

# *The Miracle and Joy of* **Christmas**

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# ΑΥΧΝΟΣ

A GREEK ORTHODOX PERIODICAL





# Η Γέννηση του Χριστού – Η Ανάπλαση του Ανθρώπου



**Η** Γέννηση του Κυρίου ημών Ιησού Χριστού θα παραμένει πάντοτε «σημείον αντιλεγόμενον» για τον «λογικό» άνθρωπο της σημερινής εποχής. Για να δεχθούμε το δόγμα αυτής της υπέρλογης και υπερφυσικής αποκάλυψης του Θεού σε μας τους χοϊκούς, αυτό προϋποθέτει απλότητα καρδιάς και ταπείνωση των λογισμών μας. Πρέπει να θυσιάσουμε την ανθρώπινη σοφία μας και να ανεβάσουμε τις σκέψεις μας πάνω από τη γήινη πραγματικότητα. Να είμαστε έτοιμοι να δεχθούμε ένα άγγελμα που βρίσκεται πέρα από τη σφαίρα της εμπειρίας και του λογικού μας.

Έτσι εξηγείται γιατί πιστεύουν οι απλοί, οι καθαροί στη καρδιά, τα νήπια. Ενώ οι περήφανοι και ακάθαρμοι στη ψυχή γκρεμίζονται στην άβυσσο της απιστίας. Οι σοφοί «κατ'άνθρωπον» αδυνατούν να συλλάβουν το μυστήριο.

Βασική προϋπόθεση του Μυστηρίου της Γεννήσεως παραμένει η ενοχή του ανθρωπίνου γένους από τη πτώση των πρωτοπλάστων. Έρχεται ο Χριστός για να αναπλάσει τον άνθρωπο. Όπως το είχε προφητεΐσει 500 χρόνια πριν ο θεόπνευστος προφήτης Ησαΐας - «να φέρω στους φτωχούς χαρμόσυνο άγγελμα, να θεραπεύσω εκείνους που έχουν συντριβεί στη καρδιά τους, να κηρύξω την απελευθέρωση στους αιχμαλώτους και την ανάβλεψη στους τυφλούς, να ελευθερώσω εκείνους που καταπιέζονται...» (Λουκ. δ' 18-19, ελεύθερη μετάφραση).

Δεν μπορούσε πια ο Κτίστης μας να βλέπει αυτόν που ήταν η κορυφή της Δημιουργίας Του να χάνεται «Ιδών ὁ Κτίστης ὀλλύμενον τὸν ἄνθρωπον χερσίν, ὃν ἐποίησε, κλίνας οὐρανούς κατέρχεται...» Δηλ. όταν είδε ο Δημιουργός και Κτίστης των πάντων να χάνεται ο άνθρωπος που τον είχε φτιάξει με τα χέρια Του, έκλινε τους ουρανούς και κατέβηκε (Κανών Χριστουγέννων).

Το δόγμα του προπατορικού αμαρτήματος είναι το μόνο που εξηγεί τη μεγάλη αταξία και το βάθος του κακού που

παρατηρούμε στον κόσμο, στις κοινωνίες των ανθρώπων και στον κάθε άνθρωπο ξεχωριστά. Ο Άνθρωπος δεν είναι αυτός που βγήκε από τα χέρια του Πλάστη Του. Γι' αυτό και τα βάζει με το Θεό, φεύγει από τον ίδιο δρόμο. Στις μέρες μας νομοθετεί ακόμα και εναντίον του Θεού. Όμως, και ποτέ δεν θα μπορέσει ο άνθρωπος να βρει την ανάπαυσή του μακριά από το Θεό. Και μόνο όταν το παραδεχθεί αυτό και αναγνωρίσει τον ξεπεσμό του (Συντριβή καρδιάς- Μετάνοια), τότε αυτομάτως λύονται και όλες οι αντιφάσεις της αλλοπρόσαλλης ζωής του. Τα πάθη της ψυχής και της σαρκός υποχωρούν και μέσα του ξαναγίνεται παιδί. Έτοιμο να δεχθεί και ν' αγκαλιάσει το μυστήριο. Δηλαδή το ότι «Θεὸς ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί» (Εβρ. β' 14) «ἵνα τοῦ χείρονος μεταλάβων, μεταδῶ μοι τοῦ βελτίονος». Δηλ. αφού λάβει τη δική μου κάκιση φύση, να μου μεταδώσει εμένα τη δική Του την θεϊκή (Ύμνο Ευαγγελισμού).

Τώρα η αλήθεια ξετυλίγεται μπροστά στα έκθαμβά μάτια μας «Εψεύσθη πάλαι Ἀδάμ καὶ Θεὸς ἐπιθυμήσας οὐ γέγονεν. Ἄνθρωπος γίνεται Θεός, ἵνα Θεὸν τὸν Ἀδὰμ ἀπεργάσθαι...» (κάποτε, παλιά, επεθύμησε ο Αδάμ να γίνει Θεός και διαψεύσθηκε οικτρά. Τώρα ο Θεός γίνεται άνθρωπος για να επεξεργασθῇ την κατά χάριν θέωση του Αδάμ).

Εδώ η αιτία. Εδώ και ο σκοπός της ενανθρωπήσεως του Θεού. Η πίστη μας δεν είναι πλάσμα φαντασίας αλλά απόλυτα δικαιολογημένη. Αυτός που ασπάζεται τη Χριστιανική αλήθεια, αποδεικνύεται ο πιο σοφός απ' όλους. Γιατί μας πληροφορεί ο ίδιος ο σαρκωθείς Υιός και Λόγος του Θεού, «Εὰν γὰρ μὴ πιστεύσητε ὅτι ἐγὼ εἰμι, ἀποθανεῖσθαι ἐν ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις ὑμῶν» (Ιωάν. η' 24) - Εάν δεν πιστεύεται ότι εγώ είμαι ο μόνος και πραγματικός Σωτήρ, θα αποθάνετε θαμμένοι εις τας αμαρτίας σας (Μετάφραση Τρεμπέλα).

Εμείς όμως, που με τη χάρη του Θεού, πιστεύσαμε, ἄς ψάλλομε από καρδιάς και ν' ακουσθεῖ παντού, «Χριστὸς γεννᾶται· δοξάσατε... Χριστὸς ἐπὶ γῆς· ὑψώθητε...».



# The Miracle and Joy of Christmas – How should we respond?

**T**he miracle of Christmas - if we stop to really think about it - is one of the greatest and most wondrous mysteries in the history of creation. The pre-eternal God, the creator of everything visible and invisible, decided to come down to earth and live a human life like all of us! God, the architect and master of the universe, voluntarily subjected Himself to pain, to sorrow, and to difficulties.

Even more so, He did not come in triumph and glory, as a king normally arrives, but rather humbled Himself by being born in a manger surrounded by animals.

And why? As the hymns we chant at the Matins of Christmas explain, although *"Man was made in the image of God, because of his transgression he tumbled down, and was to corruption wholly bound"*. Through the birth of Christ, however, *"the wise Creator once again refashions [us]"*. Or, as St Athanasios puts the matter more succinctly, *"God became man so that man might become god"* (with a lower case "g"). Christ's birth allows us, who were created in His image, to grow into His likeness and become truly holy. We can become like God! As St John Chrysostom preaches, *"God is now on earth, and man in heaven"*, which means that *"paradise is unlocked, the curse is taken away, sin is removed from us"*.

This is why Christmas is a time of universal happiness and joy, both in the world and in our Church. The hymns demand, for example, that we *"Sing to the Lord, all you who dwell on the earth; and in merry spirits, O you peoples, praise His birth. For He is glorified"*.

But what does this mean for us? Is Christmas a mere commemorative event, where we are invited to joyfully reflect on Christ's birth and celebrate its undoubted historical significance? If so, we have unfortunately missed the point. The Church hymns proclaim, in the present tense: *"Christ is born; glorify Him! Christ is*

*come from heaven; go and meet Him."* Christmas is the celebration of not just Christ's birth in Bethlehem two millennia ago, but also the re-birth of Christ today in our hearts.

This is why the only proper way to respond to and spread the joy of Christmas is for each of us to renew our relationship with Christ. This is the joy of the Christmas message because, as the Evangelist Luke says, there is *"joy in heaven... and joy in the presence of the angels of God"* when a sinner repents (Luke 15:7-10). Before this can happen, however, we must purify ourselves from sin as best we can, because it is the *"pure in heart"* who see God (Matt 5:8).

And just as the Lord Himself was born in humble circumstances; we too can manifest His love in small, humble, modest ways. All the Lord requires is that we *cheerfully* give ourselves (2 Cor 9:7) - our kindness, our respect, our forgiveness, our compassion, our love - and He will do the rest.

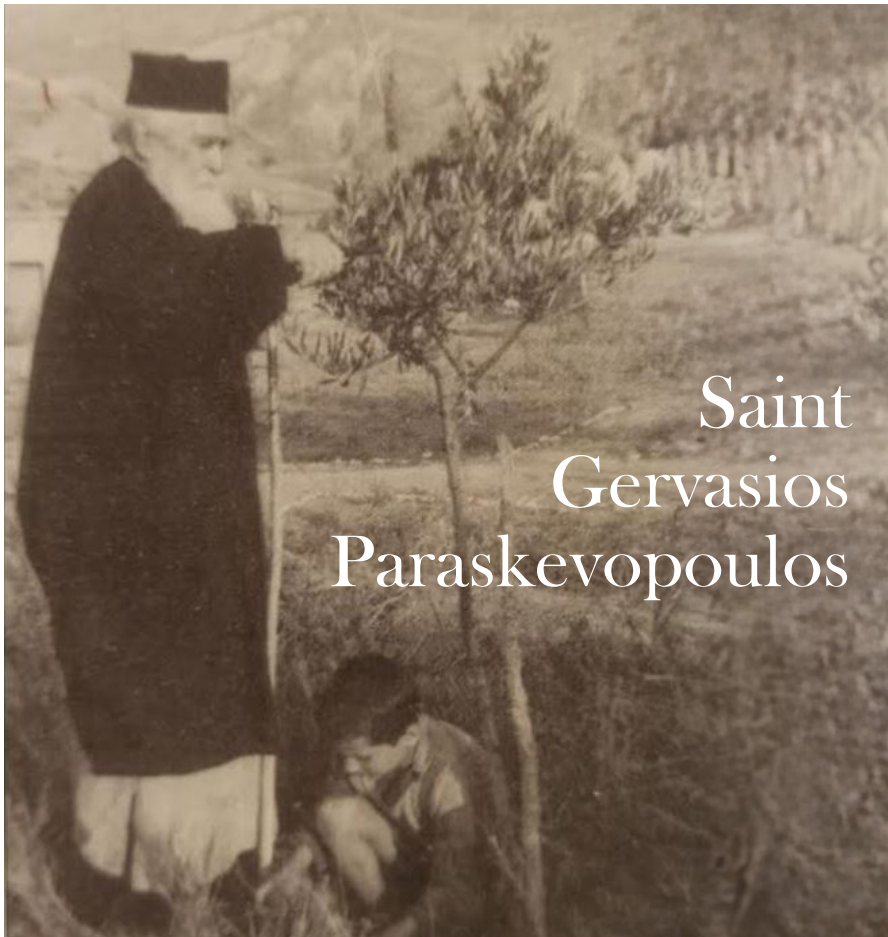
May the miracle of our Lord's Nativity fill all our hearts with love for Him so that He may be born into all our hearts, and may He grant us a very blessed and merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!



*May the miracle of our Lord's  
Nativity fill all our hearts with love  
for Him so that He may be born  
into all our hearts.*







## Saint Gervasios Paraskevopoulos

Saint Gervasios Paraskevopoulos (1877 - 1964) was one of the great lights of Orthodoxy in 20<sup>th</sup> century Greece. His zeal for God and love for all people was such that, in 2017, Metropolitan Chrysostomos of Patras confirmed that a submission had been made to the Holy Synod for Elder Gervasios to be officially recognised as a Saint of the Church. This is consistent with the proclamations of the people of Patras at his burial in 1964, where they shouted, *"He is a Saint!"*. And a few weeks ago on November 16, 2023, the Holy and Sacred Synod of the Ecumenical Patriarchate officially declared Gervasios Paraskevopoulos as a Saint on the Orthodox Church Calendar to be commemorated every year on the 30th June, the day of his repose.

Saint Gervasios was born in Nymphasia (a village in central Peloponnese) in 1877. Although he had a difficult childhood, including

losing his mother from a young age, he grew up with a strong faith. At 26, he was tonsured a monk, and at 33 he was ordained a priest. Significantly, he was also a spiritual child of St. Nektarios of Aegina when he was studying at the Rizarios Ecclesiastical School in Athens.

Saint Gervasios' zeal for Christ and his Church was fiery, and he had an almost unlimited capacity to sacrifice himself in his love for his flock. He would serve the Divine Liturgy four times a week together with many other services, give sermons daily, hear confessions, and do charity and missionary work. He was the first in Patras to organize and run catechetical schools, and his students numbered in the thousands. Professor Trembelas writes that he remembers Saint Gervasios *"surrounded by a multitude of children"* with considerable love,

patience and calmness.

At one point, Saint Gervasios was asked to slow down and rest during the summer months so he could recover with strength for the next year. In a characteristically selfless response, he said *"but does the Devil ever give up? If we could at least close him up in a jar during the summer months, then we would also rest... we also haven't got time to lose; we are obligated to work... in order to safeguard the sheep from the wolf"*. Even when he became ill towards the end of his life, and he could not get out his bed, he would preach to the multitudes who crowded around by taking a microphone in his hand and preaching from his bed into the special room outside his cell which was set aside for this purpose. His sermons had such power that those listening would sometimes interrupt him and confess their sins in public.

Further, his pastoral mission and his sacrifice for others did not come at the expense of his own personal asceticism. Before each Divine Liturgy, for example, he would not lie down at all the previous night in order to prepare himself.

Saint Gervasios reposed in the Lord in 1964 at the age of 87. In 2014, his relics were translated to the Church of St Paraskevi in Patras (at the Anaplastiki School), which he founded. At the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his passing, Metropolitan Chrysostomos described Saint Gervasios as *"a Liturgist of the Most High"* who was *"seen to elevate between heaven and earth and lived the moving experiences of the Saints of God"*.

May we all be blessed through the prayers of the newly canonised Elder Gervasios.



WITH Fr D. K.

## *What is the role of a godparent?*



In terms of who can be a godparent in an Orthodox Baptism, Church Canons state that such a person needs to be Orthodox and be at least 12 years of age. At a deeper level, for the godparent to fulfil their role properly, he or she should love Christ and be close to the Church, someone who is a good role model in terms of their faith and virtue. Of course, we all lack in this, but at least the godparent should be someone who earnestly wants to progress spiritually. When you are approached and asked to be a godparent, it is best not to answer immediately. Reflect on whether you are ready for this holy work. It is also very good to speak to your spiritual father who hopefully knows you well and can guide you.



is censing, the godparent either holding the baby or, in the case of an adult, next to the newly baptised with both of them holding lighted candles.

Typically the godparent brings to the Service of a child's Baptism a:

1. Cross to be worn around the neck;
2. Small bottle of olive oil;
3. Hand towel;
4. Bath towel;
5. Linen sheet large enough to cover the baby;
6. White singlet;
7. Bar of soap;
8. Candle; and
9. White clothing that the baby wears after the Baptism

During the Baptism Service the godparent needs to be prayerful and aware of the awesomeness of what is happening - that someone is entering the Church! Amongst other things during the Service the godparent:

- + makes a public profession, rejecting the devil and accepting Christ, and then recites the Nicene Creed. In the case of an infant, the godparent does this on behalf of the child. In the case of an adult, the one being baptised and the godparent make these public professions in unison (These responses can be read from a book during the Service);
- + holds the bottle of oil while the Priest blesses it;
- + cups his hands over the water so that the Priest can pour blessed oil there and then anoint the one being baptised;
- + dabs the one being baptised with the blessed oil;
- + just after the Baptism, receives the infant into his or her arms; and
- + after the one being baptised has changed into their new garment, the godparent walks around the Baptismal font 3 times, always opposite the Priest who

On the third day after the Baptism, typically the godparent of a child visits the family, bathes the baby, and washes whatever has been stained with blessed oil. The water is then emptied either into the sea or river, or in a garden or pot plant. The godparent also comes to the same Church with the one that was baptised at least 3 times and accompanies him or her with a lighted candle as he or she receives Holy Communion.

Then of course the hard work of being a godparent begins. Definitely the role of a good godparent is not just to occasionally give a present to their godchild and take them an Easter candle every Pascha. They need to become a friend in Christ and maintain close contact with their godchild. They need to help the child or the adult spiritually, guide them, encourage them to live the life of the Church, to join a Sunday School or a fellowship, encourage the reading of spiritual books, and generally nurture their faith. The godparent, mainly through their example, needs to help the newly baptised grow in holiness and come closer to Christ and His Church.



# “BE OF GOOD CHEER”

## St Euthymius the Great

In the city of Melitene in Armenia, after many years of childlessness, Paul and Dionysia, entreated God for a child. They had a vision and heard a voice saying: “Be of good cheer! God will grant you a son who will bring joy to the churches”. When he was born, they named him Euthymius, meaning “good cheer”.

Soon after his birth, Euthymius’ father slept in the Lord and his mother, wanting to fulfil her vow in dedicating her son to God, presented him to the Bishop of Melitene who made him a reader. His love and zeal for the Lord increased, and he was tonsured a monk and ordained to the priesthood. He was tasked with supervising the monasteries of the city but found most peace when remaining in solitude in the wilderness. His desire for stillness and solitude drove him out of the city and into the desert where he visited the holy fathers. Eventually he settled in the Tharan Lavra.

Many years passed and the Lord revealed his place of solitude, for the benefit of the faithful who flocked to him seeking spiritual guidance, and the monastic community grew. St Euthymius provided for them by entrusting St Theoctistus (September 3) – a monk who shared his spiritual mindset and zeal – to supervise the monastery.

St Euthymius provided wisdom on many matters of the Church. In the year 451, the Fourth Ecumenical Council met in Chalcedon to condemn the Monophysite heresy of Dioscorus, which asserted that in the Lord Jesus Christ there is only one nature, the divine. Saint Euthymius accepted and taught the decisions of the Council which led those who erred to change their mind, following his example. He taught the monks the ascetic struggle not just in word but in praxis. He performed countless miracles, healed the sick, and cast out demons. Unable however to withstand worldly praises, he secretly fled the monastery with a disciple and withdrew into the desert.

Some brethren from the Lavra would say that when St Euthymius would celebrate the Divine Liturgy,

fire descended from Heaven and would encircle him. St Euthymius revealed to several of the monks that he often saw an angel celebrating the Holy Liturgy with him. Moreover, he could discern a person’s thoughts and spiritual state from his outward appearance. On the eve of the feast of St Anthony the Great (January 17), the Lord revealed to St Euthymius his time of death. He then served his last vigil, revealing to the fathers his calling from the Lord. After providing final words of instruction to them, St Euthymius remained at the altar for three days, where he gave up his spirit on January 20, 473 AD aged 97.

*“Look to yourselves and preserve your souls and bodies in purity. Do not fail to attend the church services and keep the traditions and rules of our community. If one of the brethren struggles with unclean thoughts, correct, console, and instruct him, so that he does not fall into the devil’s snares. Never refuse hospitality to visitors. Offer a bed to every stranger. Give whatever you can to help the poor in their misfortune.”*

St Euthymius is called the ‘Great’, as was his firm confession of the Orthodox faith.

*Commemorated 20th January*





# ST MACARIUS AND THE TALKING SKULL

Abba Macarius said, 'Walking in the desert one day, I found the skull of a dead man, lying on the ground. As I was moving it with my stick, the skull spoke to me.

I said to it, "Who are you?"  
The skull replied, "I was high priest of the idols and of the pagans who dwelt in this place; but you are Macarius, the Spirit-bearer. Whenever you take pity on those who are in torments, and pray for them, they feel a little respite."  
The old man said to him, "What is this alleviation, and what is this torment?"

He said to him, "As far as the sky is removed from the earth, so great is the fire beneath us; we are ourselves standing in the midst of the fire, from the feet up to the head. It is not possible to see anyone face to face, but the face of one is fixed to the back of another. Yet when you pray for us, each of us can see the other's face a little. Such is our respite."

The old man in tears said, "Alas the day when that man was born!"  
He said to the skull, "Are there punishments which are more painful than this?" The skull said to him, "There is a more grievous punishment down below us."

The old man said, "Who are the people down there?"

The skull said to him: "We have received a little mercy since we did not know God, but those who know God and denied Him are down below us."

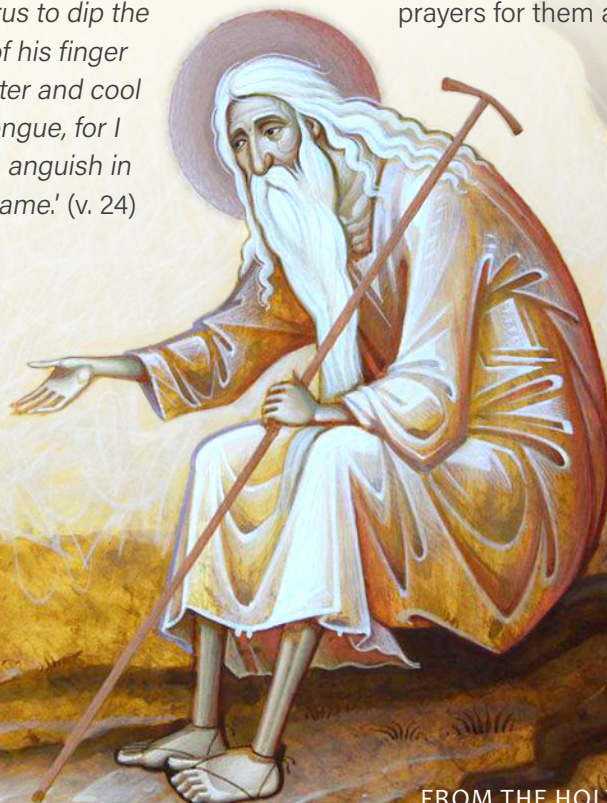
Then, picking up the skull, the old man buried it.  
(*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers, The Alphabetical Collection: Macarius the Great*, 38)

This vivid account, relayed by Saint Macarius the Great (300-390 AD), describes the state of the soul after death, which has not found repose in the Lord. The account illustrates that the souls of the dead are conscious and can experience pain. This description is harmonious with our Lord's own teaching in the account of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), in which the former, being in Hades, cries out 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' (v. 24)

A strong warning is also given to us Christians, who will face greater judgement for denying God than those who did not know Him, to whom some mercy is shown even if they lived sinful lives.

Even so, the account ultimately provides us with hope in the mercy of God. It is clear from the story that prayers for the dead were considered effectual in the early church, and provided the soul respite from suffering. This tradition has continued today in the Orthodox Church, which unlike many other Christian traditions, fervently offers prayers for the repose of the departed 'in a place from where pain, sorrow and sighing have fled' (memorial service of the Orthodox Church).

It is our privilege as Orthodox Christians to continue this tradition and pray for our departed by name, as they certainly perceive our prayers for them and are benefited.





Ἡ ΕΝΝΗΣΙΣ

ΤῸ ΧΡΙΣΤῸ





# Icon of the The Nativity

At Christmas vespers, the faithful hear the following idiomelon hymn sung before the doxastikon:

*"What can we offer you, O Christ, who has appeared on earth as a man for our sake? Each one made by you offers you its thanks: the Angels, their hymn; the heavens, the Star; the Magi, their gifts; the Shepherds, their wonder; the earth, the Cave; the desert, the Manger, and we, a Virgin Mother. God before the ages, have mercy on us!"*

Just as the Church draws the faithful into the feast with hymnology designed to bring the past into the present, so too the icons of the Church are painted in such a way as to portray events and people as if they were happening or living in the present time. The icon of Christmas, like the hymn above, brings together various symbols, characters and objects to make the feast living and present, taking it out of the tyranny of history as if to invite us to participate today.

Traditionally, the icon of the nativity depicts Christ lying in a manger situated in a dark cave. The darkness invokes the words of Isaiah, *"the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined"* (9:2). Christ's presence in the cave represents the light that he has brought to the darkness that had enveloped His generation. The contrast of light and darkness tells of the enlightenment He will bring

to the world by His teaching and the redemption He will bring to the human race by His incarnation.

But notice, doesn't the manger in that cave look more like a coffin, and the swaddling cloth the Child is wrapped in similar to a funerary shroud? That is precisely the iconographer's intention. For, from His birth, the God-man was preordained to be sacrificed for the sins of the world.

Next, we see Joseph who appears to be lost in his thoughts, troubled by what has just taken place. The man speaking with him represents the Devil, who fills Joseph with doubts about the virginity of his betrothed. Joseph represents the struggle those with a worldly mindset encounter when faced with the conflict between faith and reason.

Like the hymn, the icon depicts the Star, the Angels, the Magi and the shepherds. All creation rejoices at the mystery of this historic birth. We see the Angels conversing with the shepherds, the Magi bearing their gifts, the star leading all to the feast. These are all images from the gospels depicting the common joy of creation (including the animals) at the arrival of the Messiah.

Lastly, perhaps the most prominent figure in the icon is that of Panagia, who depicted in flesh the undepictable Word of the Father (see kontakio hymn of Sunday of Orthodoxy). It is by her submission to the will of God that God became man bringing about the salvation of all mankind. Her humility is depicted even in this moment of indescribable glory.

Thus, the icon of the nativity draws us into the feast to live it presently, joyfully and in awe of God's great condescension.





# The struggle of JACOB

The relationship between God and humanity is complex and multifaceted, recounted in many ways for centuries. In the Old Testament, we see people struggling to understand God's ways but also struggling to come to terms with each other. One such example is the struggle of Jacob.

When his mother Rebecca was pregnant with twins, the two struggled with each other in her womb, and it was revealed that she would bear two nations, and "the older shall serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23). Esau was the first-born, but Jacob (literally, supplanter) emerged, holding onto Esau's heel. The two grew up to be quite different, but somehow Jacob was more scheming and managed to steal his brother's birthright and blessing by deceiving his father Isaac. This made Esau want to kill Jacob, but he was waiting till after their father's burial.

To avoid Esau's revenge, Jacob was sent away where he stayed for about twenty years. He married Rachel and Leah, had children and acquired a large amount of livestock. He then decided to return to the land of Canaan, but was afraid of the encounter with his brother. He sent messengers ahead to announce his return, but they came back with the news that Esau was coming out to meet him with 400 men.

*Struggle without giving up, not so that we can overcome God, but so that we can receive Him. When we receive God, then we have everything, and we find peace with all those around us.*

Alarmed by this, Jacob turned to God in prayer to deliver him. He devised a plan to soften his brother's heart before meeting him face to face. Arranging his livestock into droves of goats, rams, camels, cows, bulls and others, each separated by some distance, he then sent them all out in the direction of his brother. As each



drove arrived, his men told Esau, "these are your servant Jacob's and he is also following behind"

That night, Jacob rose early and sent his family and the remainder of his belongings over the river Jabbok, and he remained alone. Then, an Angel appeared and wrestled with Jacob. The two struggled until daybreak but the Angel could not prevail over him. The Angel then touched Jacob's hip to dislocate it, but Jacob still refused to let go until the Angel blessed him. So the angel blessed him there, giving him the new name, Israel (literally, to struggle with God, but also, a man seeing God, and, a prince ruling with God), because he struggled with God and man and prevailed (Genesis 32:28). Eventually Jacob and Esau were reconciled, they embraced and wept together.

This passage teaches us that we must strongly persist with our faith and trust in God, so that we may receive His blessing. We need to separate ourselves from all our belongings, and even those close to us, and remain alone with God. Jacob demanded that the Angel bless him. We too must struggle without giving up, not so that we can overcome God, but so that we can receive Him. When we receive God, then we have everything, and we find peace with all those around us.





# Κύριε ἐλέησον

## Lord Have Mercy



This phrase and all that it signifies, is an essential, ever-present aspect of the life of Orthodox Christians. We encounter it scripturally in many instances in the Old Testament (e.g. Psalms, Isaiah and elsewhere) as well as in the Gospels, where we encounter people in need, directly addressing

Christ with the phrase, "Lord, have mercy."

Examples of this are the two blind men shouting out to Jesus in Matthew 20:32, and the father of the demon-possessed child of Matthew 17:15.

Furthermore, we have evidence of its liturgical use in the Apostolic Constitutions, an early Christian compilation of instructions for church administration and worship, specifically in the section regarding the Divine Liturgy. For example, regarding the catechumens: "You catechumens, pray, and let all the faithful pray for them in their mind, saying: **Lord, have mercy upon them**".

Then further on, in reference to prayers for the bishop – "But at the naming of every bishop by the deacon, as we said before, let the people say, Lord, have mercy upon him; and let the children say it first" – and for the baptised, – "Let us all still earnestly say on their account: **Lord, have mercy upon them**" – and for families, "Let us pray for those that are in marriage and in child-bearing, that the **Lord may have mercy upon them all**".

There is no prayer or service of the daily worship of the Orthodox Church where this short phrase is not used.

St Romanos the Melodist poetically explains the reason for asking God for mercy in the refrain of his Kontakion on the Washing of the Feet (Holy Thursday):

"Be merciful, be merciful, be merciful to us, you who put up with everyone and awaits all people"

What does God, who is All-Powerful and Impassible, put up with? What does he bear or tolerate?

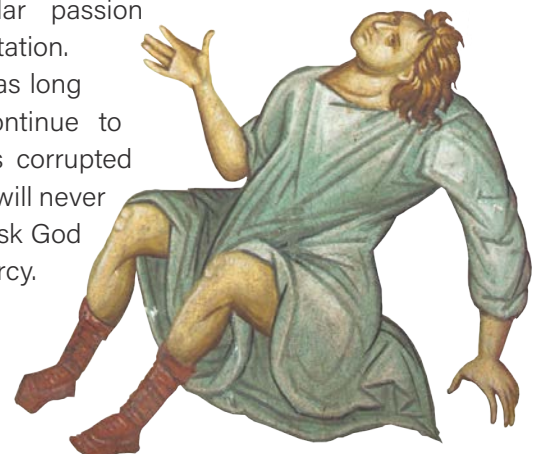
Within this refrain, we see that we cannot offer anything new to God that He has not already created.

Our very being, our talents, our gifts, the material and spiritual world are all the works of His hands. The only things that we are solely responsible for, for which God bears no part in at all, but must put up with all the same out of respect for our free will, are our own sins.

It is then that we realise, and this is reinforced by our prayers and Church services on a continuous basis, that, just like the loving father of the parable of the Prodigal Son, God awaits our return from the land of sin. He awaits our repentance. He expects our return. We repent for our sins and have hope that His mercy will allow us back into His embrace. It is true that in this world, this return to the Father is not always a final action, a single movement never to be repeated.

Many spend their lives fighting a particular passion or temptation. However, as long as we continue to live in this corrupted world, we will never cease to ask God for His mercy.

*Lord have mercy.*





## Book Review

# The Life of Saint Anthony

by St Athanasius

*"Proof of his virtue and that his soul was loved by God is found in the fact that he is famous everywhere and is marvelled at by everyone and is dearly missed by people who never saw him... For how is it that he was heard of, though concealed and sitting in a mountain, in Spain and Gaul, and in Rome and Africa, unless it was the God who everywhere makes his men known who also promised this to Anthony in the beginning? For even though they themselves act in secret, and may want to be forgotten, nevertheless the Lord shows them like lamps to everyone."*

These words were written in the years directly following the death of one of history's most famous monastics. The *Life of St Anthony* gained a remarkably ubiquitous popularity in the early Christian world. Beyond an exclusively monastic audience, the work was read and appreciated by everyone from the Emperors in Constantinople to the Hellenistic philosophers of Athens and Alexandria. St Athanasius the Great of Alexandria, a distinguished church father, who solidified his own place among the Church's greatest saints in his writings and battles against Arianism, was a close companion

of St Anthony and authored the text shortly after the Saint's passing in 356 AD.

The work was penned as a response to the eager inquiries of a group of monastics seeking information on the life of the great ascetic. St Anthony retreated as a young man to the Egyptian desert, living a long life of asceticism and holiness that culminated in the flocking of thousands to the desert, who were all inspired to search for this same angelic life. Whilst monasticism had a modest presence in Egypt already, St Anthony is rightly considered the founder of monasticism in the Egyptian desert.

St Athanasius' vivid descriptions of the sufferings endured by St Anthony gained such renown that one is as likely to encounter depictions of the Saint and his trials in Orthodox monasteries as in art galleries. These trials and temptations, as recorded by St Athanasius, as well as the Saint's miraculously ascetic feats, form a significant portion of the work. Despite countless demonic obstacles thrown in his way, St Anthony overcomes them all, repeating one message: the devil is powerless in the shadow of the cross. He who bears his cross and fears the Lord, has nothing else to fear.

St Athanasius expresses regret that his exposition contains only a small amount of the vast number of miracles performed by the holy ascetic. Apart from recalling St Anthony's myriad of miracles, the work is full of longer sections in which St Athanasius recounts the Saint's teachings, the many visions he had, and the saintly manner of his death. This remarkably approachable work has stood the test of centuries, earning its place as a seminal writing of the Church. It is a true classic.

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# OUR CREED

## *I acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins*

Following the description of the Church in our Creed, Article 10 fittingly leads the faithful to "acknowledge one baptism", since this particular Mystery establishes the way of entry into the Church for each person. To be baptised is a confession of the Person of Christ, His salvific work and of the Holy Trinity.

Before His Ascension, Christ commissioned the Apostles, *"Go... make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you"* (Matt 28:19-20). Baptism marks the incorporation of a new member into the Body of Christ. It is the initiation into a life-long journey towards the heavenly kingdom; a journey imbued with the individual's deep longing to "put on Christ" (Gal 3:27), to participate in His life and become a son of God by adoption (see Gal 4:4-7).

St Basil the Great in his "Exhortation to Baptism" states, *"Baptism is the ransom of captives, the forgiveness of debts, the death of sin, the regeneration of the soul, the robe of light, the seal which cannot be broken. It is the chariot to heaven, the means to attain the kingdom, the gift of adoption."* Without Baptism, our experience of God remains limited. We need to be baptised "for the forgiveness of sins"; to be cleansed, enlightened and transformed by the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Under the Old Covenant, St John the Baptist proclaimed to the people, *"I indeed baptise you with*

*water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I... He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire"* (Matt 3:11). John's baptism could not grant remission of sins, but served as an important preparation for the people to repent in order to receive Christ and His teachings. This greatest of the Old Testament Prophets recognised his own need for baptism under Christ, telling Him *"I need to be baptised by You, and are You coming to me?"* (Matt 3:14).

Though without sin, Christ undertook John's baptism, revealing the importance of this Mystery and our need for it as descendants of Adam subject to the influence of the "old man" (see Eph 4:22). He also transformed the Mystery into one of Rebirth, Illumination and Sanctification. Following Christ's saving work and Pentecost, Baptism became the means by which we not only receive forgiveness of sins, but also the gifts and strength of the Holy Spirit, enabling us to be joined to Christ and become heirs of His eternal kingdom. As St Basil states: *"John's baptism made a break from sin; Jesus' baptism is union with God."*

Speaking to Nicodemus, Christ declared, *"Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God"* (John 3:5). Through Baptism we acquire the means of communing with Christ (especially in the Holy Eucharist), and through the Mystery of Chrismation (which immediately follows Baptism in the Orthodox Church) we acquire "the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit" (see 2

Cor 1:21-22). Through Baptism, the "image" of God is restored in us (having previously been marred by the ancestral sin) and through Chrismation, we are granted the possibility to achieve the "likeness" of God.

Orthodox Baptism is participation in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, through the triple immersion and rising from the sanctified water. It is the foundational Mystery, opening the door to our participation in all the Mysteries of the Church. It offers spiritual healing and regeneration, which can only be fully realised through our purposeful struggle to die to sin and be joined to Christ at every moment.

In Chapter 6 of Romans, Apostle Paul speaks extensively on Baptism - *"Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life"* (Rom 6:4).

**What does it mean to "walk in newness of life"?**

In the words of St Basil, *"...discipline of the eyes; government over the tongue; proper service of the body; humility of mind; pure thinking; turning away from anger; going beyond that which is expected of you; not taking others to court over what they have stolen; responding to hatred with love; enduring persecution; and when insulted, appealing to harmony. Be dead to sin. Be crucified with Christ, your whole heart in love with the Lord"*.





Ε προηγούμενο άρθρο μας αναφέραμε πως υπήρχε κάποια ιεραρχία στα βιβλία της TANAX – Παλαιάς Διαθήκης για τους Ιουδαίους – η Τωρά – Νόμος ήταν αναμφισβήτητη σε κύρος, τα Νεβείμ – Προφήτες τα αποδέχονταν οι Γραμματείς και Φαρισαίοι αλλά όχι οι Σαδδουκαίοι (υπηρέτες του Ναού του Σολομώντος) ενώ τα Κετουβείμ – Αγιόγραφα είχαν λιγότερη αποδοχή. Το 90 μ.Χ., πήρε μέρος η ραββινική σύνοδος της Ιάμνειας στην Παλαιστίνη που οριστικοποίησε τον κανόνα της TANAX. Αυτήν αποδέχτηκαν χωρίς επιφυλάξεις οι πρώτοι Χριστιανοί, χρησιμοποιώντας μάλιστα το κείμενο της μεταφράσεως των Εβδομήκοντα (Ο΄). Αυτή η Παλαιά Διαθήκη ήταν η μόνη διαθέσιμη Βίβλος των πρώτων Χριστιανικών δεκαετιών.

Η διαμόρφωση του κανόνα της Καινής Διαθήκης στη σημερινή της μορφή είναι πολύπλοκη και σε κάποιο βαθμό ασαφής. Ο βίος και η διδασκαλία του Κυρίου Ιησού διαδίδονταν προφορικά. Τα πρώτα γραπτά κείμενα είναι οι μεμονωμένες επιστολές του Αποστόλου Παύλου σε διάφορες

Εκκλησίες και πρόσωπα σε διάστημα περίπου 15 ετών. Από την προς Κολασσαείς επιστολή (δ΄, 16), μαθαίνουμε πως έγινε ανταλλαγή αυτής της επιστολής με αυτή των Λαοδικαίων (η τελευταία δεν έχει σωθεί). Κατά τον ίδιο τρόπο μπορούμε να υποθέσουμε πως έγινε μια παρόμοια ανταλλαγή των επιστολών του Αποστόλου των εθνών σε γειτονικά μέρη, λ.χ. Φίλιπποι και Θεσσαλονίκη στη Μακεδονία, Γαλατία, Έφεσος και Κολοσσαί στη Μικρά Ασία. Το πότε ακριβώς οι επιστολές του Παύλου συγκεντρώθηκαν σε ένα σύνολο είναι άγνωστο, αλλά το γεγονός ότι ο Κλήμης Ρώμης γύρω στο 95 μ.Χ. φαίνεται να αντλεί από μια συλλογή, η οποία περιείχε σίγουρα τις επιστολές προς τους Θεσσαλονικείς, τους Ρωμαίους, τους Γαλάτες, τους Εφεσίους και τους Φιλιππησίους, μας υποχρεώνει να υποθέσουμε ότι ήδη στα τέλη του Α΄ μ.Χ. αιώνα μια ή περισσότερες (μη πλήρεις) συλλογές επιστολών του Παύλου ήταν ευρέως γνωστές.

Είναι ακόμη δυσκολότερο να καθορίσουμε το πότε ακριβώς τα τέσσερα ευαγγέλια αποτέλεσαν το σύνολο που έχουμε στα χέρια μας σήμερα. Τα αρχαιότερα σωζόμενα χειρόγραφα που περιέχουν και τα τέσσερα ευαγγέλια μαζί χρονολογούνται συνήθως γύρω στο 150 μ.Χ. Υπάρχουν ενδείξεις ότι το καθένα από τα τέσσερα ευαγγέλια κυκλοφορούσε προηγουμένως ανεξάρτητα. Για παράδειγμα στις επιστολές του Παύλου οι περισσότερες παραπομπές σε ευαγγελικά χωρία σχετίζονται με το Κατά Λουκάν, γεγονός που υπονοεί ότι μεταξύ των παύλειων Εκκλησιών κυκλοφορούσε κατά πρώτο λόγο αυτό το ευαγγέλιο. Από εδώ μπορεί να συνάγει κανείς ότι και τα υπόλοιπα ευαγγέλια συνδέονταν προπάντων με

συγκεκριμένες τοπικές Εκκλησίες.

Γύρω στα μέσα του Β΄ αιώνα μ.Χ. το μεγαλύτερο μέρος των επιστολών του Παύλου και τα τέσσερα ευαγγέλια κυκλοφορούσαν και ήταν αποδεκτά σε ευρύ πλαίσιο. Το στοιχείο που μας επιβεβαιώνει με καθοριστικό τρόπο αυτήν την υπόθεση προέρχεται από τον αιρετικό Μαρκίωνα. Ο Μαρκίων ήρθε στη Ρώμη γύρω στα 140 μ.Χ. και μαθήτευσε δίπλα στο γνωστικό διδάσκαλο Κέρδωνα, ο οποίος πίστευε ότι ο Θεός της Παλαιάς Διαθήκης δεν ήταν ο Θεός που κήρυξαν οι Απόστολοι. Ο Μαρκίων ανέπτυξε αυτήν την ιδέα καταλήγοντας στο συμπέρασμα ότι αφού ο Θεός της Παλαιάς Διαθήκης αγαπούσε μόνο τους Ιουδαίους, ενώ ο Θεός των Αποστόλων όλους τους ανθρώπους, τότε κάθε γραπτή αναφορά στους Ιουδαίους ως αγαπημένου λαού του Θεού έπρεπε να θεωρηθεί ως νόθα. Έτσι ανέπτυξε τον πρώτο ίσως σωζόμενο κανόνα ιερών γραφών, ο οποίος δεν περιείχε όμως καθόλου την Παλαιά Διαθήκη, ούτε τα ευαγγέλια του Μάρκου, του Ματθαίου και την Προς Εβραίους επιστολή του Παύλου. Αποδεχόταν κυρίως το μεγαλύτερο μέρος του Κατά Λουκάν και δέκα από τις επιστολές του Παύλου.

Σε κάθε περίπτωση η προσπάθεια του Μαρκίωνα έκανε την καθαυτό Εκκλησία να κατανοήσει πόσο σημαντικό ήταν να καταρτιστεί ένας κανόνας κειμένων που θα είχε ευρύτερο κύρος και δε θα επηρεαζόταν από προσωπικές επιλογές. Γενικά ο Γνωστικισμός και οι αιρέσεις της εποχής, οι οποίες διέθεταν τις δικές τους πράξεις, ευαγγέλια και αποκαλύψεις, ανάγκασαν την Εκκλησία να διερευνήσει και να καθορίσει όλο και πιο αυστηρά το ποια γραπτά κείμενα έπρεπε να θεωρούνται αυθεντικές πηγές του θείου λόγου.



Οι αρχές που χρησιμοποίησε η Εκκλησία για αυτόν τον καθορισμό φαίνεται ότι ήταν βασικά τρεις:

- 1) Τα κείμενα έπρεπε να είναι αληθώς αποστολικά, δηλαδή γραμμένα από κάποιον Απόστολο ή έναν στενό μαθητή αποστόλου.
- 2) Κάθε γραπτό, για να συμπεριληφθεί στον κανόνα, θα έπρεπε να μην αντιτίθεται στις αποστολικές διδαχές.
- 3) Τέλος, μια τρίτη βασική αρχή φαίνεται ότι ήταν το να χρησιμοποιείται κάποιο κείμενο στην τακτική λατρεία μιας μεγάλης και αναγνωρισμένης Εκκλησίας.

Αν οι Γνωστικοί και ο Μαρκίων «βοήθησαν» την Εκκλησία να δημιουργήσει το δικό της κανόνα, μια άλλη αίρεση, οι Μοντανιστές, την ώθησαν, όπως φαίνεται, να τον κλείσει οριστικά. Οι Μοντανιστές εμφανίστηκαν γύρω στο 170 μ.Χ. και ένας από τους βασικούς τους ισχυρισμούς ήταν ότι ο Θεός εξακολουθούσε να τους εμπνέει προφητείες και χρησμούς, τους οποίους κατέγραφαν ως ιερούς. Η απόρριψη αυτών των νέων προφητειών και αποκαλύψεων σηματοδότησε το πρώτο βήμα για το κλείσιμο του κανόνα από την Εκκλησία: στο εξής δεν γίνονταν δεκτά προφητικά ή αποκαλυπτικά κείμενα που ήταν προϊόν της σύγχρονης εποχής και όχι της αποστολικής περιόδου.

Προς τα τέλη του Β' αιώνα ο Κλήμης ο Αλεξανδρεύς, αν και χρησιμοποιεί ένα πλήθος πηγών (όπως το Ευαγγέλιο των Εβραίων και το Ευαγγέλιο των Αιγυπτίων), έχει ως βασικό κορμό τού κανόνα τα τέσσερα ευαγγέλια, δεκατέσσερις επιστολές του Παύλου, τις Πράξεις, την Α' Πέτρου, Α' Ιωάννου και την Αποκάλυψη, ενώ ο Τερτυλλιανός παραθέτει χωρία από όλα τα σημερινά κανονικά βιβλία, εκτός από τη Β' Πέτρου, την

επιστολή του Ιακώβου και τις Β' και Γ' Ιωάννου.

Στα τέλη, λοιπόν, του Β' αιώνα μ.Χ. το μεγαλύτερο μέρος των κειμένων που γίνονται και σήμερα δεκτά ως ο κανόνας της Καινής Διαθήκης ήταν ήδη ευρέως αναγνωρισμένα. Μάλιστα, η Καινή Διαθήκη θεωρείται πλέον ανώτερη από την Παλαιά, αφού αποτελεί το πρότυπο για την ερμηνεία της παλαιότερης Βίβλου. Την πλήρη αναγνώρισή τους από όλους περίμεναν η Προς Εβραίους επιστολή του Παύλου, η επιστολή του Ιακώβου, η Β' Πέτρου και η Β' και Γ' Ιωάννου.

Η ίδια σχεδόν κατάσταση πραγμάτων υπάρχει και έναν αιώνα αργότερα (αρχές Δ' αιώνα) στον Ευσέβιο Καισαρείας. Ο Ευσέβιος γύρω στα 325 καταγράφει τις απόψεις της εποχής του περί αυθεντικότητας των κειμένων της Καινής Διαθήκης, χρησιμοποιώντας τη μαρτυρία και των άλλων Εκκλησιών και ομαδοποιώντας τα κείμενα σε ομολογούμενα, αντιλεγόμενα (αμφισβητούμενα) και νόθα (αιρετικά). Στα ομολογούμενα, δηλαδή αυτά που τα δέχονταν όλες οι Εκκλησίες ανεξαιρέτως, ανήκουν τα τέσσερα ευαγγέλια, οι Πράξεις, οι επιστολές του Παύλου –μεταξύ τους και η Προς Εβραίους- η Α' Ιωάννου, η Α' Πέτρου και ίσως η Αποκάλυψη του Ιωάννη, για την οποία σημειώνεται ότι ορισμένοι δεν την δέχονται. Η διστακτικότητα του Ευσέβιου απέναντι στην Αποκάλυψη οφειλόταν προφανώς στη χρήση του έργου από τους Μοντανιστές και άλλους αιρετικούς. Την ίδια διστακτικότητα βρίσκουμε γύρω στα 350 στον Κύριλλο Αλεξανδρείας, ενώ σήμερα ως γνωστόν η Αποκάλυψη είναι το μόνο βιβλίο της Καινής Διαθήκης που δε διαβάζεται στην εκκλησία. Πάντως, μετά τα μέσα του Δ' αιώνα κανένας εντός της Εκκλησίας

δεν αμφισβήτησε σοβαρά την αυθεντικότητά της.

Τα αμφισβητούμενα βιβλία είναι κατά τον Ευσέβιο η επιστολή του Ιακώβου, του Ιούδα, η Β' Πέτρου και η Β' και Γ' Ιωάννου. Στα αιρετικά βιβλία ανήκουν οι Πράξεις Παύλου, ο Ποιμήν του Ερμά, η Αποκάλυψη Πέτρου, η Επιστολή του Βαρνάβα, οι Διδαχές των Αποστόλων και το Ευαγγέλιο των Εβραίων, το Κατά Θωμάν, το Ευαγγέλιο του Ματθία, οι Πράξεις Ανδρέα, οι Πράξεις Ιωάννου κ.α.

Στα 363 μ.Χ. η σύνοδος της Λαοδικείας σημείωνε ως κανονικά 26 από τα 27 βιβλία της Καινής Διαθήκης όπως τη γνωρίζουμε, παραλείποντας την Αποκάλυψη. Στα 367 μ.Χ. ο Άγιος Αθανάσιος δίνει το δικό του κατάλογο κανονικών βιβλίων στη ΛΘ' εορταστική επιστολή του, η οποία απευθυνόταν στις εκκλησίες και τα μοναστήρια της Αιγύπτου. Ο κατάλογος αυτός περιλαμβάνει όλα τα βιβλία της Καινής Διαθήκης που δέχεται η Εκκλησία ακόμη και σήμερα. Τριάντα χρόνια μετά τον Άγιο Αθανάσιο, το 397 μ.Χ., η σύνοδος της Καρχηδόνας, στην οποία ήταν παρών και ο ιερός Αυγουστίνος, επιβεβαίωσε επίσημα τον κανόνα της Καινής Διαθήκης που γνωρίζουμε σήμερα.

Ο ισχύων λοιπόν κανόνας της Καινής Διαθήκης περιλαμβάνει τα 4 Ευαγγέλια (Ματθαίου, Μάρκου, Λουκά και Ιωάννου), τις Πράξεις των Αποστόλων, τις 14 Επιστολές του Αποστόλου Παύλου (προς Ρωμαίους, Κορινθίους Α' και Β', Γαλάτας, Εφεσίους, Φιλιπησίους, Κολασσαείς, Θεσσαλονικείς Α' και Β', Τιμόθεον Α' και Β', Τίτον, Φιλήμονα, Εβραίους), τις 7 Καθολικές Επιστολές (Ιακώβου, Πέτρου Α' και Β', Ιωάννου Α', Β' και Γ', Ιούδα) καθώς και η Αποκάλυψις Ιωάννου.



# News & Events



## Ordination of Prof. Socrates Dokos to the Diaconate

On the feast day of the Holy Apostle Andrew, Fr Dimitri Karakiozis was ordained a Priest and Professor Socrates Dokos was ordained a Deacon of our Holy Archdiocese by His Eminence Archbishop Makarios of Australia at the Cathedral of the Annunciation of Our Lady, in Redfern.

As His Eminence Archbishop Makarios mentioned, Fr Socrates' "whole life has been ecclesiastical." From a young age, he has long served the Orthodox Church in Australia in many different facets. As an active member of the Greek Orthodox Christian Society, he led one of its fellowship groups for several years and contributed to the work of many of its other activities such as the Sunday Schools, Bible study groups, camp retreats, Lychnos periodical, and more. In addition, he has studied at St Andrew's Theological College, served as a chanter and has been a part of the chaplaincy of the university fellowships.

It is a joyous and blessed occasion when anyone is deemed worthy to take on the mantle of the priesthood, let alone someone who has already shown a tireless commitment to serving others. We pray that in responding to the calling to join the ranks of the clergy, Fr Socrates is forever given the strength by Christ to minister to His flock and may always be found worthy of the task set before him. Αἰς ὅς!



## End of Year Sunday School Concerts

With the blessing of His Eminence Archbishop Makarios of Australia, and under the direction of the Greek Orthodox Christian Society, the Sunday Schools of NSW held their end of year concerts for 2023.

The concerts provided an opportunity for the children to present a range of plays, poems and songs with various spiritual messages, encapsulating what they had learned from Sunday School during the year.

We would like to express our gratitude to the parish priests, the parents and children for their support and commitment to our Sunday Schools this year and we pray that our loving Lord blesses this work in 2024.



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(02) 9787 9779



editor@lychnos.org



lychnos.org



@orthodoxjourneyaustralia



@orthodoxjourney\_australia