

Autumn – A Time for Reflection

We live in perilous times with much anxiety about many things. Not a day goes by but that we learn of senseless murders, unending wars, and paralysis in legislative bodies, mistreatment of our brothers and sisters, and people who act in ways contrary to the gospel expectations. So, how do we cope?

First, let's recognize that our parents and grandparents also lived in perilous times. Indeed, from what I learn from history perilous times have always existed with the exception of the Garden of Eden when God walked and talked directly with Adam and Eve. Since then there has been a steady stream of dictators, tyrants, epidemics, wars, economic depressions, hurricanes, tsunamis, and dislocations. How did our forbearers cope?

I believe the answer is that they held fast to faith in God who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. They prayed and stayed faithful to the gospel message that the Kingdom of God is at hand, that we are the temple of the Holy Spirit, and that together we find peace and endure. Christ came to establish among other things His church which according to St Paul and St Peter we are its living stones and members of the Body of Christ. To make this point Paul states that the hand needs the foot, and the ear needs the eye. [I Cor 12:14-27] We need each other.

Our culture, however, tries to separate us from each other. It focuses on the individual and not the person. We all have our own social security numbers, our own cell phones, our own bank accounts and retirement plans. Before all these financial instruments how did people live? They depended upon each other, and the family was the bed rock of the community. Everyone had a place at the table. Clearly, to fit into a family, particularly a loving one, one had to forego one's ego to a certain extent. The trade-off was a sense of belonging and less anxiety about the future.

The lure of independence – the siren call from Diablos – was too strong to resist. So, where are we today? We think we can do everything by ourselves; we need no one. This trend of individualization has brought us to this point in our history. Just look at the daily news to see what we have wrought. We have lost our grounding, it is hard to find a center because we have forgotten God who is the Author of our world and our lives. For some people God is irrelevant. Dostoyevsky said without God any evil thing is possible. He was right.

Now is there hope? Yes, of course! There is always hope with God. And, this month of November is a time to reflect on the Author of our lives and on the permanency of certain truths: we were born, we are to live, and we will die. Between the dash on our tombstones is our present time - the time between our birth date and our death date. So what to do?

The church calendar – about which we should pay more attention – has two significant dates in November to remind us to stay focused on God the Father, the Son, and the Holy

Spirit. On November 8th we celebrate the Synaxis (the gathering) of the Archangels: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Oriel, and others. This rank of the heavenly host oversees us human beings, and there are many of them as we say in the Anaphora "... even though there stand beside thee [i.e., God] thousands of archangels and ten thousand of angels." As we contemplate the Synaxis of the Archangels we are reminded of heaven where they dwell and where we hope to be someday. In other words we are in their presence, and if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, they are in our presence.

The other important event we celebrate is the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple on November 21st. It reminds us of a new beginning. We acknowledge that as the future bearer of the Christ Child she is beginning her preparation for that cosmic action. As Jesus Christ's Mother she bore Him, fed Him, nurtured Him, and most importantly from her He took our humanity to become the God-Man. We honor her and in doing so we honor Him.

November is one of the months of the Autumn Season – a time for rest and reflection; a beautiful time of year: crisper air, colorful leaves, fresh apples and cider, pumpkins and other squash, harvest moon, and of course turkey dinners. The harvest is in, the weather cools, the days grow shorter and the nights grow longer. Unfortunately, we in Florida do not always appreciate the change in seasons as it is always sunny and warm. Yet, even Florida is part of God's Creation and we all get a new sign of life on the first day of fall-like weather when we breathe a sigh of relief that the oppressive humidity has finally dissipated. Change of seasons reminds us of the cycles of Nature; or rather, of God's Creation. As we become attuned to God's Creation we appreciate His wisdom because "His invisible attributes are clearly seen" in His Creation, [Romans 1:20] and "O Lord, how manifold are Your works! In wisdom You have made them all" [Psalm 104:24].

Before the days of electricity Fall was a time of rest from the daily chores of planting, cultivating, and finally reaping the fruits of one's labor. It was a time of reflection on the purpose and meaning of life, of turning to the Scriptures, of thanking God for the harvest, and of preparing for next year's planting and harvesting.

The other important event we celebrate in November in America is Thanksgiving Day – the one American holiday that I think should become a part of our church calendar as it thanks God for the harvest that allows us to survive the coming winter. Today, of course, since we are far from an agricultural society, we tend to forget the realities of life. People in Alaska in contrast must prepare for the Winter by stocking up on fish and fuel to get through it. Not as easy for Alaskans to go to the store and buy what we take for granted in the lower forty-eight. It would do us well to remember times when food was not so easy to get. Here in Florida we recently experienced power outages lasting in some cases for a week or more. With no refrigeration and stores not fully stocked we were reminded of what it is like to worry about food.

Another thing we can do to endure the present perilous time is to count our blessings and to thank God for every good and perfect gift that comes from the Father of Lights. [James

1:17] Another thing we can do is have hope, hope and trust in God. How do we know things can and should get better? What gives us hope that tomorrow will be a better day? The answer is our faith in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who are always at work striking a balance between total control and giving us humans – the crown of His Creation – free will.

Throughout human history God has always rescued His faithful followers. Think of the believers in both the Old and the New Testament and since then who held firm to the faith: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Eleazar, Isaiah, Elijah, Jeremiah, Hosea, Ignatius of Antioch, John Chrysostom, Maximos the Confessor, Athanasius, St Thekla, and of course, St Peter and St Paul. Those persecuted by the Turks, the Communists, the Nazis and more recently the Islamic State are modern day martyrs. It is interesting to ask to where and to what consequence are the atrocities of Ghenghis Khan, the Mongols, the Tartars, Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, and other tyrants? Where are these despots today?

What does history tell us? Perilous times are always with us, but more importantly God is always with us. Stay faithful and do not get discouraged. Trust God! Don't go off on tangents. Stay focused on God and family. As St Paul reminds Titus "...avoid foolish genealogies, contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and useless." [Titus 3:9]

Moreover, be thankful! Have a blessed Autumn, a joyous celebration of the Archangels and the Entrance of the Theotokos, and a Happy Thanksgiving!