

SERMON ON THE ANNUNCIATION - Sunday, March 25, 2018

When we were young children, we would cling to our mother's dress. We ran to our mother with all of our hurts, our pains and our sorrows. Our mother would gently wipe away our tears, embrace us in her loving arms, console us, and chase away all the pain and sorrow with her loving embrace. How many of us as adults still turn to our mothers for help and consolation? It is the same with the Most Holy Mother of God. The Greeks call her "Panagia," the All-Holy One. She never fails any of us who run to her and ask for her help and consolation. The Elder Joseph the Hesychast said that "she intercedes with her Son, who is so good, who loves the good and has mercy on the bad and forgives repenting sinners." The Holy Apostles deeply loved and venerated the Mother of God. When you love someone, it is a common practice to wear a locket with an image of your beloved around your neck. To this day, all bishops wear what is called a "Panagia," an icon of the Mother of God, around their necks. This is no mere tradition devoid of emotion or feeling behind it. I once heard our own Archbishop Michael remark how much he loved the Mother of God. Centuries have passed, yet we can all still experience the warmth, tender loving care and protection of the Most Holy Mother of God. If we turn to the Mother of God with faith and offer her our tears and supplications, our hearts will be filled with her love and consolation. I feel very sorry for those who do not understand or criticize the Orthodox veneration of the Mother of God. This causes me deep pain and sorrow, as if someone were to criticize or disparage the love I have for my own mother according to the flesh. The Mother of God is no mere incidental player in the story of our Savior. Her role was not merely perfunctory so that our Lord could, as St. Athanasios the Great says, "put on human flesh" and be born into the world as a man. Those who think this way have no clue and it is very sad. She carried the Creator of the universe in her holy womb. Her very own blood flowed through our Lord's veins and her very own milk nourished our Savior. When our Savior hung dying on the Cross, referring to His Holy Mother who stood weeping and lamenting at the foot of the Cross, the Lord turned to His beloved disciple St. John, who also stood by the Cross, and said to him "Behold your mother!" With that statement our Lord gifted to all of us for all time that the Panagia would be our Mother and Protectress. Many of the saints, contemporary saints such as the Elder Paisios and the Elder Joseph, as well as older saints, such as St. Seraphim of Sarov, have been gifted to experience divine visitations from the Mother of God. Here is a well known example from the life of the famous 14th century saint Sergius of Radonezh:

"Once, late at night, Saint Sergius... was reading an Akathist to the Mother of God. Having finished his habitual rule, he sat down to rest a bit, but suddenly he said to his disciple, Saint Micah (May 6): "Be alert, my child, for we shall have a

wondrous visitation.” Scarcely had he uttered these words than a voice was heard: “The All-Pure One approaches!”

Saint Sergius rushed from the cell to the entrance, and suddenly it was illumined by a bright light, brighter than the sun. He beheld nearby in imperishable glory the Mother of God, accompanied by the Apostles Peter and John. Unable to bear such a vision, Saint Sergius reverently prostrated himself before the Mother of God. She said to him, “Fear not, My chosen one! I have come to visit you. Your prayer for your disciples and your monastery has been heard. Do not be troubled, for your habitation shall prosper, not only in your lifetime, but also after your departure to God. I will be with your monastery, supplying its needs abundantly, and protecting it.” Having said this, the Mother of God became invisible.

For a long time Saint Sergius was in an inexpressible rapture, and having come to himself, he raised up Saint Micah. “Tell me, Father,” he asked, “what is the meaning of this miraculous vision? My soul nearly left my body from terror!” But Saint Sergius was silent, and only his luminous face spoke of the spiritual joy which he had experienced. “Wait a bit,” he said finally to his disciple, “my soul also trembles because of this wondrous vision.”

After a while Saint Sergius summoned two of his disciples, Saints Isaac and Simon, and shared with them the vision and the promise of the Theotokos. They all sang a Molieben to the Mother of God. Saint Sergius spent the remaining part of the night without sleep, calling to mind the divine vision.”

Through the prayers of the Most Pure, Most Holy and Ever-Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, may our souls be saved! Amen.