* (mindset). . . . It is necessary to participate in these services with attention, piety, and contrition” (“The Church in the Home,” *Divine Ascent* no. 1).

In today’s passage from First Corinthians, Saint Paul warns against four activities that work to destroy our true adoration of God. Instead, they condemn us before God. Let us consider, then, how we may defeat these pernicious enemies of a robust *phronema*.

First, “do not become idolaters” (vs. 7). We offer the Litany of Peace toward the beginning of every service of the Church, praying for “those who with faith, reverence, and fear of God enter therein.” This solemn reminder, like the admonition in the Cherubic Hymn to “lay aside all earthly cares,” tells us *why* we need worship.

We engage in idolatry when our hearts and minds attach faith, reverence, and fear to *persons* or *things* – when we direct our energies to creatures rather than the Creator. To help resist the temptation to indulge in such misplaced priorities, Orthodox worship offers us sacred readings, icons, and prayers that help overcome the tendencies of our heart and mind to wander in church.

To see, hear, and heed the tangible reminders of the liturgy (literally, “the work of the people”) we must “lay aside all earthly care,” “sing . . . to the life-giving Trinity,” and “receive the King of all.” We approach the Divine Liturgy determined to resist those stray thoughts that draw us away from our God and Savior who “dwest in the sanctuary” (Ps 21:3). Let us take care never to come to the liturgy passively, but rather be ready to defeat every suggestion from the evil one that “there is no salvation for him in his God” (Ps 3:2).

The apostle next abjures us, “Nor let us commit sexual immorality” (I Cor 10:8). We live in a hedonistic culture that constantly pollutes our environment with perverse images and erotic entertainment. We hear of “crimes, robberies, murders, obscene and sinful acts of all kinds, impassioned and brazen words,” many of which, as Dr. Cavarinos says, are sexually provocative.

Let us choose instead to make our minds, homes, and cars quiet havens of peace wherein we honor Saint Paul’s instruction to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thes 5:17). Turn off the media! Nothing is more certain to corrupt purity than constant stimulation of our various passions. We join with the Prophet Job when he declares, “I have made a covenant with my eyes, and I will not think upon a virgin” (Job 31:1).

“Nor let us tempt Christ” (I Cor 10:9). Here, the apostle speaks here of doing some evil intentionally, to see if or how God will react. Every sin tests God, but when we are proud or mindlessly confident of our piety, we veer into brazen sin. Arrogance and self-esteem drive off true worship, corrupting the praise of God and making it an abomination before the Lord. Pure worship is expressed by hearts and minds “poor in spirit,” who “hunger and thirst after righteousness” (Mt 5:3-6).

Finally, Saint Paul denounces complaints and murmuring (1 Cor 10:10), a ready snare. With Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow, let us pray: “Teach me to treat all that comes to me throughout the day with peace of soul, and with firm conviction that Thy will governs all.”

Sanctify those who love the beauty of Thy house and glorify them by Thy divine power. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

August 14 - Wednesday of the Eighth Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 10:12-22

Worship, continued – Established in Truth: 1 Corinthians 10:12-22, especially vs. 20: *“The things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons.”* Earlier in First Corinthians, in a discussion concerning eating meat sacrificed to idols, Saint Paul warns against blurring the distinction between life-giving truth, partial truths, and blatant error (1 Cor 8:8-9:2).

In today’s passage he focuses on a related danger: attendance at worship in non-Orthodox settings. In our own pluralistic religious milieu, idolatry and false teachings are everywhere around us. These teachings may appear in fully pagan form as well as through seemingly innocent programs that contain some grain of genuine truth.

We do well to take Saint Paul’s caution to heart: “Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (vs. 12). We may, like the early Christians, be invited to non-Orthodox religious events, but the apostle’s admonition is wise. We should not think of ourselves as stronger than God (vs. 22). For this reason we guard our souls against non-Orthodox religious activities.

True, God will help us to deflect falsehood. He “is faithful [and] will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (vs. 13).

Perhaps we are not tempted by modern pagan practices and ceremonies, but what about churches considered schismatic or heretical? Roman Catholic and mainline Protestant churches may not seem vastly different from ours, at least on the surface, but we also meet militant sects with highly distorted teachings.

Let us not be misled by modern cultural biases that oppose any form of intolerance or separatism. As Orthodox Christians, we receive invitations to presentations by other faiths. We need to weigh our options. Do we kindly decline such invitations, or attend and encounter subtle forms of deception?

The holy canons of the Orthodox Church exist to protect us against error, including half-truths. For this reason the Church advises against “frequenting the meetings of heretics and schismatics.”

If family members or colleagues ask us to a wedding or a funeral, are we wrong to attend such services? Not in most cases. What is more, failure to attend may violate the commandment to love others. If we are in doubt, we ask our priest.

What if an acquaintance invites us to attend a regular Bible study held at his or her church? Such an activity leads us into a situation where error will be presented, sooner or later. The same can be said of campus prayer circles, inquirers’ classes, and various outreach presentations, even if such gatherings are called “informational.”

If we expose ourselves to the teachings of other churches, we may unconsciously embrace untruth and unspoken assumptions, even when a presentation rings “true.” When error and heresy are absorbed unaware, the experience may later prompt us to question our Orthodox faith or even lead us into painful, unnecessary spiritual struggle.

Our pluralistic culture assaults Orthodox Christians through the internet, television, and motion pictures. These media often carry messages laced with secularism, hedonism, and spiritual corruption. How much time do we invest in following news and entertainment versus growing in the true faith? We have a rich array of Orthodox publications and soul-enriching literature available to us. Let us be particular!

O Lord, cleanse my soul. Sanctify my mind. Enlighten my five senses. Establish me wholly in fear of Thee. . . . Guard me from every word and deed that mars the soul. – Post-communion Prayer of Saint Simeon the Translator

August 15 - Dormition of the Theotokos
Philippians 2:5-11

The Mind of Christ: *Philippians 2:5-11, especially vs. 5:* “*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.*” Let us embrace this challenge from Saint Paul, for it is addressed to every disciple. We are asked to adopt, embrace, and take on the mind of Christ. And yet we tremble when we contrast our mind with that of Christ, even in His humanity. Admitting that our mind is far from that of the Lord Jesus is a good and humble step toward self-awareness!

To approach Christ’s mind, even slightly, begins in us a blessed transformation. The possibility of moving forward on this path to Christ suddenly opens to us. Saint Paul gives us both hope and a challenge. He intends to fan our flickering interest in the spiritual life, making it into a lively commitment to attain a Christ-like mind!

The apostle’s command calls on the best in us. Today, on the glorious feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos, we find encouragement in the Virgin Mary who, as a fellow human being, followed this path, gained the mind of Christ, and even now provides a superb example of what is possible for us. We examine the mind of Christ, beautifully mirrored in the Theotokos herself, to remind ourselves that this mind can be ours.

In becoming man, our Lord chose the lowly social position of a slave (Phil 2:7). Likewise, the Theotokos, as a pure virgin who accepts God’s will upon hearing the word of the angel Gabriel, consented to the clouding of her reputation and doubts for Joseph, her betrothed. A “shadow” was cast over her (Lk 1:35).

In icons of the Nativity of Christ, we see Joseph pondering the suggestion of Mary’s infidelity offered to him by the evil one. If we gain the mind of Christ, we must prepare for scorn from the world’s wise, who disdain anything that cannot be explained empirically. They deem us superstitious.

Just as Christ humbled Himself (Phil 2:8), so the Theotokos humbles herself as God’s handmaid, embracing motherhood, serving as a throne for the royal Son, providing the Lord with human. She nursed our God Incarnate to manhood. We too are called to serve Him who came humbly “not to be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28).

We see that acceding to the will of God – both in the case of the God-man (Phil 2:8) and in His birthgiving by the Virgin Mary – is done freely and without question (Lk 1:38). The mind of Christ calls us to die to the desires of this life. To gain the mind of Christ is to learn the Lord’s will for us moment by moment, and take up our cross to follow Him (see Mt 16:24).

To attain the mind of Christ is to be *highly exalted* by God the Father, as is Christ our God (Phil 2:9-10). By choosing a mind like her Son, the Theotokos disdained her reputation and could sing of God that “He has exalted the humble and meek” (Lk 1:52). The Lord shows us we gain His mind by accepting His baptism and His cup (Mk 10:35-39).

By the power of the Holy Spirit, every saint and apostle followed the example of the Theotokos and gained the mind of Christ. We may do so as well, if we are willing follow their path through suffering to great glory, and to give birth to Him in our hearts and minds.

Let us be among the faithful who bow to the “Mother of the Light,” just as the bodiless powers bow to her Son (Phil 2:10). Christ exalts all who magnify her!

Remember, in confessing Jesus as Lord (vs. 11), we join the faithful in calling Mary blessed. We cry out to her in the festal hymn, “O Theotokos, since thou departest to the heavenly abodes of thy Son, thou shalt ever save thine inheritance.” Let us seek her prayers so as to attain the mind of Christ!

O Theotokos, glorified one, after death thou art still alive and dost deliver thine heritage.

August 16 - Friday of the Eighth Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 11:8-23

Worship, continued – Coming Together: 1 Corinthians 11:8-23, especially vs. 18: *“For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it.”* A cursory reading of this passage shows us Saint Paul’s concern over two aspects of the Corinthian church’s worship. First, should women be veiled during services? Second, what constitutes a praiseworthy demeanor for church members attending the Lord’s Supper? For the apostle, these two issues ultimately come down to a single concern: worship should never be an occasion for contentions and divisions.

Apparently, some women of the Corinthian congregation had abandoned the long-standing custom of covering their heads during worship (vss. 11:2-16). Saint Paul points out that they are deviating from first-century tradition. Furthermore, questioning this custom threatens the unity of the believers in Christ.

Saint Paul is quick to maintain that these women are acting contrary to a practice that is universal among “the churches of God,” i.e., that women should be veiled for worship (vs. 16). He defends this practice based on created differences between male and female (vss. 8-9), “because of the angels” (vs. 10), and on account of “nature itself” (vss. 14-15).

Take careful note of the apostle’s logic. He upholds the distinctions between men and women in the Church with respect to dress and respective roles in family life, but he is mainly concerned about the interdependence of men and women “in the Lord” (vs. 11). Thus he steers a middle course, distinguishing the roles of men from those of women on the one hand, yet standing firm on the fundamental unity of the genders in Christ.

In an earlier verse, he praises the Corinthians for keeping “the traditions just as I delivered them to you” (vs. 2). Surely these Christians have likely heard this teaching “delivered” by Saint Paul: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

Why, then, does the Apostle Paul insist on veils for women? He does so mainly because the veiling of women is a culturally sensitive issue for Jewish Christians, and his principal aim is to encourage unity among all Christians, Jew and Gentile alike (vs. 16).

Because of his emphasis on and concern for unity, he is also distressed by other instances of self-assertion among the Corinthian congregation (vs. 16). Thus he rebukes church members for manifesting crude divisions within the community when they “come together in one place to eat the Lord’s Supper” (vs. 20).

The Eucharistic liturgies of the earliest Christians were centered around a shared agape meal (literally, “love feast”). Such liturgies followed the pattern set by sacred Jewish meals such as the Passover seder. Formal blessings of cups of wine before and after the meal and a solemn breaking of bread were customary.

However, the Corinthians are selfishly indulging themselves in the food offered during the agape meal associated with the Lord’s Supper. Some are taking their “own supper ahead of others” and leaving their poor brethren hungry, while others are getting drunk (vs. 21).

Saint Paul explodes at the Corinthians’ insensitivity to one another, and especially at their lack of unity. He says, “Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you” (vs. 22). How dare they “shame those who have nothing” (vs. 22)! Not to express unity is a scandal, especially during worship. We are to worship with one heart and mouth, as has been the inviolable norm of Orthodox Christians in all places and ages.

O Lord, grant us with one accord to make our common supplications unto Thee, to receive the knowledge of Thy truth, and in the world to come, to obtain life everlasting. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

August 17 - Saturday of the Eighth Week after Pentecost
Romans 13:1-10

The Dignity of Choice: *Romans 13:1-10, especially vs. 8:* “Owe no one anything except to love one another. . . .” In the last chapters of the Epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul turns from his systematic presentation of the gospel to issues of day-to-day life. In doing this, he issues two commands that might at first appear contradictory. He says, “Do not be conformed to this world” (vs. 12:2), but then he declares, “Be subject to the governing authorities” (vs. 13:1). He adds, “Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor” (vs. 7).

As servants of the Lord, how can we be subject to this world’s ruling powers without *conforming* to governing authority, i.e., the world? How is a balance possible?

In life we make our way by a series of decisions: taking one step rather than another, acting or refraining from acting, entering or leaving situations, accepting or rejecting offers and opportunities. We constantly move, from moment to moment, on the basis of choices. Of all God’s earthly creatures, humanity alone has the personal dignity of choosing and shaping life.

In the present passage we find three ground rules for our decision-making. We are to be subject to the governing authorities (vs. 1). In particular, we are subject for *conscience’ sake* (vs. 5). Finally, we “owe no one anything except to love one another” (vs. 8).

Tracing Saint Paul’s logic, it is clear that these three rules operate under the Lord’s overarching command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (vs. 9; see Lv 19:18, Mt 22:39). We observe a definite order to these three ground rules: each directive possesses a higher authority for our decisions than the one preceding it.

When we are faced with a decision, we choose to obey the obvious appointed authority. We stop at a red light, pay our tax bill, report for jury duty, and so on. However, by God’s grace we strive not make decisions impulsively. Rather, we modify our actions in response to the prompting of the Spirit.

If we come to a green light as an ambulance signals its need to enter the intersection, our conscience tells us to ignore the “authority” of the traffic signal. If a tax bill appears inaccurate or unfair, we are not wrong to appeal the bill, for we should pay only what is due (vs. 7).

But before we decide to follow the voice of our conscience without question, we are to consider the requirements of love and the needs of others. We remember that fallen human conscience, like other aspects of our nature, is in need of healing and illumination. Therefore, we consider taking actions that introduce respect and justice from the domain of love.

Christ our God, as Creator of all, made us in His image and dignified us with the gift of free choice. However, our choices may easily turn to self-seeking and a disdain for truth (vs. 2:8). Ironically, through our wrong choices, we may lose our freedom and fall under bondage to sin (vs. 7:19).

By the Lord’s death and saving Resurrection, God has reconciled mankind to Himself (vs. 5:10). Yet still we must embrace His will if we are to receive healing and life. Indeed, the three rules are not rigid. They illumine grace and show us how to make choices within God’s love. Taken in the context of the gospel, the rules become life and “the fulfillment of the law” (vs. 13:10).

Direct us, O Lord our God, in all our doings with Thy most gracious favor, and further us with Thy continual help; that in all our works, begun, continued and ended in Thee, we may glorify Thy holy name, and finally, by Thy mercy, attain unto everlasting life. – Prayer for Guidance

August 18 - Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Coming to Unity: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18, especially vs. 10: “Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” We know there were quarrels among the Christians at Corinth, for they were choosing sides and forming cliques that created schisms. Such divisiveness in the name of any leader or cause is contrary to the essence of the Church. “Divided . . . is the Lamb of God . . . yet not disunited,” the priest says when he breaks and consecrates the bread before holy communion.

Sadly, partisanship still arises in parish life. We oppose a particular person or argue against a program in order to “stop those people.” Such factions shame and blight Christian communities when they occur. What can be done to avoid such divisiveness?

In pleading for unity within the Corinthian church, the Apostle Paul names three conditions that must be realized: a common voice, a single spiritual consciousness, and a humbly shared affirmation of Christ as Lord.

Saint Paul pleads that “all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions” (vs. 10). From the heart, let us pray for a common, holy voice within our Orthodox communities. In this fallen world, a cacophony of opposition clearly marks the reign of sin and craven politics. Let us never allow this divisiveness to prevail among Christ’s people.

When partisanship appears within the Church, we become troubled. At church, we hope to experience the Kingdom God in peace and concord. Has not the Lord’s ministry of reconciliation been committed to us (2 Cor 5:18-20)? Has not the Lord told us to love one another (Jn 13:34)? Does He not pray that we might “all be one” (Jn 17:21)?

We know full well that God intends for us to “walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4). Based on such foundational truths, the apostle pleads that we speak with one voice. He expects us to seek the healing that God desires (and gives), and put an end to our factionalism.

Unity, of course, must go beyond mere words. “There is such a thing as agreement in words,” says Saint John Chrysostom, “however, [not] on all subjects, therefore [Saint Paul] added this, ‘That ye may be perfected together’” (“Homily 3 on 1 Corinthians,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 12, p. 11).

Unity must consist of more than outward formality. Hence the Apostle Paul pleads that we be “perfectly joined together,” not just in word and appearance, but “in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor 1:10). Here, the Greek word for “mind” (*nous*) refers to the deep inner part of the heart. True unity arises from hearts led by the Holy Spirit.

We may well wonder if such a vision can be realized by sinful mankind. The apostle faces the reality of division honestly and asks: “Is Christ divided?” (vs. 13). He speaks of baptism into Christ (vss. 13-16) and refers to his own commission from Christ, as well as to the Lord’s Cross and its power (vs. 17).

We understand that his solution does achieve unity – a true unity in Christ, and not apart from Him! We were baptized into Christ to have one mind with Him (Phil 2:5). We receive His Body and Blood, that He might unite us to Himself.

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female: for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). Unity is God’s gift to the Church. Let us weep when worldly schisms appear among us, and pray that the power of the Cross make its “effect” (1 Cor 1:17) known, unifying our hearts within and among us.

Grant us, O Lord, with one mouth and one heart to glorify and praise Thine all-honorable and majestic name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

August 19 - Monday of the Ninth Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 11:31-12:6

The Body of Christ – Uniting the Faithful: 1 Corinthians 11:31-12:6, especially vs. 6: “*There are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all.*” Saint Paul states that the main purpose of his letter is to bring unity to the Corinthian church (vs. 1:10). Now, in the present passage, he returns to this concern. As he continues his appeal for unity, he addresses two particularly divisive issues: carelessness at the Lord’s Supper (vss. 11:31-32) and ignorance concerning the gifts of the Holy Spirit (vss. 12:1-6).

The apostle seeks to recall the Corinthians to unity by repeatedly addressing them in familial terms as “we” (vss. 31-34) and “brethren” (vss. 11:33; 12:1). At the same time, he makes clear that unity is a true gift from God. Subsequently he identifies seven ways in which the Lord is working to achieve genuine unity among them.

As Saint Paul speaks of God’s acts, he emphasizes that a cooperative response is needed from us to complete the Lord’s gift. God uses our own responses today much as He did in the first century, and to the same end: building up communion in His Church.

First the Apostle Paul reminds us that “if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged” by God (vs. 11:31). When we judge ourselves honestly, with God’s help, we naturally turn to Him and confess our sins as an effort to restore our spiritual health. God is faithful to forgive and to heal (1 Jn 1:9), and in the process we find that we are not condemned. Our relationships with fellow Christians also benefit, for self-examination and self-judgment break down the barriers between us.

Second, let us consider the judgment of God, being reminded that He also chastens. We may rejoice in trials as gifts of love from the Lord (Ps 89:17) while being assured that we will “not be condemned with the world” (1 Cor 11:32).

“Whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives” (Heb 12:6). “Despise yourself for God’s sake,” says Saint Isaac the Syrian, “and without your being aware of it, your glory will become great.” God’s grace draws the humble into communion with one another.

Third, the apostle reminds us that we would still be slaves of dumb idols were it not for our baptism (1 Cor 12:2). Only by the working of the Holy Spirit are we able to “say that Jesus is Lord” (vs. 3). Idolatry divides, but in Christ Jesus we are united and made one.

A fourth way God accomplishes unity is by bestowing gifts upon each member. We see a rich diversity of such gifts in every church (vs. 4). Some are pastors and teachers, some gifted preachers, some evangelists (Eph 4:11); some exhort others who need direction, others have the means to give liberally, lead diligently, or show mercy with cheerfulness (Rom 12:8). These God-given abilities make the Body of Christ whole.

Fifth, God encourages unity by bestowing a variety of ministries (vs. 5). Priests lead congregations in worship as a single Body. Our bishops oversee the work of many pastors and parishes to assure true unity among them and with Christ. We see the rich and seamless tapestry of God’s work spreading across many nations worldwide.

Sixth, the Church is a tapestry with an amazing variety of *activities* (vs. 6). Our good God manages the entire Body of Christ with loving care, drawing us together with cords of love and weaving us into an imposing array of His will.

Finally, we are reminded that although God works through individuals, His efforts are on behalf of those for whom He labors (vs. 6) – for all and for the profit of all (vs. 7).

May I ever live not unto myself, but unto Thee, our Master and our Benefactor. – Post-communion Prayer

August 20 - Tuesday of the Ninth Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 12:12-26

The Body of Christ, continued – Mutual Caring: 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, especially vs. 25: “*There should be no schism in the body, but . . . the members should have the same care for one another.*” The Church is an organically interdependent community, as Saint Paul knows, and as She exists today. Up until now, the apostle has not used the term “Body of Christ” to describe the interdependence of the members of the Church. As he reaches the heart of his exhortation to love one another, he identifies the Church as the Body of Christ to underscore the need for mutual caring.

To awaken the faithful in Corinth to this necessity, the apostle uses the analogy of the human body. “The body is one” and yet it “has many members” (vs. 12). He extends the analogy to the Lord: “so also is Christ” (vs. 12).

Because he is reasoning by analogy, we might expect him to say, “so also is the Church.” However, Saint Paul is appealing to the mystery of the Church as the Body of Christ. The necessity for members of the Church to care for one another derives from our being the Body of Christ.

Saint Paul is not speaking in the abstract, but rather teaching from his experience of shared membership in Christ. According to Metropolitan John Zizioulas, “It is possible to envisage a type of Christology in which Christ . . . cannot be conceived in Himself as an individual. When we make the assertion that He is the truth . . . we mean His relationship with His body, the Church, ourselves. . . . We mean a Person and not an individual; we mean a relational reality. . . .

“Here the Holy Spirit is not One who aids us in bridging the distance between Christ and ourselves, but He is the Person of the Trinity who actually realizes in history that which we call Christ. . . . Christ does not exist first as truth and then as communion; He is both at once” (*Being as Communion*, p. 110-11).

In our experience of this living communion, we do not know Christ Jesus first as One who exists and then, later, as many members. He is known *as One through* His many members, all at the same time. From this experience, well-known to Saint Paul, comes his assertion that “in fact the body is not one member but many” (vs. 14).

Note that the apostle makes no distinction whatsoever between a physical human body and the Body of Christ. His sayings apply equally to either. As he speaks about the foot, the ear, and the eye (vss. 15-17), we know perfectly well that he is speaking about members of the Church and not merely parts of a human body.

All members of the Church are important, indeed vitally so, in the sense of life-bearing. Let us train ourselves to think of and treat every member of the Church as necessary to the life of the whole, as a functional part of the relational reality of the Body of Christ. To do otherwise is to dismember the Body and kill the very Life of the Church.

For all these reasons our mutual caring is *needful* (vs. 21-22). Each member of the Body deserves honor, no matter how unpresentable we may be in terms of human opinion (vs. 23). Such is God’s view (vs. 24). There can be no schism in Christ’s Body, wherein the Holy Spirit dwells! All true “members should have the same care for one another” (vs. 26), otherwise “where would the body be” (vs. 19)? Suffering or honor affects us all (vs. 26).

O Christ, who didst send down the Holy Spirit upon Thy holy apostles and enlighten the whole world, have mercy upon us and save us forasmuch as Thou art good and loveth mankind. – Vespers for the Monday after Pentecost

August 21 - Wednesday of the Ninth Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 13:4-14:5

The Body of Christ, continued – To Pursue Love: 1 Corinthians 13:4-14:5, especially vss. 13:13-14:1: “*And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love. Pursue love. . .*” The Apostle Paul places evangelical love before us in this passage, identifying *agape*, a love that endures eternally, as the greatest of the virtues. He then commands us to “pursue love” (vs. 14:1).

What is the essence of this special love we are to pursue? We know it is divine, for “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8), and Christ our Savior is Love incarnate. Saint Paul bids us to pursue Him. How so? The Lord Jesus tells us plainly: “If you love Me, keep My commandments” (Jn 14:15).

He then reminds us, “The first of all the commandments is: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. You shall love the Lord your God from your whole heart, from your whole soul, and from your whole power’” (Mk 12:29-30, Dt 6:5).

Thus, the love the apostle commands us to pursue is the Lord Jesus, “who first loved us” (1 Jn 4:19). Let us pay close attention to Saint Paul’s ten words concerning love in the present passage, remembering that they spring from our Savior’s nature. We learn from Love how to love, by striving to love like Him above all else.

Love “suffers long” (1 Cor 13:4). Saint Paul does not begin by merely describing love. Rather, as we learn from his writings, this description is a command: “As the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on . . . longsuffering” (Col 3:12). We are to avoid the error of the unforgiving servant who receives longsuffering indulgence from his lord, but cannot pass it on to others (Mt 18:23-34).

Love “is kind” (1 Cor 13:4). In other words, “[add] to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be [fruitful] . . . in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Pt 1:7-8). Let us be children of the Most High. Because “He is kind to the unthankful and evil,” we are likewise to “be merciful” (Lk 6:35-36).

Love “does not envy” (1 Cor 13:4). The original Greek word rendered as “envy” shares the same root as “jealousy.” Let us not be like Joseph’s brothers (Gn 37:8, 18-20) who indulge desires in opposition to the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:17-21), but accept what comes thankfully.

Now, in a series of negative commands, the Apostle Paul tells us how to love. First, we are never to become “puffed up” or to “parade” ourselves before another; instead, we strive for self-abasement (1 Cor 13:4).

Love “does not behave rudely,” but kindly (vs. 5). We care less for our needs and wants than we do for seeking ways to provide for the needs of others, as God directs us.

Love “is not provoked” (vs. 5). Do we get angry when our “rights” are violated? If we wholly submit ourselves to Christ Jesus, our rights belong to Him. At baptism we say, “I bow down before the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” If we are struck on the right cheek, we “turn the other to him also” (Mt 5:39).

Love “thinks no evil” (1 Cor 13:5). Let us not keep score! If we “remember that [our] brother has something against [us] . . . first be reconciled” (Mt 5:23-24).

Love does “not rejoice in iniquity” (1 Cor 13:6), but in truth. Since Christ is the Truth (Jn 14:6), we are to trust Him, avoid evil, and strive always to do good.

Let us bear everything that befalls us as if it comes from the hand of the Lord, and we shall be able to “endure all things” (vs. 7). “Love never fails” (vs. 8). May we never fail Him!

I have no life, no light, no joy, no strength and no love except in Thee, O Lover of all. –
Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov

August 22 - Thursday of the Ninth Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 14:6-19

Body of Christ, continued – Speaking in Tongues: 1 Corinthians 14:6-19, especially vs. 19: “*Yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.*” The gift of speaking in tongues appeared among Christians in the earliest days of the Church, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles (vss. 10:46; 19:6) and Saint Paul (1 Cor 14:6-19). Later, from the second to the ninth century, it became a hallmark of the heretical Montanist sect which originated in Phrygia.

We should note that the phenomenon of “tongues” has never been limited to Christians, Orthodox or heterodox. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato and the Latin writer Virgil reported that tongue-speaking occurred in some pagan rites. During the Middle Ages, it was practiced in Europe by mendicant friars and later by Quakers and Methodists.

The practice has enjoyed a revival during the last two centuries among certain charismatic Protestant congregations, with various denominations forming around the phenomenon. By the late twentieth century, tongues had appeared even in some mainline western churches, including the Anglicans and Roman Catholics.

The Apostle Paul himself speaks in tongues and considers it a gift from God for which he gave thanks (vs. 18). Yet he speaks cautiously about the practice, for he is concerned that tongue-speaking may alienate members of the congregation, including visitors.

In the apostle’s view, this gift from the Holy Spirit ought to be confined to private prayer and avoided in corporate worship (vss. 6, 9, 19). His reasoning is straightforward: there are “many kinds of languages in the world” (vs. 10). However, if one does “not know the meaning of the language,” he becomes a foreigner simply because he cannot understand what he hears (vs. 11).

The message of this passage does not support the opinions of those who would relegate speaking in tongues to a psychological origin. Such opinions disregard Saint Paul’s declaration that tongues may well be a gift of the Holy Spirit (vs. 12).

Yet when the Holy Spirit gives the gift of tongues, He also gives “discerning of spirits” (vs. 12:10). Furthermore, studies in comparative religions suggest that not all speaking in tongues comes from God. Some practices may indeed have their roots in demonic sources or immature and darkened human psyches.

As an apostle of the Lord Jesus, Saint Paul is compelled to preach the gospel (vs. 9:16). Today’s passage reveals his unceasing sense of urgency as he communicates the good news. Clearly, Saint Paul is most concerned that there be understanding among his hearers, a concern that extends to those occasions when he prays with other people in worship, especially with those new to the faith (vss. 1:6, 9, 11, 16).

Continually planting churches in communities where the Christian message has never been heard, Saint Paul bears a responsibility for the congregations he has brought into existence, such as the church at Corinth. He is deeply concerned that as these communities develop, their members grow in spiritual knowledge: he wants all to be edified (vss. 12, 19).

On this basis, he insists that tongues remain a matter of private devotion so as not to confuse worshipers with unintelligible words. The Orthodox Church follows the apostle’s position that prayer, hymns, and blessings should be understood (vss. 15-16). For this reason the Church never introduced speaking in tongues as part of corporate worship, lest the understanding of the faithful be put at risk.

The Father is Light; the Word is Light; and the Holy Spirit is Light, who was sent to the apostles that they might illumine and guide all people to the true worship of the Holy Trinity. – Hymn for Pentecost

August 23 - Friday of the Ninth Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 14:26-40

The Body of Christ, continued – Orderly Worship: 1 Corinthians 14:26-40, especially vs. 40: “*Let all things be done decently and in order.*” Reflecting on worship during apostolic times, Saint John Chrysostom writes in the late fourth century: “For of old they used also to make psalms by a gift and to teach by a gift. . . .”

Then, amplifying the words of the text to clarify Saint Paul’s meaning in First Corinthians, Saint John continues: “Let all these look to one thing . . . the correction of their neighbor: let nothing be done at random. For if thou comest not to edify thy brother, why dost thou come here at all. . . . One thing concerns me, one thing is my desire, to do all things unto edifying” (“Homily 36 on First Corinthians,” *NPNF* First Series, vol. 12, p. 218-20).

Gentile congregations, such as the one in Corinth, lacked the background and experience in worship found in those familiar with the Jewish synagogue. We know that early Christian liturgies included more instruction and were conducted with more spontaneity than we find in the Church today. Chrysostom recognizes this less-structured worship as an important feature of those “early days”: “For in truth the Church was a heaven then, the Spirit governing all things, and moving each one of the rulers and making him inspired.”

Unfortunately, worship at Corinth and elsewhere during apostolic times did not always remain under the Spirit’s guidance. The Apostle Paul, in his letter, is forced to lay down basic rules and guidelines for taking turns (whether speaking or listening) with the aim of keeping the tenor of the gathering focused on edification (vss. 27-31).

Commenting on worship in his day at Antioch, Chrysostom continues: “But now we retain only the symbols of those gifts. Wherefore when we begin to speak, the people respond, ‘with thy spirit,’ indicating that of old they thus used to speak, not of their own wisdom, but moved by the Spirit.

...

“But now not in one single soul can one see that unanimity, rather great is the warfare everywhere. ‘Peace,’ even now, ‘to all’ he that presides in the Church prays . . . but of this peace the name is frequent, but the reality nowhere. . . . Here great is the tumult, great the confusion, and our assemblies differ in nothing from a vintner’s shop, so loud is the laughter, so great is the disturbance; as in the baths, as in markets, the cry and tumult is universal.”

Here we see real markers of liturgical disarray! The disorder in church to which Chrysostom alludes also happens in present-day Orthodox temples, as any regular worshiper knows. We still find inattention and disorder, even a need for the clergy to intervene among those in the altar, the choir, the chanters, or the congregation. The apostle’s principles still apply today!

Saint Paul’s admonitions hold for all Christians: “Let all things be done for edification” (vs. 26) “that all may learn and all may be encouraged” (vs. 31). Let us consider what we do during worship. Do our prayers and praises honor Christ? Do our actions edify our brethren in the faith? There is no place for self-glorification, distraction, or self-indulgence among us.

The Apostle Paul knows that truly spiritual people control themselves before fellow members, the clergy, and God. “And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches” (vss. 32-33). Thus, “let all things be done decently and in order” (vs. 40), that our eyes and hearts may be illumined!

Sanctify, O Lord, those who love the beauty of Thy house, and glorify them in all things. –
Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

August 24 – Saturday of the Ninth Week after Pentecost
Romans 14:6-9

We are the Lord's: *Romans 14:6-9, especially vs. 8:* “For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.” This day and age we are told many lies, some blatant, others more subtle. Some people claim that as citizens of a nation we are meant to do the will of the people. Others advise us that we are self-directed individuals, free to plot whatever destiny we choose. Advertisers try to convince us that true life flows out of a cornucopia of goods and services only they can provide.

In contrast to these claims, Saint Paul says, “We are the Lord's” (vs. 8). What does it mean if we agree with this holy man and say, “Yes, we are the Lord's”?

To be the Lord's, on the apostle's terms, means to accept that we are persons created from nothing by the will of God. It is to choose to live with Him by whom we were fashioned and to be counted among those who serve Him. We may say with the Prophet David, “Thou hast made [me] a little lower than the angels; with glory and honor hast Thou crowned [me], and Thou has set [me] over the works of Thy hands. All things hast Thou subjected under [my] feet, sheep, and all oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, the things that pass through the paths of the sea” (Ps 8:5-7).

With trust in God, we accept that we belong to Him and are thus obligated to meet our Creator's expectations. What does He ask of us? To “be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion . . . over every living thing” (Gn 1:28). To this directive He adds, “Therefore you shall be careful to do in the manner the Lord your God commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left” (Dt 5:32).

If we are the Lord's, we confess our sins against our Father and accept that we must “toil . . . all the days of [our] life” (Gn 3:17) and “in the sweat of [our] face . . . eat bread till [we] return to the ground from which [we] were taken” (vs.19).

We cry out with the Prophet David, “Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin” (Ps 50:2). Yet we are hopeful, for God has not abandoned us to sin. “For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living” (Rom 14:9). We are able to join our lives to Him, embracing eternal membership in His Body.

Let us consider that we stand before God at this very moment. Are we the Lord's? We ask, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Jn 6:68-69).

To be the Lord's is to give thanks to Him in everything we do and say (Rom 14:6), to admit that our life is not our own, that we are not pawns of some nation. “For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself” (vs. 7). We are the Lord's! Let us accept these truths and cast aside the popular delusions and lies offered to us by the world.

“I did not dare think that the infinitely great Creator of all things could heed my worthless, vile self,” writes Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov. “And I would cry, ‘Oh, if only Thou couldst love me as I love Thee. . . . Dost Thou not see how my heart thirsts for Thee day and night?”

“Incline unto me. Shew me Thy countenance. Make me such as Thou dost desire to see them that Thou has created, such as Thou, All-holy One, may receive and love. . . .’ I did not know what I said. I did not dare think that it was He Himself praying in me” (*On Prayer*, p. 12-13).

Almighty Father, send down Thy Holy Spirit to establish me in the marvelous light of Thy will. Heal my every infirmity. Enfold my days in Thy care, even unto my last breath, I pray.

August 25 – Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 3:9-17

Edification: 1 Corinthians 3:9-17, especially vs. 9: *“For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, you are God’s building.”* Many influences shape our education and growth in the Spirit: the depth of our commitment to the Lord, the vitality of our worship and devotion, the earnestness with which we seek edification in Christ. Also important are the parish community’s educational curriculum, goals, and methods and the spiritual state of our instructors. With these factors in mind, we may approach Saint Paul’s “construction” analogy in today’s reading in order to assess ourselves and our communities with respect to “edifying of the Body of Christ” (Eph 4:12).

As a community of Orthodox Christians, we are either being built up and receiving nurture, or we are stagnating, losing ground, and withering spiritually. At a minimum, every adult member should plan to grow in faith. None of us should rely solely on the clergy or other leaders to facilitate the strengthening of our spiritual life. We may be assured that the secular media have no concern for our Christian growth. If these channels are the primary source of our edification, we are surely losing ground!

Each of us must worship, pray, read Scripture, and study the Church Fathers, along with contemporary Orthodox writers, in pursuit of growth in Christ. Our time on this earth for learning is short. Let us ask ourselves, “What am I doing for my upbuilding and that of the other faithful?”

According to Saint Paul, “No other foundation can anyone lay than . . . Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3:11). Our parish programs and personal studies should nourish the roots of our commitment to Christ. Further, we must move beyond “the elementary principles of Christ . . . to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God . . . of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment” (Heb 6:1-2).

If Orthodox fundamentals are not yet well established in us, or in our communities, then we need to work on the basics of the faith. Yet Saint Paul is adamant: there can be “no other foundation” (1 Cor 3:11). We are to resist borrowing from or drawing upon the “wisdom” of other religious or spiritual practices, and especially secular philosophies.

The quality of the educational materials and experiences we use to edify ourselves and other Christians is vitally important. The apostle gives us fair warning that “each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work” (1 Cor 3:13). Let us put prayer, worship, devotion, knowledge of Holy Scripture, and sound doctrine at the center of our curriculum.

God’s judgment is already at work today in the world. Let us not wait idly for the Day of Judgment, for God is speaking to us now! Any person or parish that fails to nurture education will exhibit boredom, self-reliance, routinized worship and, saddest of all, immorality and apostasy. True Christian edification nurtures every aspect of our lives: our emotions, reasoning, decisions, creativity, ethics, relationships, family, work, and community commitments.

For Saint Paul, the key measure is the active working of the Holy Spirit. He asks the faithful at Corinth, “Do you not know that you are the temple of God?” (vs. 16). Either the Spirit inhabits us, or He has withdrawn from our defilement (vs. 17). Let us labor to build up holiness of heart and mind in ourselves, and in all of God’s people, that we may become a worthy temple for the Spirit (vs. 16).

Grant us grace to be temperate, diligent, devout, and charitable in love and fear of Thee. –
Prayer of Parents for Their Children

August 26 – Monday of the Tenth Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Resurrection – A Stunning Hope: 1 Corinthians 15:12-20, especially vs. 15: “We have testified of God that He raised up Christ. . . .” Many of us today, exulting in technology, ride upon a wave of products and devices as if we were surfers trying to catch the proverbial “big one.” Of course, surfers know that waves move inexorably toward shore. The exhilarating ride ends at the beach, a boundary that cannot be passed. Technology likewise has its limits, for there is a finale to our present existence. For each of us the “big one” will finally crash ashore.

We may find a corollary to this in Saint Paul’s words. Our hope is not that we might continue in this existence, but that we shall rise with Christ. We are most blessed (see vs. 19), for our hope does not depend on something yet to be determined by repeated tests, but on a unique event that occurred within the tangible world. We are united in a stunning hope: because Christ is risen from the dead (vs. 12), we expect resurrection after death!

Resurrection is the centerpiece of the apostolic proclamation – an announcement, rather than a message, a declaration of the incalculable. Christ is risen! This is the faith of the apostles, this is the faith of the Fathers, this is the faith the Church celebrates with joy. Resurrection bridges this world and the kingdom of God, unrestricted by any physical calculations. The Resurrection of the Lord Jesus connects these two realms forever, for as we read at orthros for the Feast of the Ascension, “Our fallen nature hath been honored by sitting with the Father.”

Resurrection is the restoration of our spirit and soul into a transformed body, an act of God superseding the predictable expectations of the natural world (vs. 52). Resurrection must not be confused with immortality of the soul (life apart from the body), nor with reincarnation into another body, nor with the revivification of this mortal body that decays.

Resurrection is much more: God will restore body, soul, and spirit to the state which He intended at creation. Christ took up our flesh, trampled down death by death, and shall bestow resurrection upon us.

Saint Paul’s assertion is pertinent: “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen” (vs. 13). Most people who deny the Resurrection accept the fact that Jesus was a man. They overlook the fact that the Resurrection reflects on His humanity; it discloses His Incarnation and reveals that God became man. In taking upon Himself all that we are by nature, Christ forged the means of entering Hades and triumphing over death.

Earlier, the Apostle Paul tells the Corinthians, “I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (vs. 2:2). His assertion in verse 15:13 complements and fulfills his earlier remark. Materialists scoff at the apostles’ proclamation as an empty, pious delusion (vss. 14-15), but if we agree with them, we strip our faith of its content (vs. 14). We discard all hope for ourselves and for humanity. Instead of a stunning hope, we face the dreary prospect of a terminal physical existence (vs. 15-17).

Christ is risen! This is the testimony of faithful men, honest witnesses who saw His death, and then “looked upon, and . . . handled . . . the Word of life” (1 Jn 1:1) after He rose from the grave. We share an ineffable hope: “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to disgrace and everlasting shame” (Dan 12:2).

Our sins are forgiven (1 Cor 15:17); our loved ones “who have fallen asleep in Christ” (vs. 18) are “in comfort and unshaken hopes, as [they] attain the goal of the divine contests” (Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 7). Christ is risen!

The body with all its senses shall, in its perfection, enter into Paradise. Deem us worthy, that in Thy kingdom we should have an inheritance. – Saint Ephraim the Syrian

August 27 – Tuesday of the Ninth Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 15:29-38

Resurrection, continued – Preparation: 1 Corinthians 15:29-38, especially vs. 34: “Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame.” The Resurrection of Jesus Christ extends to us the possibility of a renewed and transformed life, but only if we work at sustaining our unity with Christ. There is risk in this, for we must turn away from the satisfaction of our desires and draw instead upon the Lord’s death and Resurrection if we are to attain the highest goals of life in Christ: true virtue, true knowledge of God, and eternal life.

Why should we risk giving up our comforts and endangering our pleasures? Our present existence may seem to provide everything we need to give life meaning. Pleasing ourselves seems very appealing – why not “eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (vs. 32)? Indulging our desires has immediate and appealing results!

According to Saint John of Damascus, however, there is a down side to chasing worldly satisfactions. “The roots or primary causes of all . . . passions are love of sensual pleasure, love of praise, and love of material wealth. Every evil has its origin in these” (*Philokalia* vol. 2, p. 335). The world may make self-indulgence sound alluring, but it fails to mention the evils that often follow.

And what about those who say “there is no resurrection of the dead” (vs. 12)? The Apostle Paul offers the example of his own life to refute this claim, asking, “And why do we stand in jeopardy every hour?” (vs. 30). To illustrate his point, he refers to an event known to the Corinthian Christians: fighting “with beasts at Ephesus” (vs. 32). His remark does not refer to combat with wild animals in the arena, such as Christ’s martyrs later experienced, but more likely to the vicious opponents of his ministry in Ephesus (see 2 Cor 11:23-26).

What are the high goals to which Christ is calling us through Saint Paul? We are to break off our companionship with sensuality, praise, and wealth. Note that Saint Paul quotes from the Greek philosopher Menander: “Evil company corrupts good habits” (vs. 33). Indulging such evils – or associating with those who indulge them – undermines the blessed habits that the Spirit of God forms in us. “Awake to righteousness and . . . do not sin” (vs. 34) if you wish to develop God-pleasing virtues.

Among the virtues that yield a transformed life are “the pursuit of a life of love . . . unceasing prayer . . . calling on the name of God. . . . Yoking the powers of the soul with the virtues . . . subordination to a spiritual father . . . self control . . . frugality . . . watchfulness . . . the words of God. . . . Mourning, repentance, and confession . . . the voluntary sufferings of asceticism or through involuntary trials” (Vlachos, *Orthodox Psychotherapy*, pp. 285-88).

The apostle declares that the greatest gift of the Resurrection is the opportunity to know God. Striving for “knowledge of God” (vs. 34) creates the necessary spiritual environment in which our bodies, like planted seeds, may come alive to Him, for “God gives it a body as He pleases, and to each seed its own body” (vs. 38).

“Body” here refers to the self, including the physical body. The apostle is not describing an automatic process, but rather natural growth in Christ – a life which it is possible for us to attain. If we think of our bodies – our selves – as seeds, we recall that certain seeds will only sprout unless they pass through fire. And as Saint Paul reminds us, “our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29). If we strive to know Christ, braving the searing flames of obedience to follow Him, He will prepare for us “a body as He pleases” (1 Cor 15:38).

Enlighten the eyes of my heart unto love unfeigned and unto growth in Thy divine grace. –
Post-communion Prayer

August 28 - Wednesday of the Ninth Week after Pentecost
1 Corinthians 16:4-12

The Lord as Governor: 1 Corinthians 16: 4-12, especially vs. 7: “For I do not wish to see you now on the way; but I hope to stay a while with you, if the Lord permits.” The Orthodox priest Arseny was imprisoned in a Soviet camp for incorrigibles. Inmates were sent to such camps to die. During one of the many knife fights that broke out in his barrack, Fr. Arseny commanded the violence to stop in God’s name. The fighting ceased. Afterward, a prisoner who earlier had threatened to kill Father Arseny said to him, “Forgive me, Father Arseny. I doubted your God. I see now that He exists. It even scares me. A great power is given to one who believes in Him. Even I am frightened. Forgive me for making fun of you” (*Father Arseny, 1893-1973: Priest, Prisoner, Spiritual Father*, p. 23).

The dullness of our vision often hinders us from seeing the Lord’s presence in the relationships and situations we encounter every day. It was not so with the Apostle Paul, however. In the present reading, the apostle shares some of the ways he saw and knew God in the events of his itinerant life. May his testimony make us attentive to how Christ is with us!

The first indication of Saint Paul’s sensitivity to Christ’s presence is his restraint concerning the future. He begins, “If it is fitting that I go” (vs. 4). He anticipates a journey to Jerusalem with relief offerings for the Christians, but then adds: “It may be that I will remain, or even spend the winter with you” (vs. 6).

He qualifies his hopes of spending “a while” with the Corinthians by adding, “If the Lord permits” (vs. 7). He speaks of his fellow travelers in a similar tone: “Now if Timothy comes” (vs. 10).

These remarks reveal his hesitancy to speak definitely about the future. Saint Paul considers his plans and expresses opinions as to the best course, along with his personal desires. And yet his attitude is that of one whose life is not in his own hands.

Perhaps Saint Paul’s hesitancy surprises us, given his position of authority in the Church. He is often forthright – “For I do not wish to see you now on the way” (vs. 7) – and issues orders: “See that [Timothy] may be with you without fear (vs. 11);” “Let no one despise him. But send him on his journey in peace” (vs. 11).

A single overarching concern makes Saint Paul tentative about the future: he is keenly aware of the Lord Jesus’ direction and intervention. Do we allow the Lord to alter the agenda of our daily lives in this fashion?

The apostle fully expects Christ to intervene in his plans, for they will be executed only “if the Lord permits” (vs. 7). Christ governs the saint’s agenda; he submits every decision to the will of the Lord. If we cultivate a responsiveness to God’s presence and develop the habit of waiting on God, this divine management may become characteristic of our own lives.

Saint Paul plans to “tarry in Ephesus until Pentecost” (vs. 8), because “a great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries” (vs. 9). The sensitive disciple, actively aware of God’s presence, sees both opportunities and opposition, for even time falls into God’s design. Following the prayer attributed to Metropolitan Philaret, we ask that “in unforeseen events [we] not forget that all are sent by Thee.”

Searching out God’s will demands alertness of spirit. Let us set aside the belief that we are in charge and embrace the apostle’s humility. When we place the details of our lives in Christ’s hands, seeking His will and accepting our Lord as the Governor of our life’s path, we will discover the joy of having an infallible Guide manage our choices at every moment.

Guarded always by Thy will, may we ascribe glory unto the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. –
Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom

August 29 - Beheading of the Prophet and Forerunner John
Acts 13:25-32

Eternally Begotten: Acts 13:25-33, especially vs 33: “God has fulfilled this [the sending of a Savior] for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: ‘You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.’” The third hymn sung during the recitation of the Psalms at Orthros this day is directed to John, Christ’s worthy Forerunner: “Thou of everlasting memory...didst declare the splendor-bearing Sun shining forth, preaching the Creator to the people in the wilderness, the Lamb of God Who taketh away the sins of the world.” This acclamation summarizes what God launched at the hand of the Baptizer, and explains why the Church addresses John as the great “Prophet of Prophets.”

The Holy Forerunner was first to announce the dawn of history’s greatest season: the days of the promised Savior of Israel (Acts 13:23). Saint John recognized Jesus of Nazareth as the One, “the sandals of Whose feet I am not worthy to loose,” as the “Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). Further, Blessed John witnessed the initial manifestation of the Holy Trinity, in a Theophany given when the Lord Jesus was baptized at Saint John’s hand (Jn 1:35; Mt 3:17; Jn 1:32-34). For the voice of the Father declared Jesus to be His beloved Son, and the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove.

God carefully prepared the way for the coming of the Divine Word Incarnate among men. For centuries, the Lord raised up Prophets who offered glimpses of the coming great King. They foretold the coming of One Who would rule all nations, Who would reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, Who would establish and uphold God’s Kingdom in justice and righteousness forever (Is 9:5-6), upon Whom the Spirit of the Lord would rest (Is 11:2).

Until the Forerunner came, the revelation concerning the coming Person of Christ expanded steadily, beginning from the earliest of Israel’s prophets. Further, Christ our God Himself revealed to His disciples, and to all who would receive His words, that “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, Who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him” (Jn 1:18). Jesus also declared the essential unity between Himself and God the Father: “I and My Father are One” (Jn 10:30). For three years before His Passion and Resurrection, the Lord’s disciples heard, saw, and handled “the Word of life,” and said, “we have seen...and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father...was manifested to us” (1 Jn 1:1,2).

After Jesus’ Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension, His Apostles proclaimed the Truth Whom they knew personally. God Himself had visited His people (Lk 1:68). To communicate the Truth, they called the Lord Jesus by very precise, selected names in order to express His unity with the Father: God’s Beloved Son (Lk 3:22), “the only Begotten of the Father” (Jn 1:14), God’s own Son (Rom 8: 3, 32), or as Saint Paul preached by quoting from the Prophet David, “Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee” (Ps 2:7).

Through subsequent centuries, the Church Fathers defended the Apostolic message one phrase at a time with language chosen to refute all misinterpretations of the term ‘Begotten.’ Against the theories of certain early, false teachers - that Jesus was God but in the guise of a man and not a fully, flesh-and-blood human - the Fathers declared that He was “Very God of Very God, Begotten, not made; of one essence with the Father.” The Church understands that the “Begetting” of God the Word occurs eternally from God the Father, so that there never was a time when He was not, since He is “Begotten...before all worlds.”

From the Fatherly bosom Thou art inseparable, O sweet Jesus, Thou eternally-Begotten Son of God, and Deliverer of the world; Send Thy comforting Spirit to sanctify our souls.

August 30 - Friday of the Tenth Week after Pentecost
2 Corinthians 1:12-20

Live for Christ and Rejoice: 2 Corinthians 1:12-20, especially vs. 12: “*We conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you.*” In seeking to resolve his troubled relationship with the Corinthian church, Saint Paul appeals to his manner of life, upholds his personal integrity, and affirms his apostolic authority. As a result, this epistle serves as a guidebook for how we are to live an authentic life pleasing to God. In light of the coming “day of the Lord” (vs. 14), we are to rely on God’s grace to shape our every choice and action.

In place of the word “boasting,” which appears in verse 12 of the Orthodox Study Bible and many other English translations, the King James translation employs the noun “rejoicing”: “For our *rejoicing* is this. . . .” The word used in the original Greek, *kauchesis*, indeed conveys an act of rejoicing, rather than one of boasting.

Why is Saint Paul *rejoicing* in “the day of the Lord Jesus” (vs. 14)? It is because the impending return of Christ has become his reference point for daily living – a tangible hope he in turn shares with us.

Let us consider how our lives might change if we made the “day of the Lord” the point of reference for guiding and correcting ourselves. Our certain judgment before the Lord becomes our main focus in life. As we look toward the Lord’s return, our efforts are directed toward achieving “a good defense before the dread Judgment Seat of Christ,” as the Church prays during the Divine Liturgy.

How will our struggle for such a “good defense” give us cause to rejoice, as Saint Paul does in this passage? The apostle *rejoices* at the approach of the day of the Lord because his conscience assures him that he is conducting his life in “simplicity and godly sincerity” (vs. 12). By uniting himself to Christ, he frees himself from a myriad of false foundations offered by the worldly purveyors of “fleshly” wisdom.

What a difference it makes when the day of the Lord becomes our sole focus, the goal for which we strive in this life! As we look to the day of the Lord, we receive clear criteria for attaining God’s blessing, along with true hope. We know what pleases the Lord Jesus: “being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col 1:10).

We may be tempted believe that pleasing the Lord is beyond our means, since we lack the necessary strength and resources. Let us take note, however, of Saint Paul’s qualification in 2 Corinthians 1:12: “our [rejoicing] is . . . by the grace of God.” The apostle truly depends not on himself, but upon God’s grace. Here we find the deep foundation of his rejoicing.

We may face “the day of the Lord Jesus” with confidence because we, too, receive this *grace of God*. Grace is the sure underpinning of our choices, plans, and actions. Nothing can match the renewing strength of divine grace.

Of course, it is one thing to know where we are headed in life, and quite another to reach our goal. We find in Christ the means for measuring our progress along the way. Saint Paul asks: “Therefore, when I was planning . . . did I do it lightly? Or the things I plan, do I plan according to the flesh?” (vs. 17). Rather, he urges us to act “soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith” (Rom 12:3).

May we never plan our lives “according to the flesh”! Rather, let us follow the Holy Spirit’s illumination, for there is “no condemnation to those who . . . do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:1). If we walk after the Spirit, we shall rejoice!

Let all them be glad that hope in Thee; they shall ever rejoice, and Thou shalt dwell among them. And all shall glory in Thee that love Thy name, for Thou shalt bless the righteous. – Based on Psalm 5:11-12

August 31 - Saturday of the Tenth Week after Pentecost
Romans 15:30-33

Praying for Our Fellow Christians: Romans 15:30-33, especially vs. 30: *“Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me.”* Saint Paul earnestly appeals for the prayers of the Christians in Rome, for he is about to undertake a venture that puts him at risk of death, and may unravel years of labor. He truly needs spiritual support, and so he asks that God’s grace be increased by faithful prayer.

Just as Saint Paul implores his brethren in Rome to pray, our clergy continually appeal to us to “pray to the Lord.” We may not realize the serious intent behind their requests to pray, but what they ask is needed! Let us reflect on why it is so important to pray fervently for “ourselves and each other and all our life” (Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom).

“Strive together with me,” Saint Paul asks the Romans, “that I may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe” (vss. 30-31). The apostle is heading for Jerusalem “bound in the Spirit . . . not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me” (Acts 20:22-23).

For ten years, ever since the death of the King Herod Agrippa in AD 44, the Romans had placed Judea under the rule of one incompetent governor after another. Now, the country is boiling up toward revolt, culminating in the insurrection of AD 66. The assassination of moderates and opponents is already commonplace, and Saint Paul knows he is a target (Acts 23:12-13).

However, we should never relegate the apostle’s appeal to an historical footnote. Rather, his words add urgency to our priests’ liturgical request that we pray for “deliverance from all tribulation, wrath, danger, and necessity.” Let us respond to the deep earnestness of their bidding and “strive together . . . in prayers to God” for the Body of Christ (Rom 15:30).

At this very moment, our brothers and sisters in churches around the world are in imminent danger of violent death. Christian communities in the Middle East and Africa are under assault. Prayer counts!

When Saint Paul asks “that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints” (vs. 31), he is referring to the large sum of money he plans to take to Judea for the relief of the famine-plagued communities there. He states that he is “going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints” (vs. 25) with donations from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia (vs. 26).

In other words, he plans to take Gentile money to Jewish Christians at a time when the larger Jewish community was determined not to accept any foreign aid for the Temple. This intense nationalist loyalty is inspired by a purist Judaism.

Likewise, many first-century Jewish Christians firmly oppose the apostle’s ministry to the Gentiles (see Gal 2:4-5). Should Saint Paul’s gifts from Gentile churches be rejected, there is a danger that the Christian community might fragment into opposing factions as a result, destroying everything for which Saint Paul has labored.

The Lord prays that we “all may be one” (Jn 17:21). Let us respond earnestly when we are asked to pray “for the good estate of the holy churches of God, and for the union of all men.” Life, limb, and the gospel are at stake, as well as our unity in Christ!

Saint Paul desires to visit the Roman Christians in order to “be refreshed together” with them (Rom 15:32). Let us pray with heartfelt longing “for the peace from above,” that our brethren in congregations around the world may be refreshed in the Lord!

We pray for mercy, life, peace, health, salvation and visitation for all Thy servants. – Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom