

A Guide To the Four Gospels

**By Archbishop Averky (Tauchev 1906-1976).
Translated by Seraphim Larin / Tatiana Pavlova.**

Content:

A Guide.....	1
To the Four Gospels.....	1
By Archbishop Averky (Tauchev 1906-1976).....	1
Translated by Seraphim Larin / Tatiana Pavlova.....	1
The Coming into the World of.....	10
Our Lord Jesus Christ.....	10
The Gospels' preface: Their authenticity and purpose.....	10
The Pre-Eternal Birth and the Incarnation of the Son of God.....	10
The Observations by Archpriest Michael Pomazansky.....	12
(An addition to Abp. Averky's original text).....	12
The conception of Christ's Forerunner, John.....	14
The Annunciation to the Holy Virgin Mary.....	15
The meeting of the Holy Virgin Mary with Elizabeth.....	16
The Birth of Saint John the Baptist.....	16
The Earthly Lineage of the Lord Jesus Christ.....	17
The Nativity of Christ.....	18
The Revelation of the mystery of the incarnation to the betrothed Joseph.....	18
The Circumstances and Time of the Nativity of Christ.....	19
The Circumcision and Meeting of the Lord.....	22
The Adoration of the Magi.....	24
The Flight into Egypt and the Slaying of the Infants.....	25
Jesus Christ's adolescence.....	26
The Savior's Social Service.....	27
John the Baptist and his testimony about our Lord Jesus Christ.....	27
The Baptism of the Lord Jesus Christ.....	30
The Forty-Day Fast and Tempting by the Devil.....	30
The First Disciples of Christ.....	32
The First Miracle at the Wedding at Cana of Galilee.....	34
The First Pascha.....	35
Driving the sellers out of the Temple.....	35
The Lord Jesus Christ's dialogue with Nicodemus.....	37
The Last Testimony of John the Baptist.....	39
The Imprisonment of Saint John.....	41
The Talk with a Samaritan woman.....	41
The Arrival to Galilee and the Beginning of the Sermon.....	44
The Healing of the Nobleman's Son.....	44
The Calling of the Fisherman.....	45
Healing in Capernaum.....	45
The Healing of Peter's Mother-in-Law.....	46
The Sermon in Galilee.....	46
The Sermon in the Nazareth Synagogue.....	47
The Healing of the Leper.....	48
The Healing of a Paralytic in Capernaum.....	48
The Calling of Matthew.....	49
The Second Pascha.....	51
The Healing of a Paralytic at the Sheep Gate Pool.....	51
On the Equality of the Father and the Son.....	52
The Plucking of Cornheads on Saturday.....	53

The Healing of the Man with a Withered Hand.....	54
The Lord Avoids Fame.	54
Choosing the Disciples.	54
The Sermon on the Mount.	55
The Beatitudes.	55
The Light of the World.	56
Two Measures of Righteousness.	57
The Main Task is to Please God.	59
The Prayer “Our Father”.....	60
The Eternal Treasure.....	61
Do Not Judge.	62
Steadfastness in Prayer.	62
The Narrow Path.	63
About the False Prophets.	63
The Healing of the Leper.	65
The Healing of the Capernaum Centurion’s Servant.	65
The Resurrection of the Nain Widow’s Son.	66
The Messengers of John the Baptist.	66
Exposing the Cities of Galilee.	67
Forgiving the Sinful Woman in the House of Simon the Pharisee.	68
The Healing of the Possessed and the Exposure of the Pharisees.	69
The Lord’s Answer to Those, Waiting for the Signs from Him.	70
A Woman Glorifies the Mother of Jesus.	70
The Lord Jesus Christ’s Teaching in Parables.	71
The Parable about the Sower.	72
The Parable about the Tares.....	73
The Parable about the Invisibly Growing Seed.	73
The Parable about the Mustard Seed.	73
The Parable about the Leaven.....	74
The Parable about the Treasure Hidden in the Field.....	74
The Parable about the Pearl.	74
The Parable about the Dragnet, Cast into the Sea.....	74
About the Owner, Preserving the New and the Old.....	75
The Lord’s Response to Those Hesitating to Follow Him.	75
Calming the Storm.	76
The Casting Out of a Legion of Demons.	76
The Healing of a Woman with a Flow of Blood and the Resurrection of Jairus’s Daughter. .	77
The Healing of Two Blind Men.....	78
The Second Visit to Nazareth.	78
The Plentiful Harvest, but Few Laborers.	79
Christ Sends His Apostles on their Mission.	79
The Beheading of John the Forerunner.....	82
The Miraculous Feeding of Five Thousand People.	83
The Lord’s Walk on the Water.	84
The Talk about the Heavenly Bread.	84
The Third Pascha.....	88
Exposing the Pharisees’ Traditions.....	88
The Healing of a Canaanite Woman’s daughter.	89
The Healing of the Speech-Impeded Deaf Person.	90
The Miraculous Feeding of Four Thousand People.....	90
The Exposure of the Pharisees Seeking the Signs.	90
The Healing of a Blind Person in Bethsaida.....	91

Peter’s Confession: Jesus is Christ, the Son of God.	91
The Lord Foretells His Death and Resurrection.	93
The Transfiguration of the Lord.	94
The Healing of the Possessed Adolescent.	96
The Miraculous Payment of the Temple Tax.	97
The Talk about Who is the Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.	97
Working Wonders in Christ’s Name.	98
The Teaching about the Struggle with Temptations.	98
The Parable about the Lost Sheep.	99
The Parable about the Unmerciful Debtor.	100
Christ Goes to the Feast of Jerusalem.	101
The Samaritans do not Accept Christ.	102
Sending Seventy Disciples to Preach.	102
Jesus at the Feast of the Tabernacles.	103
The Judgment of the Adulteress.	105
The Conversation with the Jews in the Temple.	106
The Healing of the Born Blind Man.	109
The Sermon about the Good Shepherd.	111
The Sermon at the Feast of the Dedication.	112
The Return of the 70 Disciples.	112
The Parable about the Good Samaritan.	113
The Lord Jesus Christ in the House of Martha and Mary.	114
The Parable about the Persistent Appeal.	114
The Exposure of the Scribes and Pharisees.	115
The Parable about the Reckless Rich Man.	115
The Parable about the Servants, Awaiting the Return of their Master.	116
The Parable about the Wise House-Steward.	116
About the Divisions among the People.	116
The Fall of the Siloam Tower.	117
The Parable about the Fruitless Fig Tree.	117
The Healing of the Deformed Woman.	118
The Narrow Path towards the Heavenly Kingdom.	118
Herod’s Threats.	119
The Healing of the Man with Dropsy.	119
The Parable about Those that Love to be First.	120
The Parable about the Invitees to the Supper.	120
About the True Followers of Christ.	121
The Parable about the Prodigal Son.	121
The Parable about the Unjust House-Steward.	122
The Parable about the Rich Man and Lazarus.	123
The Teaching on the Sanctity of Marriage and on Celibacy.	124
About the Power of Faith.	125
The Cleansing of ten Lepers.	126
Christ’s Second Coming.	127
The Parable about the Unrighteous Judge.	127
The Parable about the Publican and the Pharisee.	127
The Blessing of the Children.	128
The Rich Young Man.	128
The Apostles will Inherit Eternal Life.	129
The Parable about the Workers that Received Equal Payment.	129
About the Forthcoming Sufferings of Christ.	130
The Healing of the Jericho Blind.	131

The Visit of Zacchaeus.	132
The Parable about the Talents.	132
The Resurrection of Lazarus.	133
The Sanhedrin’s Decision to Kill Jesus Christ.	136
The Supper at Lazarus’s House.	136
The Last Days of the Lord’s Terrestrial Life.	137
The Lord’s Entry into Jerusalem.	137
Driving the Dealers Out from the Temple.	139
Great Monday.	140
The Curse of the Fruitless Fig Tree.	140
The Hellenes’ Desire to See Jesus Christ.	140
Great Tuesday.	141
The Withered Fig Tree.	142
The Conversation with the Elders.	142
The Parable about the Two Sons.	142
The Parable about the Wicked Vinedressers.	143
The Parable about the Invited to a Wedding Banquet.	144
About Paying Taxes to Caesar.	145
The Shaming of the Sadducees.	145
About the Greatest Commandment.	146
The Exposure of the Scribes and Pharisees.	146
The Widow’s Mite.	148
About the Second Coming.	149
The Parable about the 10 Virgins.	152
About the Final Judgment.	152
Great Wednesday.	153
The High Priests’ Decision to Kill Christ.	153
Great Thursday.	156
The Mystical Supper.	156
The Washing of the Feet.	158
The Lord Announces of the Betrayer.	159
The Establishment of the Eucharist Mystery.	160
The Argument about the Superiority.	162
The Final Conversation.	162
The Continuation of the Farewell Conversation.	165
The Archpriest Prayer.	168
The Appeal about the Cup.	169
The Lord’s Arrest.	171
The Trial over the Lord, Held by the High Priests.	172
Peter’s Renouncement.	174
Great Friday.	175
The Sanhedrin’s Sentence.	175
The Death of Judas.	176
At the Trial of Pilate.	177
The Cruciferous Way to Golgotha.	183
The Crucifixion.	184
The Repentance of the Wise Robber.	186
The Mother of God at the Cross.	187
The Death of Christ.	187
The Burial of the Lord Jesus Christ.	190
The Resurrection.	191
The Arrival of the Women Myrrh-Bearers at the Tomb.	191

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene.....	193
The Bribing of the Guards.....	195
Lord’s Appearance to His Disciples on the Road to Emmaus.....	195
The Appearance to the Ten Disciples.....	197
Thomas’s Disbelief.....	198
The Appearance at the Sea of Tiberias.....	199
The Restoration of Apostle Peter.....	200
The Appearance in Galilee.....	202
The Ascension of the Lord.....	203
Addendum.....	204
The Selected Sermons of Christ.....	204
Christ’s Miracles.....	205
The Gospel’s Parables.....	205
The Index of Chapters and Verses.....	205
The Revelation of the mystery of the incarnation.....	206
The Circumstances and Time of the Nativity of Christ.....	206
The Circumcision and Meeting of the Lord.....	206
The Adoration of the Magi.....	206
The Flight into Egypt and the Slaying of the Infants.....	206
Jesus Christ’s adolescence.....	206
The Savior’s Social Service.....	206
John the Baptist and his testimony of our Lord Jesus Christ.....	206
The Baptism of the Lord Jesus Christ.....	206
The Forty-Day Fast and Tempting by the Devil.....	206
The First Disciples of Christ.....	206
The First Miracle at the Wedding at Cana of Galilee.....	206
The First Pascha.....	206
Driving the sellers out of the Temple.....	206
The Lord Jesus Christ’s dialogue with Nicodemus.....	206
The Last Testimony of John the Baptist.....	206
The Imprisonment of Saint John.....	206
The Talk with a Samaritan woman.....	206
The Arrival to Galilee and the Beginning of the Sermon.....	206
The Healing of the Nobleman’s Son.....	206
The Calling of the Fisherman.....	206
Healing of the Possessed in Capernaum.....	206
The Healing of Peter’s mother-in-law.....	206
The Sermon in Galilee.....	206
The Sermon in the Nazareth Synagogue.....	206
The Healing of the Leper.....	206
The Healing of a Paralytic in Capernaum.....	206
The Calling of Matthew.....	206
The Healing of a Paralytic at the Sheep Gate Pool.....	206
On the Equality of the Father and the Son.....	206
The Plucking of Cornheads on Saturday.....	206
The Healing of the Man with a Withered Hand.....	206
The Lord Avoids Fame.....	206
Choosing the Disciples.....	206
The Sermon on the Mount.....	206
The Beatitudes.....	206
The Light of the World.....	206
Two Measures of Righteousness.....	206

The Main Task is to Please God.	206
The Prayer “Our Father”.....	206
The Eternal Treasure.....	206
Do Not Judge.....	206
Steadfastness in prayer.....	206
The Narrow Path.....	206
About the False Prophets.....	206
The Healing of the Leper.....	206
The Healing of the Capernaum Centurion’s Servant.....	206
The Resurrection of the Nain Widow’s Son.....	206
The Messengers of John the Baptist.....	206
Exposing the Cities of Galilee.....	206
Forgiving the Sinful Woman in the House of Simon the Pharisee.....	206
The Healing of the Possessed and the Exposure of the Pharisees.....	206
The Lord’s Answer to Those Waiting for the Signs from Him.....	206
A Woman Glorifies the Mother of Jesus.....	206
The Parable about the Sower.....	206
The Parable about the Tares.....	206
The Parable about the Mustard Seed.....	207
The Parable about the Leaven.....	207
The Parable about the Treasure Hidden in the Field.....	207
The Parable about the Precious Pearl.....	207
The Parable about the Dragnet, Cast into the Sea.....	207
About the Owner, Preserving the New and the Old.....	207
The Lord’s Response to Those Hesitating to Follow Him.....	207
Calming the Storm.....	207
The Casting Out of a Legion of Demons.....	207
The Healing of a Woman with a Flow of Blood and the Resurrection of Jairus’s Daughter.....	207
The Healing of Two Blind Men.....	207
The Second Visit to Nazareth.....	207
The Plentiful Harvest, but Few Laborers.....	207
Christ Sends His Apostles on their Mission.....	207
The Beheading of John the Forerunner.....	207
The Miraculous Feeding of Five Thousand People.....	207
The Lord’s Walk on the Water.....	207
The Talk about the Heavenly Bread.....	207
Exposing the Pharisees’ Traditions.....	207
The Healing of a Canaanite Woman’s daughter.....	207
The Healing of the Speech-Impeded Deaf Person.....	207
The Miraculous Feeding of Four Thousand People.....	207
The Exposure of the Pharisees Seeking the Signs.....	207
The Healing of a Blind Person in Bethsaida.....	207
Peter’s Confession: Jesus is Christ, the Son of God.....	207
The Lord Foretells His Death and Resurrection.....	207
The Healing of the Possessed Adolescent.....	208
The Miraculous Payment of the Temple Tax.....	208
The Talk about Who is the Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.....	208
Working Wonders in Christ’s Name.....	208
The Teaching about the Struggle with Temptations.....	208
The Parable about the Lost Sheep.....	208
The Parable about the Unmerciful Debtor.....	208
Christ Goes to the Feast of Jerusalem.....	208

The Samaritans do not Accept Christ.	208
Sending Seventy Disciples to Preach.....	208
Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles.	208
The Judgment of the Adulteress.	208
The Conversation with the Jews in the Temple.	208
The Healing of the Born Blind Man.	208
The Sermon about the Good Shepherd.	208
The Sermon at the Feast of the Dedication.	208
The Return of the 70 Disciples.	208
The Parable about the Good Samaritan.	208
The Lord Jesus Christ in the House of Martha and Mary.....	208
The Parable about the Persistent Appeal.	208
The Exposure of the Scribes and Pharisees.	208
The Parable about the Reckless Rich Man.	208
The Parable about the Servants, Awaiting the Return of their Master.	208
The Parable about the Wise House-Steward.....	208
About the Divisions among the People.....	208
The Fall of the Siloam Tower.	208
The Parable about the Fruitless Fig Tree.	208
The Healing of the Deformed Woman.....	208
The Narrow Path towards the Heavenly Kingdom.	208
Herod's Threats.....	208
The Healing of the Man with Dropsy.	208
The Parable about those that Love to be First.....	208
The Parable about the Invitees to the Supper.....	208
About the True Followers of Christ.	208
The Parable about the Prodigal Son.....	208
The Parable about the Unjust House-Steward.	208
The Parable about the Rich Man and Lazarus.	208
The Teaching on the Sanctity of Marriage and on Celibacy.	208
About the Power of Faith.....	208
The Cleansing of ten Lepers.	208
Christ's Second Coming.	208
The Parable about the Unrighteous Judge.	208
The Parable about the Publican and the Pharisee.	208
The Blessing of the Children.	208
The Rich Young man.	208
The Apostles will Inherit Eternal Life.	208
The Parable about the Workers that Received Equal Payment.....	208
About the Forthcoming Sufferings of Christ.	208
The Healing of the Jericho Blind.	208
The Visit of Zacchaeus.	208
The Parable about the Talents.....	208
The Resurrection of Lazarus.....	208
The Sanhedrin's Decision to Kill Jesus Christ.	208
The Supper at Lazarus's House.	208
The Lord's Entry into Jerusalem.....	208
Driving the Dealers out from the Temple.	208
The Curse of the Fruitless Fig Tree.	208
The Hellenes' Desire to See Jesus Christ.	208
The Withered Fig Tree.....	208
The Conversation with the Elders.....	208

The Parable about the Two Sons.	208
The Parable about the Wicked Vinedressers.	208
The Parable about the Invited to a Wedding Banquet.	208
About Paying Taxes to Caesar.	208
The Shaming of the Sadducees.	208
About the Greatest Commandment.	208
The Exposure of the Scribes and Pharisees.	208
The Widow's Mite.	209
About the Second Coming.	209
The Parable about the 10 Virgins.	209
About the Final Judgment.	209
The High Priests' Decision to Kill Christ.	209
Great Thursday.	209
The Washing of the Feet.	209
The Lord Announces of the Betrayer.	209
The Establishment of the Eucharist Mystery.	209
The Argument about Superiority.	209
The Continuation of the Farewell Conversation.	209
The Archpriest Prayer.	209
The Appeal about the Cup.	209
The Lord's Arrest.	209
The Trial over the Lord, Held by High Priests.	209
Peter's Renouncement.	209
The Sanhedrin's Sentence.	209
The Death of Judas.	209
The Cruciferous Way to Golgotha.	209
The Crucifixion.	209
The Repentance of the Wise Robber.	209
The Mother of God at the Cross.	209
The Death of Christ.	209
The Burial of the Lord Jesus Christ.	209
The Resurrection.	209
The Arrival of the Women Myrrh-Bearers at the Tomb.	209
Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene.	209
The Bribing of the Guard.	209
Lord's Appearance to His Disciples on the Road to Emmaus.	209
The Appearance to the Ten Disciples.	209
Thomas's Disbelief.	209
The Appearance at the Sea of Tiberias.	209
The Restoration of the Apostle Peter.	209
The Appearance in Galilee.	209

The Coming into the World of Our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Gospels' preface: Their authenticity and purpose.

(Luke 1:1-4, John 20:31).

The preface of the four Gospels can be regarded to be the first four verses of the first chapter of Luke, in which the Apostle speaks of the careful study done for everything that he writes and describes the purpose of writing the Gospel: to know the firm basis of the Christian teachings. To this end, the Apostle John the Theologian adds in the 31st paragraph of the 20th chapter of his Gospel *“that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, you may have life in His name.”*

As can be seen from St. Luke's preface, he undertook the writing of his Gospel because by that time there had appeared fairly numerous similar works but lacking in authority and unsatisfactory in substance. He also regarded it as his responsibility (from his desire to reaffirm in the Faith one “sovereign Theophilus” and, at the same time, all Christians in general) to write an epistle on the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, carefully checking all the data from the words of “eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word.” Because he was, apparently, only one apostle of the seventy disciples of Christ and therefore could not be a witness to all events — such as the birth of John the Baptist, the Annunciation, the birth of Christ, and the meeting of Christ in the temple — he undoubtedly wrote a significant part of his Gospel from the words of eyewitnesses; that is, on the basis of tradition (here we can see the importance of tradition, which is rejected by Protestants and sectarians).

The foremost and most important eyewitness to the very early events of the Gospel's history was surely the Holy Virgin Mary. Saint Luke specifically notes twice that she kept the recollections of all these events, retaining them in her heart (Luke 2:19 and 2:51).

There can be no doubt that the pre-eminence of the Gospel of Luke over other writings that existed before his is found in that he wrote **only after a thorough examination** of facts and the strict sequence of events. This pre-eminence over other writings is shared by the other three Evangelists, as two of them — Matthew and John — were of Christ's original twelve disciples (they themselves were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word) while the third, Mark, wrote from the words of Christ's closest disciple and an assured eyewitness and close participant in the Gospel's events — the Apostle Peter.

The purpose given by St. John is seen particularly clearly in his Gospel, which is full of jubilant eyewitness of the Lord Jesus Christ's divinity. But naturally, the other three Evangelists also have the same goal.

The Pre-Eternal Birth and the Incarnation of the Son of God.

(John 1:1-14).

While the Evangelists Matthew and Luke write of the earthly birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, St. John begins his Gospel by expounding the teachings about **His pre-eternal birth** and His incarnation as the Only Son of God. The first three Evangelists begin their narrations with that event as a consequence of which the Kingdom of Heaven received its beginning in time and space, while Saint John, akin to an eagle, soars to the pre-eternal basis of this Kingdom, observing the eternal existence of Him Who only in *“these last days”* (Hebrews 1:1) became a human being.

The second person of the Holy Trinity — the Son of God — is named by John as **“the**

Word.” At this point, it is important to note and remember that the Greek word “logos,” unlike the corresponding word in Russian, doesn’t only mean the spoken word but also thought, reason, and wisdom expressed by word. Consequently, the naming of the Son of God as “the Word” means the same as His being named “Wisdom” (see Luke 11:49 and Matthew 23:34). The holy Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:24 calls Christ “*the Wisdom of God.*”

Undoubtedly, the teachings about “God’s wisdom” are expressed in the same sense in Acts (see especially the wonderful text of Proverbs 8:22-30). After this it’s strange to insist, as some people do, that St. John derived his teachings on the Logos as if from the philosopher Plato and his successors (such as Philo). St. John wrote about events that were known to him from the Holy Books of the Old Testament — and also about that which, as a beloved disciple, he learned from the Divine Teacher Himself, as well as what was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit.

“*In the beginning was the Word*” means that the Word is **co-eternal** with God. What’s more, St. John explains further that with respect to His existence, the Word does not separate from God, and consequently It is of one essence with God, and finally, he directly calls the Word God: “*and the Word was God.*” Here, the word “God” was applied in Greek without any article, giving rise to the assertion by the Arians and Origen that the Word is not the same God as God the Father. However, this is simply a misunderstanding. In reality, this hides a most profound conception of **the distinction** of the three countenances of the Holy Trinity. The use of an article in Greek indicates that the dialogue is about the same subject as that just spoken of. So if in saying “*the Word was God,*” the Apostle had used the same article and said “*o Theos*” in Greek, the result would have been the incorrect idea that the Word was the same as God the Father, Who had been referred to just before. Consequently, in speaking of the Word, the Evangelist calls Him simply “Theos” indicating by this His Divine quality, but also at the same time underlining that the Word has an independent hypostatic existence and is not identical to the hypostasis of God the Father.

As Blessed Theophylact notes, in revealing to us the teachings on the Son of God, St. John calls Him Word and not Son, “so that we, having heard of the Son, did not think in terms of passion and carnal birth. He called Him the Word, so that you would know that as the word is born from the mind without passion, so is He born from the Father without passion.”

The words “*all things were made through Him*” are not meant as though the Word was only an instrument in the creation of the world but that the world originated from the Primal Reason and Primal Source of all existence (including the Word Himself) — God the Father, **through the Son**, Who by Himself is already the source of everything that **began to exist** (*that was made*), only not for Himself and not for the other countenances of God.

“*In Him was life*” — here the meaning of the word life is not to be understood in the ordinary sense but as a **spiritual** life that induces intelligent creatures to strive toward the cause of their creation, toward God. This spiritual life is obtained through the path of communion and unification with the hypostatic Divine Word. Consequently, the Word is the source of genuine spiritual life for any intelligent being.

“*And the life was the light of men*” — has in mind that this spiritual life that emanates from the Divine Word enlightens a person with a full and complete guidance.

“*And the light shines in the darkness . . .*” The Word that presents light of genuine guidance does not cease to direct them amid sinful darkness, as the light is not absorbed by darkness: Those who persist in sin have preferred to remain in the darkness of spiritual blindness. However, “*the darkness did not comprehend it*” — did not restrict its activity and dissemination.

Then, in order to join the people who abode in sinful darkness with His Divine light, the Word undertook extraordinary measures: John the Baptist was sent, and, finally, the Word became flesh.

“*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John*” — “there was” as stated in

Greek is “egenetos” (“became”) and not “inos” as enunciated about the Word; that is, John “*came to being,*” was born at a point in time and did not exist eternally like the Word, Who Himself “*gives light to every man coming into the world.*”

The world did not recognize the Word, even though it was obliged to Him for its existence. “*He came to His own,*” i.e., to His chosen people of Israel, “*and His own did not receive Him*” — of course not everybody.

“*But as many as received Him*” with love and faith, “*He gave the right to become children of God.*” That is, He gave them the beginning of a new spiritual life, which, like a physical one, also begins through birth — although the birth is not from carnal passion but through a higher power, from God.

“*And the Word became flesh.*” Here the understanding of the word “flesh” does not mean the human body alone but the whole, complete person — in the same meaning as the word “flesh” is often applied in the Holy Gospels (e.g., Matthew 24:22). That is, the Word became a complete person, at the same time not ceasing to be God. “*And dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth.*” It must be understood that grace means God’s goodness, as the gifts of goodness from God, revealing the access to a new spiritual life for humanity, i.e., gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Word that dwells among us was also filled with the Truth — complete guidance in everything that concerns the spiritual word and spiritual life.

“*And we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father.*” The Apostles actually saw His glory in the Transfiguration, Resurrection, and Ascension to Heaven — glory in His Teachings, miracles, works of love, and voluntary self-abasement. He is — the “only Son of the Father,” for only He alone is the Son of God **in essence**, by His Divine nature. These words point to His immense superiority over God’s sons and children through grace, the faithful that are mentioned above.

The Observations by Archpriest Michael Pomazansky.

(An addition to Abp. Averky’s original text).

The attention of every Christian who is familiar with the Bible is drawn to the parallel between the first words at the beginning of the Old Testament Book of Genesis and those at the beginning of John’s Gospel. We too will pause on this parallel.

“**En archi**” — “In the beginning” — are the opening words of both Holy Writings. In Greek the word “archi” has three rudimentary meanings: (a) the beginning of an event or undertaking, in the ordinary and simple sense of the word; (b) command, rule, or authority; and (c) in a secular sense — ancient times, the past, long ago, and, in a spiritual sense — unconstrained by time, eternal.

In the original language of the book of the prophet Moses, the word “archi” is applied **in the usual** sense (as in “(a)” just above) — before all His actions beyond Himself, God created heaven and earth; i.e., before the created universe, there was only God, and nothing existed outside Him. The same phrase appears as the first phrase in John’s Gospel. However, the Holy Apostle elevates the meaning of the Greek Word “archi.” “*In the beginning was the Word*” — “Word,” as a personal Divine being, “*in the beginning*” — before any other type of being, and more than this — out of any time, in the limitless eternity. The same word appears once more in another part of the same Gospel, with the same meaning. When the Judeans asked Christ: “Who are You?” — Christ replied: “*From the beginning, as I have told you.*” Thus, the first books of the two Testaments begin with one and the same expressive word, but in the New Testament, it has a more elevated meaning than that in the Book of Genesis.

In the ensuing text of both books, especially in the first five verses of each one, we notice this internal association. Let it be unintentional on the part of the Evangelist — as it is not conveyed in a strict sequence but as a connection, which flows out by itself from the substance of the narration on the two topics. Here, **the majesty of these New Testament events** — with its comparison to the Old Testament — is clearly set out. For the sake of clarity, we

show the parallel by placing the Old Testament first and the Gospel second.

The Book of Genesis	The Gospel
1. "In the beginning God . . ." "And God said, Let there . . ."	1. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Here the mystery of monotheism is elevated in the revelation of the second hypostasis in God (the expression "was with God" is explained further on, in the 18th verse: "The only begotten Son Who is in the bosom of the Father").
2. "And the earth was without form and void . . ." (lifeless).	2. "All things were made through Him (the Word), and without Him nothing was made that was made." The verb "said" in "1" is made more precise as the words "said with the Word," the participation of the second Divine Hypostasis, Creator of the whole world, Fulfiller of the Father's will.
3. "And God said, Let there be light . . ." said about physical light.	3. "In Him (in the Word) was life" (as contrast).
4. "And darkness was upon the face of the deep . . ."	4. "And the life was the Light of men." The subject of the thought is elevated immeasurably, notwithstanding that it is denoted by one and the same word. About the Word, the Son of God: "And the Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it" (as contrast).
5. On the Holy Spirit: "And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters . . ."	5. The words of John the Baptist: "I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water." And John bore witness, saying, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him'" (verses 31 and 32, as comparison).
6. "And God said, Let us make man in Our image . . ." And God created man in His Own image . . ."	6. On the incarnation of the Word: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father" (verse 14, as comparison).
7. "And He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had made . . ." (2:2).	7. The coming of the Word to earth, the glory of the Savior: "Hereafter you shall see Heaven open, and the Angels of God Ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" (verse 51, as comparison).

This coincidence of thoughts and of verbal expressions between these two holy books of the Old and New Testaments, this light of the first book in the light of the Church's understanding of the Gospel — pertaining to the first book of the prophet Moses — is confirmed by the Apostle's words in the same first chapter of his Gospel: *"And of His fullness we have all re-*

ceived, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (verses 16 and 17).

Consequently, it is not necessary to seek the source for the name “Logos” — “Word,” which has entrenched itself in Christianity. This understanding of the name is not at all foreign in general in the Old Testament: “*By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth*” (Psalm 33:6) — said in the Psalter, formerly read daily by the Judeans either in the ancient Hebrew text or in the translated form of the Septuagint.

However, Christ’s farewell talk with His disciples shines even more clearly for us: “*The word which you hear is not Mine but the Father’s Who sent Me*” (John 14:24). “*For all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you*” (John 15:15). “*All things that the Father has are Mine*” (John 16:15). Here is the fundamental subject of this majestic dialogue, just as the first sacerdotal prayer uttered by Christ that followed it.

The Orthodox Church lovingly took to calling the Son of God “the Word” and widely applies this, not in a singular form but with one or another definition, attribute: “*who without corruption gavest birth to God the Word*” (the hymn to the Theotokos “Meet it is”), “the only-begotten Son and Word of God” (sung during the Liturgy), and “*O Ruler of all, Word of the Father*” (from the prayers before sleep).

The conception of Christ’s Forerunner, John.

(Luke 1:1-25).

This section tells of the appearance of God’s Angel to the priest Zacharias during a service in the temple. The Angel foretells the conception and birth of a son to Zacharias and his wife, Elizabeth, who is to be called John and who will be great in the sight of the Lord, and speaks of Zachariah’s punishment, in the form of muteness, for his disbelief.

King Herod (mentioned here) was by birth an Idumean (an Edomite), son of the Antipater who, at the time of Hyrcanus, last in the dynasty of the Maccabees, had authority over Judea. Herod received his title of king from Rome. Although he was even a proselyte, the Judeans did not regard him as one of their own, and his rule was such that “*the scepter shall not depart from Judah,*” after which the Messiah should appear (see the prophecy of Genesis 49:10).

The priests were divided into twenty-four divisions, among which Abijah headed one. Zacharias belonged to this division. Elizabeth also came from an ecclesiastical background. While they both were outstanding in their genuine righteousness, they were without children. This was regarded by the Judeans as God’s punishment for sinning. Every week, a divine service was conducted in the temple by each division (twice a year). With that, the priests allocated responsibilities among themselves by casting lots. Zacharias’ lot was to perform the censuring of the temple. That’s why he entered the second part of Jerusalem’s temple — called *the Holiest of the Holy* or *the sanctuary* — where the incensory altar was located. At the same time, all the people were praying in a specially designated open area, *a courtyard*, of the temple. Having entered the sanctuary, Zacharias observed an Angel, and a great fear gripped him because according to Jewish understanding the appearance of an Angel foretold of impending death. The Angel calmed Zacharias, telling him that his prayer was answered and that his wife will bear him a son who will be “great in the sight of the Lord.” It is difficult to suppose that Zacharias with his righteousness, being old and at such a solemn moment of the religious service, would have been praying for a son. Apparently, as one of the finest people of that time, he prayed to God for a swift coming of the Kingdom of the Messiah — and it is precisely this prayer that the Angel said was answered. And here his prayer received its high reward: not only is his sorrowful infertility resolved, but also his son will be the Forerunner of the Messiah, whose coming he had waited for so intensely. His son will surpass everyone in his extraordinary, strict abstinence and from birth will be filled with particular, blessed gifts of the Holy Spirit. The son is faced with the task of preparing the Judean people for the coming

of the Messiah, which he does with sermons on repentance and the reformation of their lives. He diverted toward God many sons of Israel who honored Jehovah formally but had distanced their hearts and lifestyles away from Him. To accomplish this, John will be given the spirit and strength of the prophet Elijah, to whom he will be likened by his fiery zeal, strictly ascetic life, sermons on repentance, and exposure of iniquities. He will have to call the Judeans from the abyss of their moral decline, returning into the hearts of parents the love for children, and to confirm thoughts of the righteous in the minds of those resisting the right hand of God.

As he and his wife were too old to hope for an offspring, Zacharias did not believe the Angel and asked him for a sign as proof of the authenticity of his words. In order to dispel Zacharias' doubts, the Angel enunciates his name: he is Gabriel, which means God's power, the same that brought the good tidings of the time of the Messiah's coming to the prophet Daniel, having indicated the time with "sevens" (Daniel 9:21-27). For his disbelief, the Angel inflicts him with muteness and apparently at the same time with deafness, as all future communications with him are with signs. Normally, censing continues for a short period so that the people started to wonder: why is Zacharias lingering in the sanctuary? However, no sooner had Zacharias appeared and begun to gesticulate, that the people realized that he had a vision. It is remarkable that Zacharias did not cease but continued to fulfill his turn at serving at the temple — right up to the end. After he returned home, his wife Elizabeth did indeed conceive a son. For five months she hid this from fear of disbelief and ridicule from the public, while her soul rejoiced and thanked God for lifting the denouncements of her. The conception of John the Baptist is celebrated on the 23rd of September.

The Annunciation to the Holy Virgin Mary.

(Luke 1:26-38).

In the sixth month after John the Baptist's conception, the Angel Gabriel was sent to the small town of Nazareth, situated in the Zebulun area of the southern part of Galilee, "*to a Virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The Virgin's name was Mary.*" The Evangelist doesn't say: "Virgin, Who was married," but "*betrothed to a man.*" This means that formally and in the eyes of society, the Blessed Virgin Mary was regarded as Joseph's wife, even though in reality, She was not.

Having lost Her parents at an early age, the Blessed Virgin Mary was consecrated to serving in the temple. When She turned fourteen, She was not allowed (according to the law) to remain at the temple, and was unable to return to Her parents. Following tradition, She was obliged to marry. Knowing that She made a promise to remain a virgin, the high priests and priests did not want to leave Her without a guardian, so they betrothed Her to Her relative, an eighty year old carpenter named Joseph, who was renowned for his righteousness and who also had an extensive family from his first marriage (Matthew 13:55).

In appearing to Her, the Angel called Her "full of grace," i.e., having found favor with God (see verse 30) — God's special love and benevolence, His help that is essential for holy and great deeds. The words of the Angel bewildered Mary by their extraordinary nature, and She commenced to ponder over them. Having calmed Her, the Angel foretells the birth of a Son from Her, Who will be great not like John, but much greater because He will not simply be full of God's blessed gifts as John, but He Himself will be **the Son of the Almighty**. Why is the Angel saying that the Lord will give Him the throne of His father David and He will reign over the house of Jacob? Because the Jewish kingdom in the Old Testament was pre-determined to prepare people for a spiritual, eternal Kingdom of Christ and to slowly transfigure into it. Consequently, David's kingdom as such is one in which God Himself placed kings, which was ruled according to God's laws, in which all forms of civil life was permeated with the idea of serving God, which was found in an uninterrupted link with the New Testament Kingdom of God.

Mary's question, "*How can this be, since I do not know a man?*" — would have been

completely incomprehensible and would have made no sense, if She hadn't given a promise to God, to remain a Virgin **forever**. The Angel explained that Her promise would not be violated, as She will give birth to a Son without a husband, by extraordinary means. The Holy Spirit, "*the power of the Almighty,*" will bring about this seedless conception; i.e., the Son of God Himself (see 1 Corinthians 1:24) will overshadow Her, will enter Her like a cloud akin to that which overshadowed the tabernacle, as expressed by Isaiah (19:1), "*upon a swift cloud.*" While the Blessed Virgin did not demand any proof, the Angel himself in confirmation of the authenticity of his words pointed to Elizabeth, who had conceived a son in her old age by the will of God, to Whom nothing is impossible. The Holy Virgin knew through the books of the prophets that not only glory awaits Her and Her Divine Son, but also grief. Nevertheless, completely obedient to God's will, She replied: "*Behold the Virgin servant of the Lord! Let it be to Me according to your word.*"

The Annunciation is celebrated on the 25th of March. Having accepted the glad tidings, the Blessed Virgin said nothing to Joseph, and as St. John Chrysostom explains, She was justly afraid that he may not believe Her and think that through Her warning, She is trying to hide a transgression.

The meeting of the Holy Virgin Mary with Elizabeth.

(Luke 1:39-56).

The Holy Virgin hurries to share Her joy with Her relative Elizabeth, who presumably lived in Judea in a town named Juttah, situated close to the sacred city of Hebron. Elizabeth greeted Her with the same extraordinary words that were uttered by the Angel: "*Blessed are You among women*" — and added: "*And blessed is the fruit of your womb!*" — Although, as Her relative, she should have known about the promise given by Mary to remain chaste. Following this, Elizabeth exclaimed: "*But why is this granted to me, that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?*" Elizabeth immediately explains the meaning of her words, in that the child she was carrying "leaped in the womb" no sooner than she heard Mary's greeting. Undoubtedly, under the infusion of the Holy Spirit, the child in Elizabeth's womb sensed the other Child — He, before Whose arrival into the world, humanity would have to be prepared by him. That's why he produced such an unusual movement in his mother's womb. The reaction of the child to the Holy Spirit was imparted to his mother, and she, through the grace of foresight, instantly recognized what joyous tidings Mary conveyed. That's why she glorified Her as the Mother of God with the same words as that of Archangel Gabriel. Elizabeth beatifies the Blessed Virgin for Her faith with which She received the Archangel's tidings, contrasting this faith with Zacharias' disbelief.

From Elizabeth's words, the Blessed Virgin Mary understood that the mystery revealed to Elizabeth was from God Himself. Amid feelings of rapture and emotions at the thought that the time for the long-awaited Messiah and the liberation of Israel has arrived, the Holy Virgin praised God with a marvelous song. This song is now constantly sung in Her honor during matins: "*My soul doth magnify the Lord, and My spirit hath rejoiced in God My Saviour . . .*" She wards off any thoughts of personal worthiness and praises God because He has been attentive to Her humility. In a prophetic prescience, She foretells that for this mercy from God, She will be glorified by all generations and that this mercy of God will be extended to all that are fearful of the Lord. She subsequently praises God that the promise given to the Fathers and to Abraham has been fulfilled and that the Kingdom of the Messiah, anticipated so much by the Israelites, has come— that His humble followers, despised by the world, will soon triumph, be uplifted and filled with goodness, while the proud and powerful will be disgraced and vanquished. It's apparent that the Holy Virgin, not having waited for the Forerunner's birth, returned home.

The Birth of Saint John the Baptist.

(Luke 1:57-80).

When the time had arrived for Elizabeth to give birth, relatives and neighbors joined in the joy which overtook her, and on the eighth day they gathered at her house so as to perform the rite of circumcision, established at the time of Abraham (Genesis 17:11-14) and demanded by the law (Leviticus 12:3). Through this ritual, the newborn entered the society of the chosen people. Consequently, the day of circumcision was regarded as a joyful family holiday. With circumcision, the infant was given a name, usually in honor of some senior relative. Consequently, the mother's wish to name her son John would have aroused general consternation. Obviously, the Evangelist underscores this situation because it is quite miraculous: Elizabeth's desire to call her son John was the result of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They turned to the father for his decision. As he was still mute, he wrote on a piece of flat wood, covered with wax: "His name is John." Everyone was completely taken aback by the concordance of both parents' wishes to give their son a name that did not exist among their relatives. And immediately, according to the Angel's prediction, Zacharia's tongue was freed and he could speak. In a state of prophetic inspiration and by now foreseeing the approach of the Messiah's Kingdom, he began to exalt God Who visited His people and made possible their salvation, He Who *"had raised the horn of salvation in the house of David."* Just as in the Old Testament, when offenders fled from their avengers to the altar for burning sacrifices and, seizing its horns, regarded themselves as inviolable (1 Kings 2:28), so does the whole human race, oppressed by sins and persecuted by God's righteous judgment, find salvation in Jesus Christ.

This salvation is not so much liberation of Israel from its political enemies (as the majority of Jews believed, especially the scribes and Pharisees) as it is the fulfillment of God's law, given to their Old Testament forefathers, fulfillment that would give all faithful Israelites an opportunity to serve God *"in holiness and in righteousness."* Here the word "righteousness" is understood to mean the justification of humanity by Divine means, through the imputation to man of Christ's redeeming accomplishments. "Holiness" here is the internal correction of a person that is achieved by the effort of the person himself with the assistance of grace. Zacharias goes on to foretell to his son the future that was predicted by the Angel, saying that his son will be designated the Almighty's Prophet — Forerunner of the Divine Messiah. He also points out that the purpose of the Forerunner's ministry is to prepare the people for the Messiah's coming and to allow the people of Israel to realize that its salvation lies in none other than **the forgiveness of sins**. Consequently, Israel must seek righteousness and forgiveness of sins and not earthly greatness, which the then spiritual leaders were hoping for. The forgiveness of sins will come "through the tender mercy of our God, with which the Dayspring from on high has visited us." — that is the Messiah-Redeemer, by which name the prophets Jeremiah (25:5) and Zechariah (3:8 and 6:12) called Him.

According to tradition, the news of John the Forerunner's birth reached the suspicious King Herod. When the Magi arrived in Jerusalem and inquired as to the place of birth of the King of the Jews, Herod remembered about Zacharias' son and issued orders to execute all infants. He also sent his killers to Juttah. Having found out about this, Elizabeth fled with her son into the wilderness. Angered because the infant John could not be located, Herod sent his servants to Zacharias to find out where he had hidden him. Zacharias replied that he now serves the Lord God of Israel and that he doesn't know his son's whereabouts. Upon repeating his response after being threatened with death, he fell under the killers' swords — between the temple and the altar, an event the Lord remembers in His denunciatory oration to the Pharisees (Matthew 23:35). The birth of John the Baptist is celebrated on the 24th of June.

The Earthly Lineage of the Lord Jesus Christ.

(Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38).

The lists of the earthly ancestors of the Lord Jesus Christ are contained in two Gospels

— Matthew and Luke. Although both give witness of Christ's origin from David and Abraham, the names listed in the two do not always coincide. As St. Matthew was writing for the Jews, it was important for him to prove that in accordance with the Old Testament prophecies, the Lord Jesus Christ did descend from Abraham and David. Consequently, he begins his Gospel with the Lord's lineage and, moreover, takes us from Abraham and brings us to "*Joseph the husband of Mary, of Whom was born Jesus Who is called Christ.*" Invariably, the question arises: Why does the Gospel give Joseph's lineage and not that of the Holy Virgin Mary? The custom of the Jews was not to maintain any genealogy on the mother's side. However, because the Blessed Virgin was undoubtedly the only child of Joachim and Anna, then in accordance with the demands of the Law of Moses, She had to marry a relative of the same branch, tribe, and clan. As Joseph was from the same tribe as David, it follows that She too was of the same descent.

Saint Luke placed a different task before himself — to show that the Lord Jesus Christ belongs to the whole of humanity and appears as the Savior of all people. That's why he traces the lineage of Christ to Adam and to God Himself. However, this descent differs somewhat from that of Saint Matthew's. As an example, according to Matthew, Joseph — the nominal father of our Lord — is the son of Jacob, while according to Luke, he is the son of Elias. Similarly, Salathiel, the father of Zerubbabel and a man mentioned by both Evangelists, is, according to Saint Matthew, the son of Jeconiah, while according to Saint Luke he is the son of Neri. Julius the African, a renowned intellectual of ancient times, explains this variance superbly through the code of living, whereby, if one of the brothers dies childless, the other brother has to take his wife for himself, and "*The first child she bears, will remain with his brother's (deceased) name, so that it is not erased in Israel*" (Deuteronomy 25:5-6). This law extended not only to the immediate relatives but also to stepbrothers, who in fact were Jacob and Elias. While they had different fathers, they had the same mother, Esther. Thus, when Elias died, Jacob restored his brother's lineage by marrying his widow and fathering Joseph. This is where the difference came about, as Saint Luke traces the origins of Joseph through Rhesa, son of Zerubbabel and Elias, while Saint Matthew does it through Abiud, the other son of Zerubbabel, and through Jacob, the other father of Joseph.

It is not by chance that Saint Matthew includes in the Lord's lineage women that were formerly heathen or sinners. He wanted to show that God, having not disdained including such women in His chosen family, is not loathe to summon the heathen and sinners to His Kingdom: a person is not saved by his personal achievements but through the power of the purifying grace of God.

The Nativity of Christ.

Only two Evangelists narrate the birth of Christ and events related to it, Saint Matthew and Saint Luke. Saint Matthew discusses the revelation of the mystery of His incarnation to Joseph, the adoration of the Magi, the flight into Egypt, and the slaying of the innocents. St. Luke describes the circumstances under which Christ the Saviour was born in Bethlehem and the adoration of the shepherds.

The Revelation of the mystery of the incarnation to the betrothed Joseph.

(Matthew 1:18-25).

Saint Matthew informs us that soon after the Holy Virgin's betrothal with eighty-year-old Joseph, "*before they came together,*" i.e., before the consummation of their marriage, Mary's condition of being with child became clear to Joseph. Being righteous (and this means just and merciful), Joseph did not wish to expose Her seeming transgression before the public, so as not to subject Her to the shameful and agonizing death called for by the law of Moses (Deuteronomy 22:23-24), and intended to release Her without announcing the reason.

As soon as he thought this, the Lord's Angel appeared to him and explained "that which is conceived in Her is of the Holy Spirit" and not the fruit of a clandestine sin. The Angel further announces: "*And She will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.*" The name Jesus, Joshua in Hebrew, means Savior. So that Joseph has no doubts about the veracity of what was said, the Angel quotes Isaiah's prophecy that witnesses to the fact that this great miracle of the seedless conception and birth of the Savior of the world by the Blessed Virgin was preordained in God's pre-eternal counsel: "*Behold, a Virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son . . .*" (Isaiah 7:14). There is no need to imagine that the prophecy had not been fulfilled because the prophet had said "and shall call His name Immanuel," whereas the Newborn was named Jesus. Immanuel is not a personalized name but a symbolic one meaning "God is with us." So when this miraculous birth from a Virgin takes place, people will say "God is with us" because it is in this identity God came down to earth and lived among mankind. This is only a prophetic indication of Christ's Divinity — indication that this extraordinary infant will not be an ordinary person, but God. Convinced by the Angel's words, Joseph "*took to him his wife,*" that is, rejected his intention to send Her away and left Her to live in his house as a wife "and did not know Her till She had brought forth Her Firstborn Son." This does not mean that he "knew" Her after the birth of Jesus and began living with Her as a wife. Saint John Chrysostom rightly notes that it is simply not credible to submit that such a righteous individual as Joseph would decide to "know" the Holy Virgin after She had so miraculously become a mother. While in Greek the word "zos" and in Church Slavonic "dondezhe" mean "**until**" this cannot be interpreted in the way that those who do not honor the Holy Virgin do — Protestants and sectarians — as though Joseph did not "know" Her before Christ's birth and then he did. He absolutely never "knew" Her. In the Holy Scriptures the word "zos" is used in the narration on the concluding stages of the Flood: "And he sent forth a raven, and it went forth to and fro, until ("zos") the waters were dried up" (Genesis 8:6) — but the raven never did return afterwards. Or again, in the words of our Lord: "*I am with you always, even to ("zos") the end of the age*" (Matthew 28:20). As the Blessed Theophilact rightly observed, this doesn't mean that Christ would not be with us after the end of the age. Definitely not, as it is especially then that He would be with us!

Jesus is named "Firstborn" not because the Blessed Virgin had other children after Him but because He was born first, and, being that, was her only child. In the Old Testament, God decrees that "*all the firstborn*" are to be consecrated to Him, irrespective of whether the family will have further additions or not. And if the Gospel mentions "brothers of Jesus Christ" (Matthew 13:55, John 2:12, and others), it certainly doesn't mean that they were His brothers by birth. As tradition witnesses, Joseph's children were from his first marriage.

The Circumstances and Time of the Nativity of Christ.

(Luke 2:1-20).

The most detailed narrative of the circumstances of the Nativity of Christ and of those times is provided by the Evangelist Luke. He refers the events of Christ's birth to the time at which Caesar Augustus decreed a census of all citizens of the Roman Empire, the reign of the Roman Emperor Octavius, who received from the Roman Senate the title "Augustus" — "honorable." Unfortunately, the exact date of this census was not preserved. However, the time of Octavius Augustus's rule, a personality historically well known, gives us an opportunity to approximate the year of Christ's Birth. With the aid of other facts, which we shall mention later, it is possible to determine this with a degree of accuracy — within a few years. A Roman monk Dionysius, named "the Small" introduced the accepted method of calculating the years "after Christ." As the basis of his calculations, Dionysius estimated that the Lord Jesus Christ was born in the 754th year from the establishment of the city of Rome. However, further and more thorough calculations proved his computations flawed: the year he had nominated was at least five years later than the actual date. Nevertheless, from the tenth cen-

ture, the application of this Dionysian period of time (which was originally intended for Church use only) was wide-spread among Christian countries and accepted by civil authorities, even though it was acknowledged as being flawed by all chronologists. The actual date of Christ's birth can be determined accurately on the basis of the following facts found in the Gospel:

(1) The time of the reign of Herod the Great. From Matthew 2:1-18 and Luke 1:5, it is absolutely clear that Christ was born when Herod was in power. He ruled from the 714th year of the establishment of the city of Rome and died in the 750th, eight days before Passover (Pascha) and soon after the lunar eclipse. According to astronomers' calculations, the eclipse occurred on the night of the 13th or 14th of March, while the Jewish Pascha fell on the 12th of April in that year. Consequently, Herod died at the beginning of April in the 750th year after the establishment of Rome — at least four years earlier than that established by Dionysius.

(2) The census mentioned in Luke 2:3, was ordered by Augustus' decree in the 746th year after the founding of Rome. The census commenced in Judea during Herod's reign, was suspended as a consequence of his death, and continued when Quirinius was governing Syria. This is mentioned in Luke's Gospel (2:2). As a result of the census, there was a public uprising in Palestine. By Herod's directive, the instigator was burned at the stake on the 12th of March in the 750th year of Rome. Consequently, the census commenced some time a little earlier.

(3) According to Saint Luke's witness (3:1), Saint John the Baptist commenced his ministry in the fifteenth year of Caesar Tiberius' rule, and "*Jesus Himself began His ministry at about thirty years of age*" (Luke 3:23). Two years before his death in January 765, Augustus accepted Tiberius as a co-ruler. Therefore, the 15th year of Tiberius' reign would have commenced in January 779. As a result of Saint Luke's statement that the age of Lord Jesus was 30, then it follows that He was born in 749.

(4) Astronomical calculations show that Christ's death on the cross could only have occurred in the year 783, (according to the data in the Gospel, this transpired in the year when the Jewish Pascha fell on a Friday evening). And as the Lord's age was advancing toward 34 years, He therefore must have been born in the 749th year from the establishment of Rome.

So all the above facts testify to the fact that the year of the Nativity of Christ was necessarily in the 749th year from the founding of Rome.

Due to lack of facts in the four Gospels, it is impossible to determine the day upon which Christ was born. Initially, the Eastern Church celebrated it on the same day as Theophany, under the general title of "Epiphany" — "*God came into the world*" — the 6th of January. The Western Church has, for a very long time, celebrated Nativity on the 25th of December. From the end of the fourth century, the Eastern Church too began to celebrate this event on the 25th of December. This date was selected according to the following understanding.

There is a hypothesis that Zacharias was serving as the high priest when the Angel appeared to him behind the curtain within the Holiest of the Holy. This is where the high priest was allowed to enter once a year, on the day of purification. This day falls on the 23rd of September, which began to be regarded as the day when the Forerunner was conceived. Six months later, the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary took place (which is celebrated on the 25th of March), and after nine months, on the 25th of December, the Lord Jesus Christ was born. However, there is nothing to confirm the fact that Zacharias was the high priest. Consequently, a more plausible explanation is more likely a symbolic one. The ancients thought that Christ, as a second Adam, was conceived by the Holy Virgin during the Spring equinox, the 25th of March, and according to ancient tradition, the same day Adam was created. Christ — the light of the world, the sun of truth — appeared to the world after nine months, during the winter solstice, when the day begins to lengthen and the night, to shorten. Corresponding to this, the conception of John the Baptist (who was six months older than Christ) was to be cel-

celebrated on the 23rd of September, during the solar equinox, while the day of his birth — on the 24th of June, during the summer solstice, when the days were getting shorter. As Saint Athanasius cited the words of John the Baptist in John 3:30: *“He must increase, but I must decrease.”*

Some confusion arises from the statement by the Evangelist Luke about the census conducted at the time of Christ’s birth, that “This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria,” whereas, according to historical facts, Quirinius was governor of Syria some ten years after the birth of Christ. The quickest way to resolve this misunderstanding is through the following: during the translation from the Greek text (and there is strong support for this), instead of the word “this” census, the word “same” census should have been applied. Augustus issued the decree for the census before the birth of Christ. However, because of the public’s unrest and the death of Herod, it was delayed and completed only some ten years later, during the governorship of Quirinius. There is further data that Quirinius served twice as governor of Syria, and the census, begun during his first tenure, was completed only during his second term in office. That’s why the Evangelist calls the census — commenced at the time of the birth of Christ — as the “first.”

Every person had to be registered “in his own city.” Roman politics always acceded to the customs of the conquered, so as the Jewish customs demanded that the census be conducted according to branch, tribe, and clan, everyone was obliged to turn up for registration in that city, where the head of his tribe once lived. As Joseph was David’s descendant, he had to go to Bethlehem — David’s city of birth. God’s wonderful providence can be seen in this: in accordance with the ancient prophesy from Micah 5:2, the Messiah was required to be born in this city. According to Roman law covering conquered nations, not only men but also equally women were subject to this census. Consequently, there is nothing amazing in that the Holy Virgin Mary, albeit in Her condition, accompanied the guardian of Her virginity — the “elder” Joseph — and undoubtedly being aware of Micah’s prophecy, could not but recognize God’s providence in the census that directed Her toward Bethlehem.

“And She brought forth Her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in the manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” The Evangelist emphasizes the fact that Holy Virgin Mary Herself diapered Her newborn Infant, meaning that the birth was completely painless. Again, Her Son is called “firstborn” not because the Blessed Virgin had other children after Him. According to the law of Moses, every first male child born was called firstborn, even though he was the only child in the family. Because of the multitude of travelers that had arrived earlier, but more so because of their poverty, the Holy Family were forced to settle in one of the many caves that were abundant throughout Palestine. These caves were used to shelter stock during inclement weather. It was here that the Divine Messiah was born. Instead of being placed in a child’s cradle, He was laid in a manger and thereby, from His Own Nativity, accepting the cross of abasement and suffering for the redemption of humanity. And by His Own Nativity, giving us a lesson in humility — that highest virtue, which He later taught His followers continually. According to ancient tradition, during the Savior’s birth, near His crib stood an ox and an ass, as though signifying that *“The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib”* (Isaiah 1:3).

However, not only humiliation accompanied Him at birth and throughout His earthly life but also reflections of His Divine glory. God’s Angel, illuminated with Divine glory, appeared to the shepherds — who may have been the owners of the cave and were sleeping in the field due to the prevailing good weather — and announced to them “*great joy*” of the birth of the Savior in the city of David, *“Who is Christ the Lord.”* It is important to note here the words of the Angel *“great joy . . . to all people.”* The Messiah did not come to earth for the Jews only, but for the whole human race. With this, the Angel gave a “**sign**”, an indication as to how they will recognize Him: *“You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.”* And as though in corroboration of the veracity of the Angel’s words, there appeared “a multitude of the Heavenly host,” a whole mass of Angels praising the

astonishing glory of the Newborn God-Infant — the Messiah: “*Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!*” The Angels are praising God for sending the Messiah to earth; they are acclaiming the peace that will settle in people’s souls who have accepted the Savior; they are happy for the people to whom God’s grace had returned. The higher powers, the sinless eternal spirits, continually praise their Creator and Lord in the heavens. They especially praise Him for the extraordinary manifestation of His Divine clemency, which in fact is an expansion of His domain. The peace that was brought to earth by the incarnate Son of God cannot be confused with ordinary human tranquility and well being. This is a peace of conscience in the soul of the human-sinner who has been redeemed by Christ the Savior. It is a peace of conscience, reconciliation with God, with people and with yourself. And as much as this is God’s peace that surpasses all understanding (Philip. 4:7) and settles in the souls of humans that have accepted Christ, so does the inner peace become the heritage in human life. Redemption revealed the total greatness of God’s benevolence, His love toward humanity. Therefore, the purpose for the Angels’ praises is in the following: Worthy are the praises to God by the Heavenly Spirits, as peace and salvation has settled on earth, because humanity has become deserving of a particular Divine blessing. The shepherds — who were evidently pious — immediately hurried to the location indicated by the Angel and became worthy of the honor of being the first to worship the Christ-Infant. Wherever they went, they proclaimed the news about the appearance of the Angel and the Heavenly announcement, much to the amazement of their listeners. The Blessed Virgin Mary, filled with feelings of profound humility, memorized all that was happening, “*kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.*”

The Circumcision and Meeting of the Lord.

(Luke 2:21-39).

After eight days had passed and in accordance with the law of Moses (Leviticus 12:3), the God-Infant was circumcised and given the name (as designated by the Angel) of Jesus, which means **Savior**.

According to the Law of Moses, a woman bearing a male child was regarded as unclean for the first forty days after the birth (eighty days if it was a female child). On the fortieth day, she had to bring a sacrifice of a one-year-old lamb to the temple for burning and a young dove as a sacrifice for her sins. In case of poverty, this could be replaced with two doves — one for each sacrifice. Complying with this law, the Holy Virgin and Joseph brought the infant with them to Jerusalem so as to pay the required five shekels for Him. This law came into being when on the eve of the exodus of Jews from Egypt, God sent His Angels to slay all the Egyptian new-born, while all the Jewish new-born were consecrated to serve at the temple. With the passing of time, this practice was allotted to the tribe of Levi only, while the new-born of other tribes were released from this obligation by paying a special levy of five silver shekels (Numbers 18:16). It can be seen from the Gospel’s narrative that the Holy Virgin and Joseph brought a sacrifice of the poor: two doves.

Why was it necessary to subject the Lord, Whose conception and birth were devoid of sin, to circumcision, and His Ever-Blessed Mother to the law of purification?

Firstly, this was in order to “*fulfill all righteousness*” (Matthew 3:15) and show by example complete submission to God’s law. Secondly, this was essential for His ministry as the Messiah in the eyes of His people. Uncircumcised, He would not have been part of the community of God’s people; He would not be able to enter the temple, nor the synagogue. Uncircumcised, He would be unable to have influence on the people or to be acknowledged as the Messiah. Equally, His Holy Mother, not being cleansed, would not be regarded as a true Israelite. At the time, the mystery of His chaste conception and birth was unknown to anyone besides the Holy Virgin Herself and Joseph. Consequently, everything that was required by the law had to be executed exactly.

At the time at which the Mother of God brought Her sacrifices and payment of indem-

nity to the temple, there was a pious “elder” named Simeon who was waiting for the “Consolation of Israel,” God’s promised Messiah, whose appearance would bring consolation to the Israelites (Isaiah 40:1). The Evangelist advises us only that Simeon was foretold by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death until such time as he experienced the honor of seeing his expected “consolation”; that is, the Lord Christ. According to ancient tradition, Simeon was one of seventy-two erudite old men that were charged by the Egyptian King Ptolemais to translate holy books from the Jewish language into Greek. Given the Book of Isaiah to translate, Simeon became dubious when he came upon the prophecy of the birth of Immanuel from a Virgin (Isaiah 7:14). It was then that an Angel appeared to him and foretold that he would not die until his own eyes had witnessed the fulfillment of this prophecy. Through the Holy Spirit’s prompting, he apparently came to the sacrificial altar in the temple and, upon seeing the Virgin Mary’s Infant, recognized Him as the Messiah-Christ. The old man (tradition has it that he was three-hundred years old) took Him in his arms and proclaimed the inspired prayer of gratitude for being able to witness, in the face of this Infant, the salvation that has been prepared for humanity. *“Lord, now let Your servant depart in peace, According to Your word,”* exclaimed the elder. He was saying: From this moment, the tie that connected me to life has been severed, and You, Master, are releasing me from this life into a new life, *“according to Your word,”* through the prophecy given to me from You by Your Holy Spirit, *“in peace,”* with complete spiritual tranquility, *“For my eyes have seen Your salvation,”* the salvation promised by God through His Redeemer-Messiah, Whom I now have the great happiness to see before me — the salvation, *“which you have prepared before the face of all peoples,”* not only for Jews but also for all peoples. This salvation is *“A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel,”* as coming out of its midst. Joseph and the Mother of the Divine Child probably marveled that everywhere they found people to whom God had revealed the secret of this Child.

Returning the Child to His Mother and blessing Her and Joseph, Simeon — by right of a profound elder on whom the Holy Spirit rested — foretells in a prophetic enlightenment that this Infant will be the subject of arguments and disputes between His followers and His enemies: *“That the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”* Depending on the diverse relationships of people toward this Infant, their true nature will be revealed, the disposition of their souls: Those who love the truth and strive to fulfill God’s will, will believe in Christ, while those who love evil and deeds of darkness will hate Christ and, in order to justify their malice, will slander Him in every way. This, in reality, took place in the figures of scribes and Pharisees and continues to be enacted in the form of all godless individuals and Christ-haters. For those who believe in Him, He stands **“for arising,”** or for eternal salvation, and for the disbelievers — **“for falling,”** or for their eternal condemnation, for eternal perdition. Simeon spiritually foresees those sufferings by the Blessed Virgin for Her Divine Son: *“yes, a sword will pierce through Your own heart also.”*

Present at the time was a woman named Anna, “daughter of Phanuel.” Because she was moved by especial actions of the Holy Spirit and because she possessed the gift of inspired speech, the Evangelist calls her a prophetess. Evidently, the Evangelist praises her as an upright widow, who devoted herself to God after living with her husband for just seven years. Having reached eighty-four years of age and not departing from the temple, she *“served God with fasting and prayers night and day.”* Like Simeon, she too praised the Lord and, apparently in a state of prophetic inspiration, repeated approximately the same words uttered by Simeon to everyone anticipating the liberation of Jerusalem, to those awaiting the coming of the Messiah.

The Evangelist says further that having fulfilled everything according to the law, the holy family returned to Galilee, *“to their own city, Nazareth.”* Saint Luke omits everything that transpired after the Meeting of the Lord, probably because Saint Matthew gives a detailed description of the events: the adoration of the Magi in Bethlehem, the holy family’s flight into Egypt, the slaying of the innocents, and the return of the holy family after the death

of Herod. We often find this type of abridgement of narrative with writers of holy books.

The Adoration of the Magi.

(Matthew 2:1-12).

When Christ was born in “*Bethlehem of Judea*,” the Magi arrived in Jerusalem from the East. It is named here as Judean Bethlehem because there was another Bethlehem, in Galilee, in the region of Zebulun. The Magi who came to adore Christ were not those who are usually associated with this name, not sorcerers or wizards that create illusory miracles, calling up the spirits and interrogating the dead (Exodus 7:11, Deuteronomy 18:11), who are condemned by the Word of God. These were highly learned individuals possessing great knowledge, over whom Daniel presided in the land of Babylon (Daniel 2:48). They judged the future by the stars and studied the mysterious powers of nature. Such wise men were highly revered in Babylon and Persia, as they used to be priests and advisers to kings. The Evangelist says that they came “from the East,” not naming from which specific country. One proposition suggests this country was Arabia; another, Persia, and a third, Chaldea. However, the word used in the Gospel, “*magos*” is Persian, making it more than likely that they came from Persia or from a country forming part of the former Babylonian kingdom. There, during the Jews’ seventy-year bondage, the forefathers of these Magi may have heard from the Jews that they were waiting for a Great King, a Redeemer, Who will conquer the whole world. Also, the prophet Daniel lived there, having predicted the time of the coming of this Great King, and the tradition of the prophecy of the magus Balaam may have been preserved there, that there shall come forth a star from Jacob (Numbers 24:17).

The study of stars in the heavens was one of the major occupations of the Persian wise men, and the Lord summoned them through the appearance of an extraordinary star to adore the Newborn Savior of the world. At the time in the East, there was a widely spread belief that the Lord of the world would appear in Judea, to Whom adoration would be fitting from all peoples. That is why, upon arriving in Jerusalem, the Magi confidently inquire: “*Where is He Who has been born King of the Jews?*”

These words alarmed Herod the Great, as he himself had no legal right to the Judean throne, was an Idumean, and, being a tyrant, aroused hatred from his subjects. All of Jerusalem became alarmed with him because it was afraid of new repressive measures from Herod, who was agitated by the extraordinary news.

Bloodthirsty Herod, in deciding to exterminate the Newborn — regarding Him as his antagonist — summoned all his high priests and scribes and directly poses to them the question as to the place of birth of the Messiah, King of the Jews: “*Where is Christ to be born?*” The scribes immediately pointed out to him Micah’s well-known prophecy (5:2), not citing it literally but its meaning that the Messiah had to be born in Bethlehem. Bethlehem means “**house of bread**” and Euphratus, “**fertile field**,” a name that characterizes the exceptional fertility of the soil.

It is striking that in Micah’s original prophecy there is the statement that the Messiah will only “come” from Bethlehem but will not live there and that His true origins “*are from of old, from everlasting*” (Micah 5:2). In order to execute his bloody intentions with certainty, Herod also wanted to know the time of birth of the Judean King. He summons the Magi so as to interrogate them clandestinely as to the time of the appearance of the star and then sends them to Bethlehem so that when they return they can relate all they found out about the Newborn. When the Magi set out toward Bethlehem, the star that they saw in the East traveled before them, showing the accurate route until it stopped where the Newborn Infant was located.

What sort of star was it? There are varied thoughts on this issue. Saint John Chrysostom and the Blessed Theophilactus thought that it was a certain Divine and Angelic force, appearing in the form of a star. In relation to the star that was seen in the East, many defined it as a real star, inasmuch as some type of sign of a perceivable nature preceded many great events

in a moral world. It is interesting to note, that in accordance with the calculations of the famous astronomer Kepler, in the year of Christ's birth there was an incredibly rare coincidence of the three brightest planets — Jupiter, Mars and Saturn — becoming aligned in one spot and creating the visible effect of an unusually bright star. This heavenly event, known in astronomy as the “**uniting of planets**,” coincided with the great event of the birth of the Son of God — the Messiah, and this wonder is a manifestation of God's providence in summoning the learned heathen to worship the newborn Messiah. The marvelous meaning of the Wise Men's arrival from a distant land is explained excellently by Saint John Chrysostom: “Because the Judeans, listening ceaselessly to the prophets' proclamations on the coming of Christ, did not pay any particular attention, **the Lord instilled into the barbarians** the need to come from a distant land, inquire about the King that was born among them, and the Judeans first recognize from the Persians that which they did not want to learn from the prophets.”

Naturally, the star that showed the way to the wise men from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, “till it came and stood over **where** the young Child was,” was now a real star — not a planet but a completely special and miraculous manifestation. When they saw the star, the wise men “*rejoiced with exceedingly great joy*,” because undoubtedly, they saw in it a new strengthening of their faith in the authenticity of the birth of this extraordinary Infant. It is said further about the Magi that they came to a house and there “*fell down and worshipped*” the Newborn. Consequently, the Magi did not come to the cave where Christ was born; by that time, the Infant and His mother could have resettled into an ordinary house. “*And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*” Having received a Divine warning in a dream not to return to Herod, who had designs to kill the God-Infant, the Magi returned to their homeland along a different route, not through Jerusalem but probably to the south from Bethlehem.

The Flight into Egypt and the Slaying of the Infants.

(Matt. 2:13-23).

After the wise men's departure, the Lord's Angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and directed him to take the Infant and His mother and flee to Egypt, what he did at night. Egypt was located southwest of Judea, requiring a journey of some 100 miles to its border. At the time, it was also a Roman province where many Jews lived; they had their own synagogues and as Herod's authority did not extend there, the Holy Family, having stopped at one of their compatriot's houses, could feel themselves out of danger. To the question as to why Christ did not save Himself from Herod's executioners, St. Chrysostom responds: “If the Lord started to work wonders in His initial years, then He would not have been acknowledged as a Human” (Discourse on Matthew 7). Many wonderful traditions have been preserved regarding the Holy Family's flight into Egypt. One of them proclaims that when Joseph, God-Infant and His Mother entered an idolater's temple that contained 365 idols, those idols fell and shattered on the ground: thus the prophecy about them came true: “Behold, the Lord rideth upon a swift cloud (on the arms of the Blessed Virgin Mary), and cometh unto Egypt: and the idols of Egypt shall be moved at His presence” (Isaiah 19:1). In the fact that Child-Jesus had to flee specifically to Egypt and return from there, St. Evangelist sees the fulfillment of Hosea's prophecy: “...called My Son out of Egypt” (11:1). In reality, these words of the prophet refer to the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, but because the chosen by God Jewish nation was a symbol of the true, one and only Son of God, Jesus Christ, then the withdrawal of the Jewish people from Egypt served as a symbol of Jesus Christ's recall from the same Egypt. In the Old Testament, on the note of St. Chrysostom, everything had a symbolic meaning, everything served as the symbols of events in the New Testament.

When the wise men failed to return to Jerusalem, Herod became angry, felt “mocked of” and ridiculed by them. This produced greater wrath in him. Having learned from the Magi that the star appeared to them over a year ago, he concluded that even if the Infant is more

than 12 months old, He would be less than 2 years old. Therefore he issued the brutal decree to slay all the infants “from 2 years old and under” in Bethlehem and all the coasts thereof, reckoning that among them will be Jesus Christ. According to the legend, there were 14,000 infants slain, who are commemorated, as of the martyrs for Christ, by our Church on the 29th of December. The similar savagery was absolutely typical of Herod, about whom according to the testimony of the Jewish historian Joseph Flavius; it is well known that because of the groundless suspicion, he ordered his wife to be strangled and his 3 sons to be put to death. When Augustus was informed of this, he responded: “It is better to be an animal at Herod’s than his son.” Up to this day, people are shown the grottos on the suburbs of Bethlehem, where mothers with the infants in their arms, attempting to avoid Herod’s soldiers, were killed together with their children. In the slaying of the children, the Evangelist sees the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy: “*A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping*” (Jer. 31:15). In these words, the Prophet Jeremiah describes the calamity and grief of the Jewish people, led to the Babylonian captivity and previously gathered in Ramah, a small town of Benjamin tribe, to the north of Jerusalem). A witness of this event, Prophet Jeremiah depicts it like the weeping of Rachel about her children, who were led away to death. Saint Matthew sees in this a symbol of the true loss of Rachel’s children, who are buried close to Bethlehem.

For the precise date of Christ’s birth is not known, there is no definite data, how long the Holy Family lived in Egypt. However, it is clearly and definitively said that soon after the death of Herod, the Holy Family returned to the land of Israel, and this date can be regarded as more or less definite. As Joseph Flavius testifies, Herod died in a dreadful agony in March or the beginning of April, in the 750th year from the foundation of Rome. If we assume that Christ was born on the 25th of December, in the 749th year from the foundation of Rome, then the Holy Family would have spent some 2 months in Egypt. If we suppose (as some do) that Christ was born earlier, in 748, then it can be said that they lived there over a year, and that the Divine Child was nearly 2 years old when He returned from Egypt. In any case, He was still a child — as the Angel called Him when he directed Joseph to return to Israel. Upon their return, Joseph apparently decided to settle in Bethlehem, where, as it seemed to him, the Son of David — future Messiah-Christ — had to be brought up. However, when hearing that the worst of Herod’s sons Archelaus, bloodthirsty and cruel, similar to his father, began to reign in Judea, he was “afraid to go thither”. Having received a new warning in a dream, he headed towards the boundaries of Galilee and settled in the township of Nazareth, where he used to reside previously, pursuing his trade of carpentry.

St. Evangelist views in this the fulfillment of the prophecy, that the Lord Jesus Christ “*shall be called a Nazarene*”. However, such a prophecy cannot be found in the Old Testament. There is a supposition that this prophecy might have been in the book, lost by the Jews. Another opinion is that the Evangelist is not referring to any specific prophesy, but means the general character of all the prophecies about the humiliating state of Christ-Savior, during His earthly life. To come out of Nazareth meant to be despised, humiliated, rejected. On the other hand, in the Old Testament as Nazarenes there were called the people, who have devoted themselves to God; maybe this was the reason why Jesus Christ was called a Nazarene, as the highest legate of the Nazarene vows — total dedication of oneself to serving God.

Jesus Christ’s adolescence.

(Luke 2:40-52).

Before His appearance in the society to serve the human race, Lord Jesus Christ remained in anonymity. Concerning this period, Evangelist Luke tells about one event from His life. As he wrote his Gospel “having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first,” presumably, there were no outstanding facts in the Lord’s life in this earlier period. Saint Luke gives us the general characteristics of this period in the following words: “*And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon*

Him". This is understandable, as the boy Jesus was not only God, but also human and as such was subjected to the laws of human development. Human wisdom — in the measure of its development — reflected or contained the whole depth and fullness of the Divine knowledge, which adolescent Jesus possessed being the Son of God.

Consequently, when adolescent Jesus became 12, this Divine wisdom revealed itself clearly for the first time. According to the Law of Moses (Deut. 16:16), all male Jews were obliged to appear in Jerusalem on the feast days of Pascha, Pentecost and Festival of Tabernacle; the only exception was made for sick children. An adolescent, turning 12, became "*the Child of the law*": from this point on, he had to learn all the demands of the law, fulfill its directions and in particular, go to Jerusalem for the feast days. Saint Luke states that Jesus' "parents" went to Jerusalem every year. The mystery of the Divine Child's birth remained a secret: Ever-Holy Virgin Mary and elder Joseph did not find it necessary or beneficial to reveal it; and in the eyes of the citizens of Nazareth, Joseph was Mary's husband and the father of Jesus. The Evangelist uses this expression as being applicable to the social opinion. In another extract (3:23), he directly states that Joseph was only supposed to be the father of Jesus, and consequently, in reality he was not the one.

The celebration of the Passover continued for 8 days, after which the faithful returned to their homes, normally in groups. Joseph and Mary did not notice how adolescent Jesus stayed in Jerusalem, surmising that He walks nearby in another group, with His relatives or friends. Seeing that He did not join them for a long time, they began to look for Him, and having not found Him, they returned to Jerusalem in anxiety, where after three days of searching (presumably from the day they departed from Jerusalem), they found Him, seated in the midst of the doctors, listening to them and asking them questions. That happened, probably, in one of the parts of the temple, where the rabbis gathered, holding discussions between them and with the people, edifying in the law all willing to listen to them. In this discussion, adolescent Jesus already displayed His Divine wisdom — that was why everybody listening to Him marveled at His answers and His mind. His Mother, expressing their anxiety over Him, calls Joseph as the father of Jesus, as She could not call him in any other manner, because in everybody's eyes, Joseph was the father. Adolescent Jesus responds to His Mother's words by revealing His designation — to serve the will of the One that had sent Him, and then corrects His Mother by pointing out that not Joseph but God is His father: "*Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?*" However, neither Blessed Mary nor Joseph understood His words, as the mystery of Christ's matters on earth was not fully revealed to them. Nonetheless, "*His Mother kept all these things in Her heart*" — this was an especially memorable day for Her, as this was the first time Her Son made it known of His high designation. For the time for His social service had not arrived yet, Jesus obediently went with them to Nazareth, and as the Evangelist notes, "*and was subject*" to his earthly parents, probably sharing the labors of His so-called father Joseph, who was a carpenter. Growing up, He succeeded in wisdom, and the especial love of God towards Christ became more evident to the attentive eye, which in turn attracted people's love towards Him.

The Savior's Social Service.

John the Baptist and his testimony about our Lord Jesus Christ.

(Matt. 3:1-12; Mark 1:1-8; Luke 3:1-18; John 1:15-31)

About the start of the sermon of John the Baptist and about his testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ, correspondingly narrate all the Evangelists, in nearly the same detail. John is the only one, who omits something from that said by the others, instead, underlining only Christ's Deity.

Saint Evangelist Luke gives the important information about the starting time of John the Baptist's sermon, and together with that — the starting time of the social service of the very Lord. He says that this occurred "in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being the tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests" (Luke 3:1-2).

Beginning his narration about John the Baptist starting his sermon, Saint Luke wants to say that at the time, Palestine was the part of the Roman Empire, and was governed by tetrarchs, or the rulers of the fourth part of a province, in the name of Emperor Tiberius, the son and successor of Octavius Augustus, during whose time Christ was born. In Judea, the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate governed instead of Archelaus; in Galilee — Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, who slew the innocent infants in Bethlehem; his other son, Philip, governed Iturea — the country, situated to the east of Jordan, and Trachonitis, located to the north-east of Jordan; the fourth province, Abilene, that was adjacent to Galilee in the north-east, at the foothill of Antilebanon, was under the rule of Lycinius. The high priests at the time were Annas and Caiaphas, this is necessary to understand this way: actually, the high priest was Caiaphas, and his father-in-law — Annas, who, though being precluded by the civil authorities from his post, had the authority and respect of the people, and in reality, shared the leadership with his son-in-law.

After the death of Augustus in the 767th year from the foundation of Rome, Tiberius ascended the throne. However, two years before, in 765, he had already become a co-ruler, and consequently, his fifteenth year of ruling began in 779, when according to the most probable suppositions, Christ became 30 years old, about what Apostle Luke tells later, mentioning the age, in which Jesus Christ was baptized by John and commenced His social service.

Saint Luke testifies that "*the word of God*" came to John — in other words, a special calling or revelation from God that prompted him to begin his service. Saint Matthew calls the place where he commenced his service "the wilderness in Judea". Situated on the western shores of Jordan and the Dead Sea, it carried this name because of its sparse population. After God's calling, John started to appear in the more populous areas of the region, like Bethabara on Jordan (John 1:28), or Aenon near Salim (John 3:23), closer to the water, which was necessary for baptism.

Evangelists Matthew (3:3), Mark (1:3) and Luke (3:4) call John the Baptist "*the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His path straight*". Exactly the same way John the Baptist calls himself in the Gospel of John (1:23). These words are taken from the Prophet Isaiah's speech, where he comforts Jerusalem by saying that the period of their humiliation is over, and that soon the glory of the Lord will appear and "*all flesh shall see it together*" (Isaiah 40:5).

This prophecy was fulfilled when after the 70 year Babylonian captivity the Persian King Kir permitted 42,000 of Jews to return to their homeland. This return is portrayed by the Prophet as a joyful procession, led by God Himself and preceded by a messenger. This messenger proclaims that a path — along which the Lord and His people had to pass — should be prepared straight and even: hollows should be filled, mounds and hills — leveled, etc. This prophecy, the Evangelists and John himself (John 1:23), explain in the form of a symbol (all the Old Testament events had this type of meaning, foretelling by themselves the events of the New Testament): as God, leading the procession of His people, coming out of the captivity, there is meant the Messiah, while as His messenger — His Forerunner, John. In the spiritual sense, the wilderness are the people of Israel, while the unevenness that had to be leveled as the obstacles for the Messiah's coming — are human sins; that is why the essence of the Forerunner's sermon led to the only call: "Repent!" This Isaiah's symbolic prophecy the last of the Old Testament Prophets, Malachi, expresses directly, calling the Forerunner, who was preparing the way for the Messiah, the "*Messenger of the Lord*". Saint Mark begins his

Gospel with the same quotation (Mark 1:2). John the Baptist's sermon about repentance was based on the approaching of the Kingdom of Heaven, i.e. the Kingdom of the Messiah (Matt. 3:2). As such a Kingdom the Word of God understands the liberation of the man from the authority of sin and the ascension of righteousness within his nature (Luke 17:21; Rom. 14:17), and also the unification of all nations, which were worthy of this, into one organism — the Church (Matt. 13:24-43, 47-49), and their eternal heavenly glory in the next life (Luke 23:42-43).

Preparing people for the entry into this Kingdom, which was soon to be revealed with the coming of the Messiah, John called people to repent and those who reacted to that call, he baptized with "*a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins*" (Luke 3:3). This was not the blessed Christian baptism, but only the immersion into the water as a symbol that the person wished to be absolved of his sins, the same way as the water cleansed his body of the bodily grime.

John the Baptist was a strict ascetic, who wore the roughest raiment of camel's hair and ate locusts and honey of wild bees. He was a sharp opposition to the contemporary teachers of the Jewish people, and his sermon on the coming of the Messiah, the coming of Whom so many were tensely anticipating — could not but attract general attention. Even the Jewish historian, Joseph Flavius, testifies that "the people, captivated by John's teachings, flooded to him in the great number", and that the authority of this man over the Jews was so great that they were ready to do all following his advice, and even Herod the King was afraid of this great teacher's power. Even the Pharisees and Sadducees could not watch indifferently as masses of people came to John, and they themselves went to him into the wilderness, but hardly with the sincere feelings. Therefore, it is little wonder that John greets them with the stern, reproaching words: "*Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*" (Matt. 3:7). The Pharisees skillfully covered their vices with the strict observance of the purely outward instructions of the Law of Moses, while the Sadducees, succumbing to the bodily comforts, rejected that what went against their epicurean style of living: the spiritual life and retribution beyond the grave. John accuses them of arrogance, of their assurance in personal uprightness, and instills onto them that their hope of being Abraham's descendants, will bring them no benefit if they do not carry out the fruits worthy of repentance, because "*every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire*" (Matt. 3:10; Luke 3:9), as useless. The genuine children of Abraham are not those who have originated from him by flesh, but those who will live in the spirit of his faith and devotion to God. "And do not think to say to yourselves, 'we have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones" (Matt. 3:9; Luke 3:8).

According to the Evangelist Luke, this stern speech was directed to the people. But this cannot be treated as a contradiction, for in its significant part the people were infected with the false teachings of the Pharisees. Confused by the strictness of the speech, people began to ask: "*What shall we do then?*" (Luke 3:10). John answers that it was necessary to perform deeds of love and benevolence, and to refrain from any type of the evil. These would be the "*fruits worthy of repentance*".

Then there was the time of a general expectation of the Messiah's coming, together with that the Jews believed that the Messiah, when He would come, He would baptize (John 1:25). So it is not surprising that many started to pose the question, if John is Christ Himself. To this John replied that he baptizes with water unto repentance (Matt. 3:11), i.e. as a sign of repentance. But the One, Who is coming after him is Mightier, Whom he, John, is not worthy to untie His sandals and carry them (Luke 3:16; Mark 1:7, 3:11), just as slaves do for their master. "*He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire*" (Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16; Mark 1:8) — the grace of the Holy Spirit will act in His baptism, searing every type of iniquity with fire. "*His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire*" (Matt. 3:12; Luke 3:17) — Christ would clean His people, just as the master cleans his

thrashing floor of weeds and dirt, collecting the wheat, i.e. gathering all those who have believed in Him into His Church, as though into a granary, and all those rejecting Him, will subject to the eternal suffering.

The Baptism of the Lord Jesus Christ.

(Matt. 3:13-18; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:32-34).

The 4 Evangelists narrate about the Baptism of the Lord Jesus Christ. Saint Matthew depicts this event in the most detail.

“Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee...” Evangelist Mark adds that He came specifically from Nazareth of Galilee. Apparently, it was in the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar’s ruling when, according to Saint Luke, Jesus became 30 — it was the age, required to be a teacher of faith. Saint Matthew writes that John refuses to baptize Jesus saying: *“I need to be baptized by You, and are you coming to me?”* But according to the Gospel of John, the Baptist did not know Christ before His baptism (John 1:33), until he saw the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descending upon Him. There is no contradiction here. Before the baptism, John did not recognize Jesus as the Messiah. However, when He came to him requesting to be baptized, John, being a prophet who penetrated people’s hearts, immediately felt His holiness, purity and His eternal pre-eminence over him; therefore he could not but exclaim: *“I need to be baptized by you...”* When he saw the Holy Spirit ascending on Jesus, then he became finally assured that before him was the Messiah-Christ.

“For thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” — responded Jesus Christ to the Baptist (Matt. 3:15); this meant that the Lord Jesus Christ, as a Human and the Head of new, regenerated by Him humanity had to show by His own example, the essentiality of all of God’s determinations. However, *“when He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water”* (Matt. 3:16), because being sinless, He had no need to confess, as had to do all the others being baptized — while they remained in the water. Saint Luke reports (3:21) *that Jesus also being baptized, and praying*, undoubtedly about that His Heavenly Father would bless the beginning of His service.

“The heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him”. According to the text, John “saw” the Holy Spirit, and of course the Baptized Himself, as well as the people present, for the aim of the miracle was to reveal to the people the Son of God in Jesus, Who up to this time, dwelt in anonymity, that is why the Church sings on the feast day of Christ’s Baptism (also called Theophany): *“Thou hast appeared this day to the whole world”* (The contacion). As John says, God’s Spirit not only descended on Jesus, but *“He remained upon Him”* (John 1:32).

The voice of God the Father: *“This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased”* (Matt. 3:17, Mark 1:11 and Luke 3:22), was the indication to John and those people present about the Divine entitlement of the One Baptized as the Son of God in the personal sense, the Begotten Son, in Whom the grace of God the Father abides eternally. Together with this, the words were the Heavenly Father’s answer to His Divine Son’s prayer, about the blessing of the great exploit of serving, for the sake of the mankind salvation.

Our Holy Church celebrates the Baptism of Christ on the 6th of January, naming it the feast of Theophany, because this event revealed the whole Trinity to the people: God the Father — the voice from heaven, God the Son — the baptism, fulfilled by John in the river Jordan, God the Holy Spirit — the ascension upon Jesus Christ in the form of a dove.

The Forty-Day Fast and Tempting by the Devil.

(Matt. 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4:1-13).

The narration about the Lord Jesus Christ’s 40 day fast and His following tempting by the devil in the wilderness is contained in the Gospels of the first three Evangelists. Moreo-

ver, Saints Matthew and Mark tell about this in detail, while Saint Mark mentions it briefly, without depicting the details.

After the baptism, “*Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil*” (Matt. 4:1). This was situated between Jericho and the Dead Sea. One of the mountains in this wilderness still carries the name of the “Forty days” because the Lord fasted there for 40 days. The first thing God’s Spirit (that resided in Jesus with the baptism) did was to lead Him into the wilderness, so that through fasting and prayer He could prepare Himself to the great service of saving mankind. There, He fasted for 40 days and nights, i.e. according to everything, not eating anything and finally “*was hungry*” (Matt. 4:2, Luke 4:2), that is, He reached the acute stage of hunger and drain of energy. “*Now... the tempter came to Him*” (Matt. 4:3). This was the concluding approach of the tempter, because according to Luke, during the whole period of forty days, the devil never ceased to tempt the Lord (Luke 4:2).

What was the sense of this devil’s temptation of the Lord?

Having come to the earth to destroy the works of the devil, the Lord of course could have obliterated them with one breath of His lips, however, it is necessary to remember that the devil’s works had taken root in the delusion of the free human soul, which the Lord had come to save without depriving it of God’s greatest gift — its freedom. The human was created neither as a pawn, nor as a soulless machine or an animal guided by instinct, but as a free and intelligent personality. In relation to the Divinity of Jesus Christ, this temptation appeared as a battle between the spirit of the evil and the Son of God that has come to save the human race, for the preserving of the power over the people with the help of the illusory happiness. This temptation is akin to that of Jehovah, which the Israelites permitted when they started to complain in Rephidim about the lack of water: “*Is the Lord among us or not?*” (Exodus 17:7). Likewise, the devil commences his temptation with the words: “*If You are the Son of God...*” Just as the Psalmist says of the sons of Israel that they tempted the Lord in the wilderness, so the devil tempted the Son of God with the intention of provoking Him, anger, reproach and insult (Psalm 78:40-41).

Mainly, the temptation was aimed against Christ’s human nature, over which the devil hoped to extend his influence and deviate it onto the false path. Christ came to the earth in order to establish His Kingdom among the people — God’s Kingdom. There were two paths that led to that: one, which the Jews were longing for, the path of a speedy and dazzling ascension of the Messiah as the world’s King, and the other path — slow and thorny, the path of voluntary moral rebirth of the people, combined with many sufferings not only for the followers of the Messiah, but for Himself. This is exactly what the devil wanted to do - to turn the Lord away from this second path, having attempted to entice Him in a human way with the ease of the first path, which promised no sufferings but only the glory.

In the first place, taking advantage of Christ’s hunger, which was torturing Jesus as a human the devil attempted to convince Him to use His divine power so as to rid Himself of that so hard to bear for every human being feeling of hunger. Pointing to the stones (which to this day retain the shape of loaves), he says: “*If you are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread*” (Matt. 4:3; Luke 4:3). The devil hoped that having been tempted once, Jesus will react likewise in the future: surround Himself with the legions of Angels from His enemy hordes, come down from the cross and call Elijah to His aid (Matt. 26:53, 27:40, 49), and then the matter of saving humanity with His sufferings on the cross would not be realized. Having turned water into wine for the others and miraculously augmented the number of loaves, Human-God rejected this wily advice with the words of Moses, spoken in the regard to the manna which God sent to His people, while they were in the wilderness over a 40 year period: “*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*” (Deuter. 8:3; Matt. 4:4; Luke 4:4). Under the term “every word” one must understand God’s benevolent will that thinks of the man. The Lord performed miracles to satisfy not His needs but those of the others: if during all His sufferings, instead of tolerating them, He would have resorted to His Divine powers, He would not have been an example to

us. Often repeating this miracle, He might have enticed those people that at the time were demanding **“bread and signs”**, however, those people would not be trustworthy for the Kingdom of Heaven, being established by Him. His aim was in that the people would follow Him freely, through His word and not like slaves, enticed by the ease of possessing with the earthly blessings.

Having suffered a defeat with his first temptation, the devil started with the second one: he took Him to Jerusalem and setting Him on the pinnacle of the temple, suggested: *“If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: ‘He shall give His Angels charge over You, in their hands they shall bear You up, Lest You dash your foot against a stone’*” (Matt. 4:6; Luke 4:9-10). The proposal was aimed at astounding the people’s imagination with this miracle, which were tense of expectation for the coming of the Messiah — and thus enticing them easily. Of course, this would have been of no moral benefit for the people’s moral life, and the Lord rejected that proposal with the words: *“It is written again, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God’*” (Matt. 4:7; Luke 4:12). These words were said by Moses to the people of Israel (Deut. 6:16). Jesus Christ meant that without necessity, it was inadvisable to expose oneself to danger, trying out the wonder-working power of God’s omnipotence.

Then the devil starts his third temptation by showing Christ, from a high mountain *“all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, ‘All these things I will give You if You fall down and worship me’*” (Matt. 4:8-9, Luke 4:6-7). The devil unfolded before Christ’s eyes the scene of all the kingdoms of the world, which, as the spirit of the evil, he actually controlled. He showed Him, what forces and means are under his disposal in this world, to fight with God, Who came down to the earth in order to save humanity from his control. Apparently, he hoped that this scene would agitate Jesus’s human spirit, instill the fear and doubt in His soul about the possibility of achieving the great task of saving the human race. Indeed, what could be more frightening than the picture of the world, voluntarily submitting itself into the devil’s authority? The devil wanted to say with this: *“You see my authority over humans? Do not interfere with my existence and control over the people in the future, and for this, I am ready to share my authority with You — You only have to join me. Only worship me and you will be the Messiah that the Jews are expecting”*. Naturally, with these words the devil promised Jesus the purely outward power over humans, only the outward authority over them, keeping for himself the inner, spiritual authority. But this was exactly what the Lord did not want, teaching that He did not come to rule outwardly, not to be served as an earthly ruler (Matt. 20:28), and that His Kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36), His Kingdom is purely spiritual. That is why the Lord, using the words of Deuteronomy (6:13), drives the devil away from Himself: *“Away with you Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve’*” (Matt. 4:10). With this, Jesus wants to show that He does not accept the devil’s authority over the world, because the universe belongs to the Lord God, and He is the only One to be worshipped in it.

According to Evangelist Luke, the devil leaves Jesus Christ *“until an opportune time”* (Luke 4:13), because he soon begins to tempt the Lord through people, creating all types of snares.

Evangelist Mark makes an important reference to the fact that in the wilderness, Jesus *“was with the wild beasts”* (Mark 1:13). As the New Adam, the beasts would not venture to attack Him, acknowledging in Him their Sovereign.

The First Disciples of Christ.

(John 1:35-51).

After the devil’s temptations, the Lord Jesus Christ headed anew towards Jordan to John. In the meantime, on the eve of His return, John gave a new triumphant testimony of

Him before the Pharisees — but this time, not as about the coming but the arrived Messiah. Only one Evangelist — John, narrates about this event. The Jews sent to John from Jerusalem priests and Levites to ask him, who he is — maybe Christ? Because according to their understanding, only Christ-Messiah could baptize. *“He (John) confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ” (John 1:20).* To the question who he was, perhaps a prophet, he calls himself: *“I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness” (John 1:23),* and emphasizes, that his baptism with water — like his entire service — is only preparatory, and in order to put aside the further questions, he concludes his answer with a triumphant declaration: *“There stands One among you Whom you do not know. It is He Who, coming after me, is preferred before me” (John 1:26-27).* He emerges for His service after me, but has eternal existence and Divine worthiness, He is *“Whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose” (John 1:27).* This testimony was given in Bethabara — where the masses of people used to flock to John.

“The next day,” i.e. the next time, after the 40-day fast and the devil’s temptations, Jesus again comes to John at Jordan. Upon seeing Him, John announces to everyone: *“Behold! The Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29);* confirming that this is the One Who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, **the Son of God**, as: *“I saw the Spirit descending from Heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him” (John 1:32).*

The following day, after the personal testimony of the arrived Messiah, the Son of God that had taken all the sins of the world upon Himself, John was once again standing on the bank of the river Jordan with two of his followers, while Jesus was passing by the bank. Seeing the Lord, John again repeats the same words about Him: *“Behold! The Lamb of God”.* In calling Christ the Lamb, John relates to Him the wonderful prophecy of Isaiah where he presents Messiah as a sheep led to slaughter — a mute lamb before his shearers (Isaiah 53:7). Consequently, the basic thought of John’s testimony lies in that Christ is the sacrifice, brought by God for people’s sins. But in John’s words about Jesus: *“Who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29),* this enormous live Sacrifice also represents the High Priest, Who sanctifies Himself: takes upon Himself the sins of the world and sacrifices Himself for the world.

After hearing this testimony on Jesus’s Divinity, this time both of John’s disciples accompanied Him to where He lived, and stayed with Him from the 9th hour (or, in our terms since 4 o’clock in the afternoon) till late evening, listening to His speech, which increasingly was instilling in them the unshakeable belief that He is the Messiah. One of the disciples was Andrew, and the other — Evangelist John himself, who never mentioned himself in the narration about those events, in which he personally participated. Returning home after conversing with the Lord, Andrew was the first to announce that he and John had found the Messiah; he informs his brother Simon: *“We have found the Messiah (which is translated, the Christ)”.* Thus, Andrew was not only the First-Called disciple of Christ, how they are used to call him, but he was also the first of the Apostles to preach about Him and to convert and bring the future leader of the Apostles. When Andrew brought his brother to Christ, the Lord, looking at him with a trying glance, called him Cephas, meaning “a rock,” i.e. Petros in Greek, or — Peter.

The following day, after Andrew and John’s visit, Jesus wished to go to Galilee and summoned Philip to follow Him. Philip, locating his friend Nathanael, tried to invite him as well, saying: *“We have found Him of Whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote — Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph”.* However, Nathanael objected: *“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”* Apparently, Nathanael shared the common with many Jews prejudice that Christ, as a King with earthly greatness, will come and appear in glory among the higher echelons of Jewish society; apart from this, at that time, Galilee was held in bad repute among the Jews, and Nazareth, this small town that is not mentioned anywhere in the holy writings of the Old Testament, seemed in no way to be the birthplace of the Messiah, Who had been promised by the Prophets. Nevertheless, Philip did not see the need to refute his

friend's prejudice and offered him to be convinced in the genuineness of his words, saying: "*Come and see*".

Being a forthright and sincere person, and wishing to investigate the veracity of his friend's words, Nathanael went to Christ. The Lord testified of the simplicity and artlessness of his soul, and declared: "*Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no deceit!*" Nathanael expressed surprise, where the Lord knew him from, seeing him for the first time. So, to totally disperse Nathanael's doubts and draw him towards Himself, Christ reveals His Divine omniscience by hinting at a private circumstance in Nathanael's life, the meaning of which could only be known to no one but Nathanael: "*Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you*".

Whatever Nathanael was doing under the fig tree is unknown to us, but as we can see, there is a hidden mystery in this event, about which besides Nathanael could know only God. This revelation startled Nathanael so much that all his doubts about Jesus dispersed in a moment: he realized that standing before him was not an ordinary human, but the One gifted with the Divine omniscience, and he instantly believed in Jesus as in the Divine Messenger-Messiah, expressing this with the words filled with fervent faith: "*You are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel*". There is a premise that Nathanael was in the habit of performing his established prayer rites under the fig tree and, apparently, at that particular time, he probably experienced the peculiar anguish during the prayer, which clearly lodged itself in his memory and about which none of the people knew about. This is most likely why the Lord's words aroused such fervent faith in Him as in the Son of God, to Whom the states of the human soul are opened.

To Nathanael's exclamation, the Lord addresses not only to him alone, but to all His followers, predicting: "*Most assuredly, I say to you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the Angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man*". With these words the Lord is saying that His disciples will see His glory with their spiritual eyes, that the ancient prophesy of heaven connection with earth by a mysterious ladder, which the Old Testament Patriarch Jacob foresaw, is fulfilled (Gen. 28:11-17), through the incarnation of the Son of God, Who had now become "*Son of Man*". The Lord often calls Himself with this name; there are 80 cases of this in the Gospel. Through this, Christ positively and irrefutably confirms His human nature, and also underlines that He is the Human in the highest meaning of the word: the ideal, universal and absolute Person, the Second Adam, the primal father of the new mankind, regenerated through His sufferings on the cross. This way, the similar name comes in no way to denigrate Christ, but expresses His superiority above the general level, indicating in Him the accomplished ideal of human nature, i.e. of such a man, which is necessary for Him to be in accordance with the thought of His Maker and His Creator — God.

The First Miracle at the Wedding at Cana of Galilee.

(John 2:1-12).

Only one Evangelist — John, narrates about the first miracle, made by Jesus Christ (turning water into wine at a wedding or "marriage," at Cana in Galilee. This occurred on the third day of His departure with Philip and Nathaniel to Galilee. Cana was a small town, located in 2-3 hours of walk towards the north of Nazareth and was called Galilean, unlike the other one — situated close to the city of Tyre. Nathaniel was a native of Galilean Cana.

By the custom of hospitality, Jesus was invited there as an ordinary person, like an acquaintance. His Mother was there already, having presumably arrived there earlier. The family that was celebrating the wedding was not rich, that was why, during the celebrations, they found out the lack of wine. The Ever-Holy Virgin took an active part in this circumstance, which threatened to spoil the innocent delight of the family's jubilation. Her soul, filled with grace, manifested the first example of Her consideration and intercession for people before Her Divine Son. "*They have no wine,*" — She says to Her Son, undoubtedly counting on His miraculous help to these poor people. "*Woman, what does your concern*

have to do with Me?” In the word “woman” one should not see even a shade of disrespect — this form of addressing was usual in the East. During the hardest moments of His sufferings on the cross, the Lord likewise addresses His Mother, entrusting the care of Her to His beloved Disciple (John 19:26). “*My hour has not yet come*” — says the Lord. More likely, Christ meant, that not all the wine that had been saved for the wedding, ran out. In any case, from the further words of His Mother one can see that She did not interpret His response as a refusal. “*Whatever He says to you, do it*” — She says to the servants.

There were 6 stone waterpots, which served for frequent ablutions that were established by the Jewish laws, for example, for washing the hands before meals. The capacity of those waterpots was huge, for a “measure” or “bat” was equal to our measurement of one and a half buckets; therefore, there could be from 18 up to 27 buckets in the total capacity, the more sticking was the miracle, made by the Lord.

Jesus directed the servants to fill the waterpots with water, “*and they filled them up to the brim*”. Jesus further orders them to draw some of it out and present it to master of the feast, so that he would be convinced in the authenticity of the accomplished miracle. As we can see, the Lord without even a touch, at a distance performed this miracle, what especially clearly testifies of His Divine power. As the Saint Chrysostom explains: “So as to show that He is the One Who converts the water into grapes and the rain into wine through the root of the grape; and that, what happens in the plant over a lengthy period of time, He accomplishes in an instant at the wedding”. Not knowing where the wine came from, the master calls the bridegroom and gives witness through his words to the authenticity of the accomplished miracle, testifying with his words the veracity of the accomplished miracle and even emphasizing that the miraculous wine is of much higher quality than that which they had. From the words “*when the guests have well drunk*” one should not draw the conclusion that at this wedding, everybody was drunk. The conversation here is about the general custom and not about the specific usage concerning this case. It is well known that the Jews were noted for their moderation in the use of wine, which in Palestine was considered an ordinary drink and was diluted with water. To get drunk was regarded as extremely improper — and of course, the Lord Jesus Christ would not participate in a feast where many could have been drunk. The purpose of the miracle was to bring happiness to the poor people, fulfilling their family celebration. In this the Lord’s mercy became apparent. According to the Evangelist’s testimony, that was the first miracle that the Lord performed, having stepped on the path of His public service, which was also performed with the aim of revealing His glory as that of the Son of God, and to ratify His Disciples’ faith in Him. After this miracle and spending some time in Nazareth, the whole Holy Family headed to Capernaum, in order to travel from there to Jerusalem for the feast day of Pascha.

The First Pascha.

Driving the sellers out of the Temple.

(John 2:13-25).

The first three Evangelists do not tell quite clearly about the Lord’s stay in Jerusalem, they narrate in detail only about the Pascha, which was on the eve of Christ’s suffering. Only Saint John gives us sufficient detail about the Lord’s every visit of Jerusalem at Pascha during all three years of His public service, as well as His visits of Jerusalem on some other feast days. It was totally natural for the Lord to appear in Jerusalem on the great feast days, because all the spiritual life of the Jewish people was concentrated there, and on those days, people from all over Palestine, as well as from the other countries, gathered there, and it was important for the Lord to reveal Himself as the Messiah exactly there.

Driving the sellers out of the Temple, described by John at the beginning of His Gospel, differs from the same event, described by the other three Evangelists. The first event occurred at the beginning of Christ's public service, while the last one (which in reality could be several) took place at the end of His public service, before the 4th Pascha.

As it can be seen further, the Lord in the company of His Disciples traveled from Capernaum to Jerusalem, but this time, it was not simply because of the obligations to the law, but in order to render the will of His Sender, to continue the Messianic service that had commenced in Galilee. At the feast day of Passover, up to two million Jews gathered in Jerusalem, who were obliged to kill the Paschal lambs and bring the sacrifice to God in the Temple. According to the testimony of Joseph Flavius, in the year 63 AD, on the day of the Jewish Passover, some 256,500 lambs were given to the priests for slaying, not counting minor livestock and birds. For the sake of ease in selling such a large amount of animals, the Jews converted the so called area of "courtyard of the heathen" into a market-place: they gathered the sacrificial animals, placed cages with birds, erected shop-fronts for the sale of everything, necessary for sacrificial offerings and set up money-exchange centers. At the time, the official money in circulation was in Roman coins, while the law demanded that contributions to the temple were in Jewish shekels. The Jews arriving for Passover had to change their money, and this exchange brought great profit to the moneychangers. Striving for the maximum profit, the Jews were selling in the temple's courtyard the other items, which had nothing to do with sacrificial offerings, for example, oxen. The high priests themselves took part in breeding doves for their sale at high prices.

The Lord, having made a whip out of ropes, which were apparently used to restrain the animals, drove the lambs and oxen out of the temple, overturned the money-changers' tables, scattering their coin, and walking up to those who sold doves, said: "*Take these things away! Do not make My Father's house a house of merchandise!*" Thus, for the first time, calling God His Father, Jesus declared Himself publicly as the Son of God. Nobody had the audacity to oppose the Divine authority of the act, because apparently John's witness of Him as of the Messiah had already reached Jerusalem, and it might be that the traders' conscience woke. Only when He reached the doves (thereby affecting the self-interests of the high priests), He received a query: "*What sign do you show to us, since you do these things?*" Jesus answered to that: "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*". Furthermore, as the Evangelist explains further, what Christ meant was the "*temple of His Body*", i.e. what He wanted to say with this to the Jews was: You are asking for a sign from Me — it will be given to you, but only not now: when you destroy the temple of My Body, I shall raise it up in three days and this should serve as a sign of that authority, with which I am doing this.

The high priests did not understand that with those words, Jesus predicted His Own death, destruction of His body and His resurrection from the dead on the third day. They took His words regarding the temple literally, relating them to the Jerusalem temple, and attempted to provoke the people against Him.

Meanwhile, the Greek verb "agaro" translated into Slavonic "I shall raise" actually means "I shall awaken" and therefore in no way can be applied to the destruction of a building, it matches sooner the notion of a body, immersed in sleep. Naturally, the Lord was speaking of His Body as of a temple, because it contained His Divinity; and finding Himself in a temple building; it was especially natural for the Lord Jesus Christ to speak of His Body as of a temple. Each time, when the Pharisees demanded some type of a sign from the Lord, He told them that they will see no other signs but that which He called the Prophet Jonah's sign — the resurrection after the three days of interment. In the light of this, the Lord's words addressed to the Jews could be understood thus: is it not enough for you to desecrate the hand-built house of My Father, by making it a house of merchandise? Your hatred is leading you to crucify and kill My body; carry this out and then you will see such a sign that will paralyze all My enemies with fear — I shall raise up My dead and buried body in three days.

However, seizing upon the literal meaning of Christ's words, the Jews got armed with the outer sense of the words of Christ and attempted to make them absurd and impossible to fulfill. They pointed to the fact that that temple — the pride of the Jews — took them 46 years to build, so how could it be raised up in three days? They talk here about the restoration of the temple by Herod. The construction of the temple began in 734 from the establishment of Rome, i.e. 15 years before the birth of Christ, and the 46th year falls on the 780th year from the establishment of Rome, i.e. on the first Evangelical Passover. Even the Lord's Disciples did not understand the sense of His words until the Lord's resurrection from the dead and the moment when *"He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures"*.

Further on, the Evangelist states that during the feast of Pascha, the Lord worked wonders, and many who saw them, believed in Him. However, *"Jesus did not commit Himself to them"*, i.e. did not count on them or their faith, for the faith, based on wonders only, not warmed up by the love for Christ, cannot be counted as stable. The Lord "knew all men" as the Almighty God, "knew what was in men" — what was hidden in the depths of everyone's soul, and therefore, did not trust the words of those, who, seeing His miracle, professed one's faith in Him.

The Lord Jesus Christ's dialogue with Nicodemus.

(John 3:1-21).

Driving the seller out of the temple and the miracles performed by the Lord in Jerusalem, so strongly influenced the Jews that one of the "princes" — or leaders of the Jews — Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, came to see Jesus. Apparently, he wanted very much to hear His teachings, but fearing to incur the wrath of his associates that were hostile towards the Lord, he arrived at night. Nicodemus calls the Lord "Rabbi," i.e. the teacher and thus acknowledging His right to teach, which, according to the view of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus was not allowed to have — not having finished the Rabbinic school. This already shows Nicodemus's disposition towards Christ. Later, he calls Him "a Teacher come from God," accepting that He works wonders with the Divine power, typical of Him. Nicodemus speaks not only from his own name but from all the Jews, who believed in the Lord, and perhaps even from the name of some members of the Sanhedrin — although the majority of them was hostile towards the Lord.

The whole following discourse is remarkable, for it is directed towards destroying the false Pharisee outlook on the Kingdom of Heaven, and the conditions under which a human can enter this Kingdom. This conversation is divided into 3 parts: The spiritual rebirth as the basic demand for entry into God's Kingdom; Redemption of humanity through the sufferings of the Son of God, without which, people would not be able to inherit God's Kingdom; The nature of the judgment over the people that have not believed in the Son of God.

The type of a Pharisee at that time was the embodiment of the narrowest and fanatical, national particularity: they regarded themselves as completely different from the rest of the people. A Pharisee thought that just being a Jew, particularly being a Pharisee, he is a certain and worthiest member of the glorious Messiah's Kingdom. According to their belief, the Messiah Himself must be like them, and will free the Jews from the foreign yoke and establish the world kingdom, in which they, the Jews, will occupy the leading position. Apparently Nicodemus, sharing these common for the Pharisees' opinion, possibly felt that they were false deep down in his heart. Therefore, he came to Jesus, Whose remarkable personality caused spreading of so many rumors, to find out, if He was that expected Messiah. That was why he decided to come personally to the Lord to substantiate this. With the first words of His conversation, the Lord destroys the Pharisees' false pretensions of being the chosen ones: *"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God"*. Or, in other words, it is insufficient to be a Jew by birth. There must be the complete moral rebirth, which is given to a person from above, from God, and one should as if be born again, become a new being (which is the essence of Christianity). For the Pharisees imagined the

Messiah's Kingdom as the physical and earthly kingdom, there is nothing surprising in the fact that Nicodemus also took the Lord's words in a physical sense, i.e. that in order to enter the Messiah's Kingdom, it is necessary to have the second carnal birth, so he expressed his bafflement, emphasizing the absurdity of such a demand: *"How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"* Jesus then explains that the conversation is not of the physical birth, but of the special spiritual birth, which is distinguished from that bodily both in purpose and fruits.

This birth is *"of water and the Spirit"*. Water is the means or weapon, and the Holy Spirit — the Power, which brings about the new birth and the Cause of the new existence: *"Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God"*. *"That which is born of the flesh is flesh,"* — when a person is born from the earthly parents, he inherits from them the primal sin of Adam, nesting in the flesh, he thinks according to the flesh and pleases his physical passions and lusts. These deficiencies of the physical birth can be corrected through the spiritual birth: *"That which is born of the Spirit is spirit"*. He who accepted the rebirth from the Spirit, himself enters the spiritual life that is higher than anything carnal or sensual. Seeing that Nicodemus still does not understand, the Lord begins to explain what this birth is made up of, comparing the means of this birth with the wind: *"The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone born of the Spirit"*. In other words, in the spiritual rebirth, a person has access to observe the change only that takes place within him, but the power of rebirth and the method through which it acts, as well as the paths by which it arrives — all this is mysterious and subtle. In the same manner we feel how the wind affects us: we hear its "voice", but we do not see and know, where it comes from and where it goes, so free in its strife and in no way depending on our will. The effect of the Holy Spirit that gives us rebirth is akin to this: it is evident and sensory, yet enigmatic and unexplainable.

However, Nicodemus continues to remain in the state of incomprehension, and his next question *"How can these things be?"* are expressed the mistrust to the words of Christ and the Pharisee's pride, with the pretension to understand all and to be able to explain everything. It is this Pharisee's sophistry that the Lord destroys with His response, and with such power, that Nicodemus is unable to object — and in his state of self-humiliation, little by little begins to prepare in his heart the grounds on which the Lord will later sow His seeds of the redemptive teaching: *"Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?"* By these words the Lord not only accuses Nicodemus but also the high-minded Pharisee teachers, who, taking the key of understanding the mysteries of God's Kingdom, neither entered it themselves nor allowed the others to do so. How was it that the Pharisees did not know the doctrine on the necessity of the spiritual rebirth, when in the Old Testament one often encountered the thoughts on the necessity of the spiritual regeneration, about God's gift of a heart of flesh and not one of stone (Ezekiel 36:26). Even King David prayed: *"Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me"* (Psalm 51:10-11).

Passing to the revelations of the higher mysteries of Himself and of His Kingdom, the Lord remarks to Nicodemus in the form of a prologue that in opposition to the teachings of the Pharisees, He Himself and His disciples are proclaiming the new teaching, which is based directly on the knowledge and the contemplation of truth: *"We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive our witness,"* — that is, you, the Pharisees — are the false teachers of Israel.

In the further words: *"If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you Heavenly things?"* under **"earthly"** the Lord is thinking of the teaching on the necessity of rebirth, as the need of rebirth and its consequences happen within a person and are known through his inner experience. While speaking about the **"Heavenly"** the Lord means the sublime mysteries of God, which are higher than any human observation or knowledge: About the eternal unity of Triad-God, about accepting by the Son of God of the redeeming exploit for people's salvation, about conjoining in this exploit of the Divine

love with the Divine justice. Perhaps, about what happens within the person and with the person may be known by the person himself. But what a human can ascend to heaven and penetrate into the mysterious domain of the Divine life? Nobody, except the Son of God, Who in descending to earth did not abandon heaven: *“No one has ascended to Heaven but He Who came down from Heaven, that is, the Son of Man Who is in Heaven”*. By these words the Lord reveals the mystery of His incarnation, convincing him in that He is greater than an ordinary messenger of God, akin to the ancient Prophets, for which Nicodemus takes Him, that His appearance on earth in the form of the Son of Man is the ascending from the highest state to the lowest, belittled one, because His genuine, eternal existence is not on earth, but in heaven.

Afterwards the Lord reveals the mystery of His redeeming exploit to Nicodemus: *“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up”*. Why is it that the Son of Man had to be raised on the cross for the human salvation? This is exactly what is that **heavenly**, which is impossible to comprehend with the earthly mind. As to the symbol of His exploit on the cross, the Lord points to the brass snake that Moses raised in the wilderness. Moses raised the brass snake in front of the Israelites, so that they, struck by snakes, would receive a cure by looking at it. Likewise, the whole human race, living in flesh and struck by the ulcer of sin, receives its cure by looking with faith at Christ, Who had come down in the form of sinful flesh (Rom. 8:3). In the basis of the Son of God’s exploit of crucifixion lies God’s love for people: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”*. The everlasting life is established in a person by the grace of the Holy Spirit, while the access to the altar of grace (Heb. 4:16), is received by people through the redeeming death of Jesus Christ.

The Pharisees thought that Christ’s pursuit would consist of judging the people of other faiths. The Lord explains that He was currently sent to save the world, and not to judge. The unbelievers will condemn themselves, because together with their disbelief will be revealed their love for darkness and hatred for light, forthcoming from their love for dark deeds. Those who render truth, the honest and moral souls, walk towards the light themselves, not fearing the exposure of their deeds.

The Last Testimony of John the Baptist.

(John 3:22-36).

After the conversation with Nicodemus, which took place in Jerusalem during the Passover, *“Jesus and His Disciples came into the land of Judea, and there He remained with them and baptized”*. Here we have an important indication from Evangelist John that the Lord Jesus Christ spent much time in the southernmost part of Palestine, in the region called Judea. The other three Evangelists do not mention this fact. The length of the period spent by the Lord in Judea can be determined from the fact that, when returning to Galilee and stopping at Samaria, He mentioned to His Disciples: *“Do you not say “There are still 4 months and then comes the harvest?”* (John 4:35). It can be concluded from these words, that the Lord was returning from Palestine some 4 months before the harvest time, and since harvesting in Palestine takes place in April, then the Lord left Palestine not earlier than in November. Consequently, He stayed there not less than 8 months — from April till November. The first three Evangelists do not mention of this initial period of the Lord Jesus Christ’s public service: having narrated about His Baptism, fasting and the devil’s temptations in the wilderness, they immediately pass over to description of His activity in Galilee.

Being called by the Lord much later, Saint Matthew was not a witness to that what happened in Judea; and apparently, Saint Peter, from whose words Evangelist Mark wrote his Gospel, was not present, either, with the Lord in Judea; and it appears that Saint Luke did not have sufficient information on this period of Christ’s service. That was why Saint John felt his duty to add that what was omitted and to what he was an eyewitness. There is no indica-

tion of that the Lord spent all the 8 months in some specific area; it has to be supposed that He passed across all of this Holy Land with His sermon.

Saint John informs us that “*Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His Disciples*” (4:2). This baptism was identical to that performed by John the Baptist: it was with water and not with the Spirit, because at that time they did not have the Holy Spirit as “*Jesus was not yet glorified*” (John 4:39). It was only after the Lord’s resurrection from the dead that they received His directive to baptize in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19).

At the same time, Saint John the Baptist continued to baptize “*in Aenon near Salim*” in the area which is difficult to determine, however, it appears it was not adjacent to Jordan, otherwise the Evangelist would have no need to add an explanatory note: “*there was much water there*”. Saint John the Baptist’s disciples soon began to notice that there were fewer people coming to listen to their teacher than before, and in their blind, illogical affection to him, began to be vexed and envy the One, Who had great success among the people, i.e. Lord Jesus Christ. Undoubtedly, these malicious feelings within them were purposely fomented by the Pharisees, contriving arguments about cleansing, which lead to the debates about the comparative worthiness of the baptism performed by John and Christ’s Disciples. Wishing to vent their envy and vexation towards Christ to their teacher, John’s disciples came to him and said: “*Rabbi, He Who was with you beyond the Jordan, to Whom you have testified — behold. He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him*”. The use of the word “all” is applied here with exaggeration, which was suggested by envy and the desire to arouse envy in John.

Absolutely devoid of any envy towards Christ, the Baptist begins his answer by directly revealing Christ’s greatness in comparison to himself, and gives the new (and final) solemn testimony of Christ’s Divine worthiness. Defending Christ’s right to baptize, John states that of all of God’s messengers, no one can assume that which had not been given to him from Heaven. That is why if Christ baptizes, then He has the authority from God to do that. The Baptist reminds them that as he said from the beginning, he is not Christ, but only His Forerunner. Instead of vexation and envy, John expresses his joy about Christ’s successes. He calls Him the bridegroom and himself as a friend of the bridegroom, who does not envy the bridegroom’s advantage but stands before Him as a servant and “*rejoices greatly*” hearing His voice. In the Old Testament, the union of God with the faithful — just as the union of Christ with the Church in the New Testament — is often presented in the Holy Scripture in the form of a marriage (Isaiah 54:5-6, 62:5; Ephes. 5:23-27). Christ is the Bridegroom of the Church, and John — His friend, a close, trustworthy individual, who can only rejoice about the Bridegroom’s success. To the Jews, the friend of the bridegroom played an important role during the time, prior to the wedding. Once the wedding took place and the bridegroom became a husband, the role of the friend ended. So it was with John: he had the leading role in the preparation of the people to accept Christ, but when Christ began His public service, John’s role was over. That is why he states: “*He (Christ) must increase, but I must decrease*”, just as the morning star dims in the brightness of the rising sun.

Professing Christ’s superiority over him, John states that Christ is the One “*Who comes from above*” and therefore “*is above all*”, i.e. that He is greater than all people, even God’s messengers, and that he, John, having the earthly origin, proclaimed God’s truth only to the extent as one, who originates from the earth, can; but coming from Heaven, Christ testifies about the Heavenly and Divine, as about that, what He directly saw and heard, and that no one human is capable to accept this testimony without the grace of God (Matt. 16:17; John 6:44).

Sadly noticing the unkind feelings in his disciples, John praises those who accept Christ’s testimony, because He proclaims to the people the words of God Himself: he who accepts His words as the truth, accepts the words of God the Father as true. God the Father gave in abundance the gifts of the Holy Spirit, beyond all measure, to His Son Jesus Christ., because He loves His Son, and handed everything in His hands. Consequently, those who be-

lieve in the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, have eternal life, while the one who does not believe in Him, will not see eternal life but *“the wrath of God abides on him”*.

Thus, in concluding his service, John for the last time triumphantly testifies about Christ’s Divinity, exhorting everyone to follow Christ. These words need to be treated as the will of the greatest of all the Prophets.

The Imprisonment of Saint John.

(Matt. 14:3-5; Mark 6:17-20; Luke 3:19-20).

Soon after Saint John the Baptist’s last testimony of Christ’s Divinity, he was seized and imprisoned for exposing the illegal co-habitation of king Herod Antipas and Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip. The first three Evangelists narrate about this. Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, who ordered the slaying of the infants in Bethlehem, ruled Galilee and Perea. Being married to the daughter of the Arab King Aretus, he started a love affair with Herodias, unhappy in her marriage with Philip. She openly moved into the palace, having banished Herod’s legal wife. Feeling insulted about his daughter, Aretus declared war against Herod. Herod himself had to leave to the fort Machaerus (to the east of the Dead Sea), to take command of the troops. There, Herod heard about John the Baptist as of the Prophet that attracted many people to himself. Hoping to find support in his campaign, he sent for John. However, instead of the supporting word, he heard the very unpleasant for him accusation: *“It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife”* (Mark 6:18).

These words annoyed in particular Herodias, and she used all her influence in order to incite Herod to kill John. Fearing the people, Herod did not dare to kill John but just imprisoned him in the Machaerus fortress. According to Evangelist Mark’s testimony, Herod even respected John as a righteous and holy man, and acted many times in accordance with his advice. Apparently, like all people of weak character, Herod entered into the arrangements with his conscience, hoping by performing a few good deeds (according to John’s advice) to be able to atone his major sin — against which was John. He even enjoyed listening to the advice given by the Baptist, but would not forsake his sin, and in the end he took away his liberty to the benefit of evil Herodias. That was how John’s service, as that of the last of the Old Testament Prophets, ended.

The Talk with a Samaritan woman.

(Matt. 4:12; Mark 1:14; John 4:1-42)

All the four Gospels speak about the departure of the Lord to Galilee. Saints Matthew and Mark note that this happened after John had been imprisoned, while Saint John adds, that the reason for that was the rumor that Jesus was receiving and baptizing more disciples than John, although the Evangelist explains that it was not Christ, Who was baptizing them, but His disciples. After John’s imprisonment, the Pharisees’ hatred focused on Jesus, Who started to seem to them more dangerous than the Baptist. As His time for the suffering had not arrived yet, Jesus leaves Judea and goes to Galilee, in order to avert the persecution of His envious enemies. Only Evangelist John narrates about Christ’s conversation with the Samaritan woman that happened on the way to Galilee.

The Lord’s way was through Samaria — the district located to the north of Judea and formerly belonging to the three tribes of Israel: Dan, Ephraim and Manasseh. There was the town in this district called Samaria, Israel’s former capital. The Assyrian king Salmanassar conquered the Israelites and took them into captivity, replacing the population with heathens from Babylon and other places. The mixture of these settlers with the remaining Jews gave birth to the Samaritans. They accepted the Five Books of Moses, worshipped Jehovah — as well as they did not forget their own gods. When the Jews returned from their Babylonian captivity and started to erect the temple of Jerusalem, the Samaritans also wanted to join them in their endeavors. However, the Jews rejected them, so they erected their own temple on the Mt. Gerizim. While accepting the Books of Moses, the Samaritans, however, rejected the

writings of the Prophets and the entire tradition. Because of this, the Jews' attitude towards them was worse than to heathens, they avoided the contact with them in every way possible, loathing and despising them.

Passing through Samaria, the Lord with His disciples stopped to rest near a well, which according to the tradition, was dug by Jacob close to the town named Sychem, called by Saint John as Sychera. Possibly, the Evangelist was mocking at this name, restructuring it from the word "shikar" — "ply with wine," into "sheker" — "lie." St. John points at the fact that it was "*about sixth hour*" (the noon according to our time), the time of the maximum heat, which most probably was the reason for having rest. "*A woman of Samaria came to draw water*". While the disciples of Jesus went to the town to buy some food, Christ turned to the Samaritan woman with a request: "*Give Me a drink*". Seeing by the clothing or manner of speech that the addressing her man was a Jew, the Samaritan woman expressed her surprise with that He, being a Jew, is asking her, a Samaritan, for water, meaning the hatred and contempt that the Jews felt towards the Samaritans. But Jesus, having come to the world to save everyone, but not only the Jews, explains to the woman that she would not be asking such things if she knew Who she was talking to and what great fortune ("*Gift of God*") God sent her through this meeting. If she only knew Who was asking her for a drink, then she herself would be asking Him to quench her spiritual thirst and reveal to her the mystery, which everybody is seeking to know: and He would give her "*living water*", which is meant to be understood as the grace of the Holy Spirit (see John 7:38).

The Samaritan woman misunderstood the Lord: she thought the living water meant the water found at the bottom of the well. That was why she asked Jesus, where she could get the living water if He did not have anything to scoop it up with, while the well was deep. "*Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?*" (John 4:12). She then recollects patriarch Jacob with pride and love, as the one who left the use of the well to his offspring. Then the Lord elevates her mind to the highest understanding of His words: "*Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life*" (John 4:13-14). In the spiritual life, the blessed water has a different effect than the earthly water in the physical life. The one who is filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, will never feel the spiritual thirst, because all his spiritual needs have been satisfied; meanwhile, the one who drinks the physical water, as well as the one who satisfies some other type of the earthly needs, quenches his thirst for some time, and soon after "*will thirst again*".

Moreover, the blessed water will dwell in the man, establishing a spring within him, gushing (*skipping* — the literal translation from Greek) into eternal life, i.e. making that person a communicant of the eternal life. Still not understanding the Lord and thinking that He is speaking about the ordinary water — only some special type which quenches the thirst forever — she asks the Lord for some of this water, so as to get rid of the need to come to the well for the water. Finally, in order to make her realize that she is speaking with no ordinary man, the Lord initially directs her to call her husband, and afterwards, He directly accuses her that while she had 5 husbands, at that moment, too, she was living in the adulterous union.

Realizing that the one standing before her was a Prophet Who knows everything concealed, the woman turns to Him for the resolution of the problem, which greatly tormented the Samaritans in their relationship with the Jews: who is correct in the argument about the place for worshipping God. Were correct the Samaritans who, following their forefathers, built the temple at the Gerizim Mount, and worshiped God there, or, were correct the Jews who assured that it was allowed to worship God only in Jerusalem? Guided by Moses's directive to deliver a blessing on this mountain, the Samaritans chose Mt. Gerizim for their worship. And although their temple that was erected there was destroyed by John Hyrcanus in the year of 130 BC, they continued to bring their sacrificial offerings to the location of the ruined temple. Responding to the woman's question, the Lord explains that it is wrong to

think that it is allowed to worship God only in one specific place — and that the argumentative question between the Samaritans and the Jews will soon lose its meaning by itself, because the both types of the divine service — the Jewish as well as the Samaritan — will cease in the nearest future. This prophecy was accomplished when the Samaritans, decimated by the soldiers, became disillusioned with the importance of their mountain, while Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans and the temple was burnt in the year of 70 AD.

Nevertheless, the Lord gives His preference to the Jewish worship, meaning, of course, the fact that the Samaritans have accepted only the Pentateuch of Moses, rejecting the Prophetic writings, which contained the detailed description of the Personality and the Kingdom of the Messiah. But “*salvation is of (will come from) the Jews*” for the Redeemer comes from the Jewish people. Further, the Lord, elaborating His initial statement, points to the fact that the “*hour is coming, and now is*” (since the Messiah had already appeared), the time of the new, highest worship of God, which will not be constrained by any location, but will be everywhere, for it will be in the spirit and truth. Only this type of worship is genuine, because it corresponds to the nature of God Himself, Who is the Spirit. To worship God in the spirit and truth means to endeavor to please God, not only in the outward form but through the sincere and openhearted strife with all the strength of the spiritual being, for God as the Spirit, not through the sacrificial offerings, which both the Jews and Samaritans were making, as though this was the only way to honor God, -- but to know and love God, not falsely and hypocritically, wishing to please Him by fulfilling His commandments. Worshipping God in “*Spirit and truth*” by no means excludes the outward, ritual side of honoring God, like some false teachers and sectarians attempt to affirm, but the main power is not contained in this outward side of God’s worshipping. The actual ceremony of worshipping God should not be seen as prejudicial: it is both essential and unavoidable, for a human consists not only of the spirit, but of the body. Jesus Christ Himself physically worshipped God the Father, kneeling and prostrating Himself on the ground, and not rejecting similar worshipping of Himself from the people, during His life on the earth (see examples: Matt. 2:11, 14:33, 15:25; John 11:32, 12:3; and many other examples in the Gospel).

The Samaritan woman, somehow, begins to understand the meaning of Christ’s words and in her deliberation says: “*I know that Messiah is coming (Who is called Christ). When He comes, He will tell us all things*”. The Samaritans were also awaiting the Messiah, calling Him — Gashageb — basing their expectations on the words of Genesis 49:10, and especially on Moses’s words in Deuteronomy 18:18). The Samaritans’ understanding of the Messiah was not as distorted as of the Jews, because they awaited Him as a Prophet and not as a political figure. That was why Jesus, not calling Himself the Messiah before the Jews for a long time, directly says to this simple Samaritan woman that He is the Messiah-Christ promised by Moses: “*I (am the Messiah) Who speak to you am Me*”. Elated with joy from seeing the Messiah, the woman drops her water-pot near the well and hurries into the town to announce to everybody about the arrival of the Messiah, He to Whom all hearts are open, revealed to her all her past actions. Just then, His disciples arrived and were surprised to find their Teacher talking to a woman, for was condemned by the rules of the Jewish rabbis, who edified: “*Do not speak for long with a woman*” and “*nobody should talk to a woman on the road, even with a lawful woman*” and also: “*It is better to burn the words of the law, than to teach them to a woman*”. However, being reverent to their Teacher, the disciples did not in any way show their amazement and just asked Him to taste the food that they brought.

Although Jesus-Man’s natural feeling of hunger was stifling His happiness about the Samaritan people’s conversion to Him, He was joyous that the seeds sown by Him had begun to produce a crop. That was why He refused to satisfy His hunger and replied to His disciples that the real food for Him was carrying out the task of saving humanity, a task conferred upon Him by God the Father. The Samaritan inhabitants that came to Him, seem to Christ as a cornfield, ripe for the harvest — while in the fields, the harvest is ready only in four months. Ordinarily, the one who sows the seeds collects the harvest: with the sowing of the seeds in

the souls, the spiritual harvest, more often than not, goes to the others, but together with that, the sowing rejoices with the harvester, because he did not sow for himself but for others. That is why Christ states that He is sending His Apostles to collect the harvest in the spiritual field, which initially was not prepared and sown by them, but by the others — the Old Testament Prophets and by Himself. During those explanations, the Samaritans approached the Lord. While many believed in Him “because of the word of the woman”, many more of them believed “because of His own word,” when on their invitation, He stayed with them in the town for two days. In listening to the Lord’s teachings they were convinced, according to their own admittance, that “this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world.”

The Arrival to Galilee and the Beginning of the Sermon.

(Matt. 4:13-17; Mark 1:15; Luke 4:14-15; John 4:43-45).

All four Evangelists testify about the Lord’s arrival to Galilee and the beginning of His sermons. Arriving to Galilee, He left His native town of Nazareth, testifying that a Prophet has no honor in His own town, and settled in Capernaum. This was treated by Saint Matthew as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy: *“In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulum and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time hath he made it glorious by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light”* (Isaiah 9:1-2).

Jesus was received by the inhabitants of Galilee in a good way, as they too traveled to Jerusalem on the feast day and saw His deeds. Soon, the rumors about Him spread across the whole country. He went to synagogues and taught, beginning His sermon with the words: *“Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!”* The remarkable thing is that John the Baptist used these same words to open his sermons. The New Kingdom, new order, which the Lord Jesus Christ came to install in people, differed so from their former sinful life, that it was indeed necessary for the people to leave everything from the past, and as though to be born again through repentance, i.e. to change completely internally. Repentance is the complete change in thoughts, feelings and aspirations.

Since the time the Lord returned to Galilee from Judea, Galilee became the constant location for His activities. This was the country not large in size but well populated, in which lived not only the Jews but the Phoenicians, Arabs and even Egyptians. The fertile grounds of this country attracted many settlers, who formed one people with the local inhabitants. Although the prevailing faith was Jewish, there were many heathens — hence Galilee was called **heathen**. On the one hand, this was the reason of the great religious ignorance of the people of Galilee, while on the other — the reason of their greater freedom from the religious prejudices of the Jews, particularly those concerning the Messiah. The Savior’s disciples were Galileans, and His other followers also walked freely along this fertile land. This might explain why the Lord chose Galilee as the prevailing location for His service — and we can also see that the Galileans indeed turned out to be more receptive to His sermon than the Jews.

The Healing of the Nobleman’s Son.

(John 4:46-54).

On the way to Capernaum, the Lord visited Cana where He performed His first miracle by turning water into wine. Having found out about this, one of the inhabitants of Capernaum, the former Herod’s noblemen, hurried to Cana to ask Jesus to come to Capernaum and heal his son, who was about to die. *“Then Jesus said to him, “Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will by no means believe”*. The Lord appreciated faith that was based on the contemplation of miracles less than that, based on the comprehension of His pure and sublime Divine teaching. Faith, born from seeing miracles, demands more and more new miracles in order to sustain itself, because the previous ones become habitual and cease to amaze. Together with this, a person accepting the teaching that is accompanied with miracles can fall into delusion, accepting a lie to be true, as miracles might be false, from the devil.

That is why the Word of God warns us to be wary of all miracles (Deut. 13:1-5). And the Lord speaks with some sorrow about the Galilee inhabitants' indiscriminating attitude in this respect. However, after this reproach, the nobleman displays persistence, which shows the magnitude of his faith: "*Sir, come down before my child dies!*" And the Lord heals the nobleman's son, and moreover, He does it by correspondence, saying: "*Go your way; your son lives*". At that precise time, the fever left the boy. Startled by the dying youth's instant recovery, the nobleman's servants hurried to their master to report him about the joyous news. The father, believing the Lord's words but thinking that the healing will happen slowly, inquired, at what hour the youth recovered. When he found out that it was at the precise hour when the Lord said that his son was cured, the nobleman "*himself believed, and his whole household*", i.e. when he notified them of the miracle, his whole family and servants believed in the Lord. Perhaps, it was the same Chuza, whose wife, Johanna, later followed Christ, serving Him.

This was the second miracle, which "*Jesus did when He had come out of Judea into Galilee*".

The Calling of the Fisherman.

(Matt. 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:1-11)

Three Evangelists narrate about the calling of the first Apostles: Matthew, Mark and Luke. Together with that, the first two mention the event very briefly, just stating the very fact, while Saint Luke gives the detailed description of the miraculous netting of the fish, preceding the calling. As Saint John writes, the first disciples, Andrew and John, designated by the Lord, followed Him even in Jordan, and later Simon, Philip and Nathanael joined him. However, having returned with Jesus to Galilee, they little by little turned to their former activity of catching fish. But the Lord calls them anew to follow Him, directing them to leave their fishing and dedicate themselves to another activity — catching people for the Kingdom of God.

The rumors of the Messiah's arrival quickly spread all over Galilee, and the crowds of people started to converge to listen to His teaching. They were crowding around Him, and once, when He was on the banks of the Gennesaret lake, also called as the sea (apparently, because of happening there strong storms), there was such a huge gathering that He was forced to enter into a boat and distance Himself from the shore, in order to teach people from there. Having finished edifying the people, the Lord ordered Simon, who was the owner of the boat, to sail further away from the shore, where the water was deeper, and to cast his net. Simon, being an experienced fisherman and having fished all night without success, was convinced that the new endeavor would turn out to be fruitless. However, this time the catch was so great that even the net burst in some places. Peter and Andrew had to call their friends from the other boat for help in order to take all the fish out. The catch was so abundant that the both fully loaded boats started to sink. Overwhelmed with reverent fear, Peter fell before Christ's feet, saying: "*Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord*". With those words, Peter wanted to express the extent of his unworthiness in the presence of such a great and mighty Wonder-worker. The Lord calms Peter with the meek word and predicts his future high designation. According to the testimony of Evangelists Matthew and Mark, the Lord tells both the brothers — Peter and Andrew: "*Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men*". And thereupon, He called the other two brothers — James and John Zebedee — to follow Him. Leaving their nets, and the latter two, their father as well, they followed Christ.

Healing in Capernaum.

(Mark 1:21-28; Luke 4:31-37).

When in Galilee, Christ mainly remained in Capernaum — so much, that it became "His town". Capernaum, located on the border of two domains — Galilee and Iturea, was outstanding for its salutary climate, material abundance and in general, had everything for that the people, wanting to listen to Christ, could converge there in large numbers. Living in

Capernaum, the Lord taught on Saturdays in synagogues — the houses where the Jews gathered for prayer. The church services and sacrificial offerings could only be performed in the temple of Jerusalem; however, while being in captivity, the Jews felt the extreme necessity to gather in prayer meetings for the common readings of the books of the Law and collective prayers. Such meeting-places became the synagogues. After the Jews' return from captivity, the synagogues became an essential attribute in every Jewish settlement, both in Palestine itself, and in every place of the Jewish settlement. The synagogue contained the urn, in which the books of the Law were kept, the pulpit, from which these books were read and the seating area. Anyone that regarded himself capable could read and interpret the Law and the Prophets. The reader usually stood up while reading and sat down when he passed over to interpreting of the read. Continually listening to the lifeless word of their teacher-Scribes and Pharisees, the Galileans were astounded in hearing the Lord's lively word. If the former interpreted the Law as its servants, Jesus spoke as the One, Who had authority. The Scribes and Pharisees, not understanding the Law themselves, distorted its meaning and therefore were unconvincing in their interpretations. Whereas Jesus was saying His own, i.e. that which He had heard from His Father, and spoke authoritatively, convincingly and persuasively, which was producing the strong impression on the listeners.

At the time, when the Lord was teaching in one of the synagogues in Capernaum, there was a man possessed by the evil spirit. He unexpectedly cried out in a loud voice: *"Let us alone! What have we to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are — the Holy One of God!"* This involuntary confession of truth wrenched through the presence of the Son of God was a cry of low, slavish fear, pretending and flattering in the deviation from judgment; a slave's lament, whose imagination draws the tortures and torment awaiting him, when meeting with his master. Perhaps by this confession, the enemy was hoping to undermine the people's trust in Jesus Christ, and we can see that the Lord indeed, forbade him to testify about Him, commanding: *"Be quiet, and come out of him"*. The possessed instantly fell to the ground in the middle of the synagogue, but stood up fully recovered, because the demon, obeying, had left him. Both the Evangelists underline the extremely powerful impression this made on the people by the healing of the possessed person.

The Healing of Peter's Mother-in-Law.

(Matt. 8:14-17; Mark 1:29-34; Luke 4:38-41).

The Evangelists Mark and Luke, place this in direct relationship with the preceding event. Leaving the synagogue, the Lord entered Simon Peter's house probably to eat bread. Peter's mother-in-law was found to be extremely ill, moreover, Evangelist Luke explains as a physician that it was a *"high fever"*. On one word from Jesus, the fever instantly left the afflicted woman and even her strength returned to her to such an extent, that she got up and began to serve them. The expulsion of the evil spirit in the synagogue, and then the miraculous cure of Simon's mother-in-law, produced such a powerful impression, that after the sunset (apparently, because this was Saturday), people started to bring the ill and possessed to the doors of Simon's house, so that soon the whole town gathered outside; and the Lord healed many, suffering of the various illnesses, and expelled many demons. Proving through his Gospel that Jesus is That Redeemer, about Whom the prophets foretold, Evangelist Matthew explains that through this mass healing, had been fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy: *"He Himself took our infirmities, And bore our sicknesses"*. To take infirmities, means to remove the weakness from the ill and destroy it; to bear sicknesses, means to ease the pain of the ill, to heal. Not wishing to hear the testimony of evil spirits, the Lord forbids them to pronounce through the lips of the possessed, that He is Christ, the Son of God.

The Sermon in Galilee.

(Matt. 4:23-25; Mark 1:35-39; Luke 4:42-44).

As a human being, Christ the Savior Himself suffered from physical exhaustion as a result of so many labors, and in that sense, it can be said, that He took upon Himself our infirmities and carried our illnesses. So in order to rest and restore His strength through the solitary prayer, in the early morning of next day, He left the people. However, the people again started to crowd around Simon's house, and having discovered that Jesus was not there, started to look for Him. Realizing this, Simon and those with him, i.e. Andrew, John and James, also started to look for Jesus, and when locating Him, asked Him to come back to town, where everybody was waiting and looking for Him. However, the Lord told them that He had to go to other towns and settlements to preach, "*because for this purpose I have come forth*", i.e. to spread the good news for everyone. Leaving Capernaum, Jesus traveled over whole Galilee, preaching and working wonders. The rumor of Him spread far beyond the boundaries of Galilee, across all Syria, and the sick from distant lands were brought to Him: from Decapolis, from Judea and Jerusalem, from the other bank of Jordan; and He healed them. Many people followed Him, listening to His teaching.

The Sermon in the Nazareth Synagogue.

(Luke 14:16-30).

This event is described by Evangelist Luke in the very beginning of the Lord's sermon, though there is a short narrative before that: "*and news of Him went out through all the surrounding region. And He taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all*" (Luke 4:14-15). Because of this, as well from the narrative on this event it can be seen that the Lord came to Nazareth long before the very beginning of His public service how one could have thought, but after many miracles, performed by Him in Capernaum, about which it was mentioned above. On the other hand, Evangelists Matthew and Mark as though assign this event to the later period of time. However, such noted interpreters of the Gospel, as Bishop (now Saint) Theophan the Recluse, regard that the Lord's visit to Nazareth, about which is said by Saint Matthew in 13:53-58, and Saint Mark in 6:1-6, differs from the visit, described by Saint Luke. And indeed, with all the similarities, in these descriptions there are also seen the very substantial differences. In general, it must be said that it is almost impossible to establish the rather accurate and indisputable chronological flow of the Gospel's events, for each Evangelist had his own system of narrating, in concordance with the task set, and the exact chronology was not the subject of their major care.

Having entered the Nazareth synagogue, the Lord began to read that part of Isaiah's book, where the Prophet from the person of the arrived Messiah speaks figuratively about the purpose of His coming. Speaking through the lips of the Prophet, the Messiah states that He was sent by God to proclaim to all the beggars, the poor and the miserable that the Kingdom of God is at hand for them — the Kingdom of love and mercy. The Jews did not doubt that the prophecy referred to the Messiah, therefore, when the Lord Jesus said, "*Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing*", there remained nothing for them but to acknowledge Him as the Messiah. And indeed many, knowing and recalling of the miracles, performed by Him, were ready to accept Him as the Messiah. But among those in the synagogue, there were undoubtedly those Scribes and Pharisees, antagonistically disposed towards the Lord. They had the false understanding of the coming Messiah as of the mighty, though earthly king, the national leader of the Jewish people, who would place all other nations under the Jewish rule, and make the Scribes and Pharisees, as His confidantes, the heads of the authority. The Lord's teaching of the kingdom of the poor and penitent hearts were totally unacceptable for them. Likewise, the rest of them, though they were delighted by the Lord's sermons, knew Him from His childhood days as the son of a poor carpenter and therefore did not dare to acknowledge Him as the Messiah. They were just amazed with His wisdom and the miracles that He performed — instead of believing in Him. Then the Lord, not wishing to resort to miracles to prove His Divine origin before the unbelievers, made two examples from the ancient history about Prophets Elijah and Elisha, visually explaining, that those present were

not worthy of those miracles and signs, which they were expecting. Having heard such bitter truth and comprehending from the words of Jesus, Whom they were used to treat as their equal, but not higher, that He puts them, the proud Jews, lower than the heathens, they “*were filled with wrath*”. They drove Him out of the town and attempted to put Him to death by throwing Him off the mountain on which their town was situated, but they were withdrawn from committing that crime, by the power of God and “*He went His way*”.

The Healing of the Leper.

(Mark 1:40-45; Luke 5:12-16).

Saint Matthew also narrates about the healing of the leper (8:1-4), and such an authoritative interpreter as Bishop Theophan, finds this to be a special miracle, performed by the Lord much later — after the sermon on the mount, whereas Saint Luke says that this occurred in the city. Of all the diseases mentioned in the Bible, leprosy is the most frightful and repulsive. It appears on the body in blotches, akin to herpes — first on the face around the nose and eyes, and then slowly spreads over the whole body, until it is covered with sloughs. With this, the face swells, the nose dries up and becomes pointed, the sense of smell totally disappears, the skin becomes brown and cracks, the voice grows hoarse, the hair falls out, the eyes become watery, there begin to form malignant ulcers that give off a stench, from the disfigured bloated mouth flows foul-smelling spittle, the joints of the arms and legs grow numb, the whole body becomes decrepit. Thereupon, fingernails start falling off, as well as the fingers and the separate digits, until finally the death arrives to terminate the agonies of the sufferer. Those born lepers live 30 or 40 and sometimes 50 years, dragging out their miserable existence. Moses, in the book of Leviticus (chap. 13), gave the detailed directives concerning those afflicted with leprosy. A priest had to define and investigate the disease, and remove the ill from the general public for to avoid spreading the infection.

The leper boldly violates the law that prohibits him coming close to the healthy people, by approaching them with a deep conviction that among them, there is the Lord Himself. His request about the healing is as full of profound humility, as of belief in the miraculous power of the Lord. While healing, the Lord touched the suffering in order to show that He is not bound with any laws, forbidding the touching of a leper — that for the Clean there is nothing unclean, at the same time expressing through that gesture the feeling of deep compassion towards the miserable. “*I am willing; be cleansed*”, — says the Lord, indicating His Divine authority. He tells the former leper to go and show himself to the priest, i.e. to fulfill the Law of Moses, but not to tell anyone about the happened miracle. The main reason why the Lord forbade spreading the news about His miracles, can be seen in the humility, with which the Son of God demeaned Himself. Assuming the figure of a slave for our salvation, He did not want to walk the earth on a path of glory (see John 5:41), especially, if His glory of a wonder-worker could assist in strengthening the unnecessary, dreamy ideas about the Messiah’s Kingdom — the ideas with which He fought. The Lord directs the healed leper to show himself to the priest “as a testimony to them” in the sense that, the priest had to, according to the Law, testify of the fact of being cured from leprosy and allow the ill to return to the society, and as well to show that the Lord does not violate the Law, but fulfils its demands.

The Healing of a Paralytic in Capernaum.

(Matt. 9:1-8; Mark 2:1-12; Luke 5:17-26).

Matthew, Mark and Luke are the three Evangelists who harmoniously narrate about this miracle. Moreover, Mark names Capernaum as its location, while Matthew states that the Lord performed this miracle, having come “*to His Own city*”, Capernaum, which became worthy of this calling (as mentioned above); Saint Chrysostom testifies about this: “*He was born in Bethlehem, brought up in Nazareth, but lived in Capernaum*”. The paralytic was brought to the Lord on a bed, and consequently, could not move by himself. Judging by the description, the actual name of the illness of such a type, as it is narrated in the Gospel, he

suffered from the infirmity that in today's terms is called paralysis. Saints Mark and Luke add that because of the mass of people surrounding Christ inside the house, those that had brought the paralytic, were unable to enter, so they lowered him on his bed through the temporary roof over the courtyard. During the hot season, temporary roofs were erected over courtyards and were made out of planks, leather or cloth and were bordered by the walls of the houses with flat roofs, making it quite easy to get to the rooftop by the ladder. Only strong faith could move those who brought the paralytic to such a bold action. Seeing such faith, and also the faith of the suffering, who allowed himself to be lowered in such a risky manner to the feet of Jesus, the Lord says to him: *"Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven you"*, — thus showing the close connection between his illness and his sins. According to the teachings of the Word of God, illnesses appear as the result of sins (John 9:2) and are sometimes sent by God as a punishment for them (1 Cor. 5:3-5, 11:30). Often, the link between sickness and sin is quite evident, for example, the illnesses from drunkenness and dissoluteness. That is why, in order to cure the illness, one first have to remove the sin, get it forgiven. Apparently, the paralytic saw himself as such a great sinner that he hardly hoped to be forgiven; therefore, the Savior encouraged him with such words: *"Son, be of good cheer!"* Those Scribes and Pharisees, who were present, began to condemn Him in mind for His blasphemy, seeing in His words the unlawful appropriation of the authority, which belonged only to God alone. The Lord, knowing what they were thinking, let them know that their thoughts were known to Him by saying: *"For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Arise and walk?'"* Clearly, both the first and the second do require the similar Divine authority.

"But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins" — then He said to the paralytic, "Arise, take up your bed, and go to your house". Saint Chrysostom excellently explains the coherency of the speech: "As you cannot see the healing of the soul, while the healing of the body is evident, then I join the last to the first, which, while being lower, is more evident so that through this to bring belief in the higher, the unseen". Following those Lord's words, the miracle of healing confirmed that Christ, endowed with the Divine power, not in vain said it to the leper: *"Your sins are forgiven you"*. Moreover, it must not be thought that the Lord performed the miracle only wishing to convince the Pharisees in His Divine omnipotence. That miracle, like all the others, was the act of His Divine goodness and mercy. The suffering testified of his full recovery by carrying the bed on which he was brought to the Lord. The result of the miracle was that the people became amazed, and praised the Lord for giving such power to humans; i.e. evidently, not only the Pharisees, but also the common people did not believe in Jesus as the Son of God, regarding Him as just a human.

The Calling of Matthew.

(Matt. 9:9-17; Mark 2:13-22; Luke 5:27-39).

This event is narrated by Matthew himself, as well as by the two other Evangelists — Mark and Luke. Furthermore, only Matthew calls himself with this name, while the others call him as Levi. Leaving the house after the miraculous healing of the leper, the Lord saw an individual sitting on a toll-bar (place where taxes were collected), called Matthew or Levi, and said to him: *"Follow Me"*. And he instantly got up and followed Jesus. It has to be added, that the public overlords or toll collectors — to which belonged Matthew — were regarded as the very sinful and were despised by the Jews, because they gathered the dues for the benefit of the Roman authorities. Moreover, the permission for such due gatherings they took from the Roman authorities, and in their excessive craving for profit they collected from the people more than necessary, earning themselves the common hatred.

Such was the power of the Lord's words, that the tax collector, a greedy and wealthy man, left everything and followed Him — One Who did not even have a place to rest His head. But this also proves that the sinners, realizing their sins and ready to genuinely repent, are closer to the Heavenly Kingdom than the Pharisees, proud with their false righteousness.

Gladdened by the Lord's calling, Matthew invited Him and His disciples to his house for some refreshment. According to the eastern custom, people invited for the lunch or dinner did not sit at a table, but reclined on the special benches or divans arranged around a low table, putting their left elbow on the pillow. Evidently, the friends of Matthew and other publicans and sinners, according to The Pharisees, came there too, reclining with the Lord and His disciples at the same table. This gave a chance to the Pharisees to condemn the Lord for joining the sinners. *"Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"* — they addressed the Disciples. Saint Chrysostom explains these words like that: *"They denigrate the Teacher before His disciples in the hope that they may be detracted from Him"*, throwing a shadow on the Lord as the One, seeking bad company. *"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick"*, — was the Lord's reply to this slander. The meaning of these words is in that there is no need of the Savior in those who imagine themselves to be righteous, like the Pharisees, but for those who are sinners. As though the Lord is saying: the place of a doctor is by the bed of the sick, while My place is with those, who ail with the realization of their spiritual illness — and I am with them, with the publicans and sinners, just as a doctor is with his patients. *"But go and learn what this means"* — adds the Lord — which means: *"I desire mercy and not sacrifice"*. The Pharisees suppose that righteousness is entailed in the bringing of sacrifices, established by the law. But at the same time, they forget God's words, said through Prophet Isaiah's: *"For I desire mercy and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings"* (Hosea 6:6). The Lord means that the sacrificial offerings and all the formal piety, without love for the neighbor, without the works of mercy, are worthless in God's eyes. *"I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance"*, or in other words, the Lord came so that the sinners would repent and change. He came to call for repentance those who humbly regard themselves as sinners and ask for God's mercy, and not those who consider themselves to be righteous, imagining that they have nothing to repent about. Though, the Lord came to save everybody, including those false righteous individuals, but until they leave their fantasy of being righteous and acknowledge themselves as sinners, calling them would be fruitless and their salvation impossible.

Being defeated in this, the Pharisees transfer their accusations to the Lord's disciples. To them join the followers of John the Baptist who, as we have mentioned before, thought their teacher to be higher than Jesus, and were envious about His constantly increasing glory. Saint John the Baptist was fasting strictly, and naturally, taught his disciples to such strict fasts. Apparently, at that time, he was already imprisoned and his followers increased the severity of their fast on that occasion. The Pharisees drew their attention to the fact that the disciples of Jesus do not follow such strictly established fasts, and so John's disciples ask Jesus: *"Why do we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?"* The Lord answers them with the words of their own teacher: *"Can the friends of the bridegroom mourn as long as the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast"*. This means: after all, your teacher called Me the Bridegroom and himself — the friend of the bridegroom, who should be joyful; that is why My disciples, being the sons of the of the bridegroom's party, are happy while I am with them, and this happiness is incompatible with a strict fast, which is an expression of grief and sorrow. When the day comes that they will be left alone in the world, then they will fast. In memory of these words of Christ, our holy Church established the Passion Week fast, adjacent to the Great Lent fast, and the fast on Wednesdays and Fridays, exactly on those days, when our Bridegroom was taken away — the days of betrayal, His sufferings and death on the cross. Stating that the time for His disciples to fast had not yet arrived, the Lord develops this thought further in these words: *"No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and the tear is made worse. Nor do they put new wines into old wineskins, or else the wineskins break, the wine is spilled, and the wineskins are ruined. But they put new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved"*.

According to Saint Chrysostom's interpretation, new wineskins and new wine are the strict fast, the strict demands in general, while old garment and old wineskins are the infirmity and weakness of His disciples, who are not yet ready to bear great exploits. The Lord means the following: I find it is not correct time for Me to impose the burden of strict life and ponderous commandments upon My disciples, as they are still weak, while they have not been regenerated, not re-born by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Here, the Lord protects His disciples from reproofs with genuine fatherly love and condescension towards them.

The Second Pascha.

The Healing of a Paralytic at the Sheep Gate Pool.

(John 5:1-16).

This event is narrated only by Saint John, informing us in his Gospel about the Lord's every feast day visit to Jerusalem. As for this particular occasion, it is not clear for which particular feast day the Lord arrived to Jerusalem, but more than likely, it was either Pascha or Pentecost. Only in this case, it appears that the Lord's public service continued for three and a half years, as the ancient Church thought, being guided, in particular, by the chronology of the fourth Gospel. Thus, nearly half a year passed between the Lord's Baptism and **the first Pascha**, described in the second chapter, then a further year — before **the second Pascha**, which is mentioned in the fifth chapter, then one more year — before **the third Pascha**, which is described in the sixth chapter, and finally another, the third, year — up to **the fourth Pascha**, before which our Lord suffered.

At the Sheep's Gate, called so because the sacrificial animals were driven through it to the temple, or, because beside it there was the market where those animals were sold, on the north-eastern side of the city walls, on the way through the Cedar's flow into Gethsemane and towards the Mt. of Olives, there was a pool, which was called in Jewish — **Bethesda**, which means "the house of mercy," or of God's mercy: the water for that pool was gathered from a curative spring. According to the testimony of Evsevius, already in the 5th century AD, the pool had 5 porches. This healing spring attracted many people with different ailments. However, this was no ordinary healing spring: it manifested its curative power only at times, when God's Angel descended and stirred up the water, and then only that one that straight after stirring up the water entered the pool, could get cured; evidently, the water retained its healing properties only for a short time, and then was losing them.

Here, by the pool, laid a paralytic who suffered for 38 years and who had almost lost the hope for to be cured ever. Moreover, as he explained to the Lord, not having an assistant, he was incapable of utilizing the power of the miraculous spring, as he had no strength to move fast enough to immerse himself into the water, immediately after the water was stirred up. Having mercy on him, the Lord instantly cures the miserable with only one word of His: "*Rise, take up your bed and walk*". With this, the Lord showed the superiority of His saving grace over the Old Testament methods.

However, as this was Saturday, the Jews, under which name John the Baptist usually means the Pharisees, Sadducees and Jewish elders, hostile towards the Lord Jesus Christ, instead of being happy for the miserable, who had been suffering for so much time, or be amazed with the miracle, got annoyed with the fact that the former paralytic had the audacity to violate the commandment about the tranquility of the Sabbath, while carrying his bed, and rebuked him. However, the cured paralytic, not without some effrontery, began to justify himself, stating that he is only carrying out the orders of the One, Who healed him and Who in his eyes, had sufficient authority to release him from following those enough narrow-minded regulations regarding Saturday. With the trace of contempt, the Jews inquire the for-

mer paralytic, Who the Person, that had the audacity to permit him to violate the public regulations, was.

Blessed Theophilactus makes an interesting remark concerning this: “Here is the sense of the malice! They do not ask Who cured him, but Who ordered him to carry his bed. They are not interested in that, which brings to amazement, but in that what is censured”. Although they were not certain, they most probably guessed that the Healer was no one but the hated Jesus from Nazareth, and therefore did not want even to speak about the miracle. The cured paralytic could not answer them, as he did not know Jesus.

Soon afterwards, he most probably went to the temple in order to bring a sacrifice to God, in gratitude for his healing. Here, the Lord met him with the significant words: “*See, you have been made well. Sin no more, lest a worse thing come upon you*”. From these words, it can be especially clearly seen that a sickness overtakes a person for his sins, and the Lord warns the cured paralytic against repeating the sins, so as not to be afflicted with the greater punishment. Recognizing his Healer, the former ill went and told the Jews about Him: of course, not with any evil intention, but just to raise the authority of Jesus Christ. This evoked a new hatred attack of the Jews, and they “*sought to kill Him, because He had done these things on the Sabbath*”.

On the Equality of the Father and the Son.

(John 5:17-47).

Jesus responded to the Jews’ plans to kill Him for violating the Sabbath, with the words: “*My Father has been working until now, and I have been working*”. These words contain Christ’s testimony of Himself, as of the consubstantial Son of God. All the further words only develop this basic thought in the Lord’s reply to the Jews, only more wishing to kill Him for He is calling Himself the Son of God: “*Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner*”. For Him, as the Son of God, it is natural to follow the commandments given to Adam and his offspring, but only following the example of God the Father. And though God the Father rested on the seventh day, it was from the works of creation and not from the works of care. Having correctly interpreted the Lord’s words that He is teaching about His equality with God the Father, the Jews started to redouble their accusations that He deserved the death penalty for violating the Sabbath and blasphemy. In chapters 19-20, the teaching about the unity of actions of the Father and Son is revealed, applicably to the ordinary assumptions of the son, imitating the father, and the father loving his son and teaching him to do his deeds. The words “*The Son can do nothing of Himself*” have nothing of Arius’s heresy, but only the fact, as Saint Chrysostom says, that the Son does not do anything that is opposite to the Father, nothing that is alien to Him, nothing incompatible, contrary to His will. “*And He will show Him greater works than these, that you may marvel*”, i.e. like the Father, the Son can not only heal the infirm, but also raise the dead (15:21).

Initially, the talk here is about the spiritual resurrection, about the awakening of the spiritually dead to the truth, holy life in God, and then about the general bodily resurrection, and both of these resurrections have the tight inner connection between themselves. The man’s perception of the true, spiritual life is the beginning of his triumph over death. Just as a spiritual ailment can serve as the cause of death, so the true spiritual life can lead to the eternal life, conquering death, as unavoidable.

The Lord joins the spiritual resurrection with His other great work — the judgment. In the first place, here is meant the moral judgment in the present life, which will unavoidably lead to the last, general Dread Judgment. Christ appeared as the Life and Light into the spiritually dead, steeped in the spiritual darkness world. Those who believed in Him, were resurrected to the new life and became the light themselves; those who rejected Him, remained in the spiritual death, spiritual darkness. That is why the Son of God’s judgment over the people continues throughout life, and will finally conclude in the last Dread Judgment. In this way,

the fate of people eternally stays in the complete authority of the Son of God, that is why it is necessary to honor Him the same way, as the Father, for *“He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father Who sent Him”*. The verses 24-29 contain further depictions of the Son of God’s life-giving activity. Obeying the Savior’s words and faith in the fact He was sent, is the main condition for accepting true life, in which lies the pledge also of the physical blessed immortality. The words: *“shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life”* mean: will not be subjected to Judgment. *“The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live”* — again, here is meant the spiritual revival, as a result of Christ’s sermon, as the Son is the source of life, granted to Him by His Father (5:26). The Son also has the power to judge — that is why He became human, being the Son of God by nature (5:27). This authority of the Son of God as a Judge will eventually be completed with the general resurrection and just retribution (5:28-29). This will be the just judgment, for it will be the result of full agreement of the will of the Judge with that of the Heavenly Father (5:30).

In verses 31-39, Jesus testifies with absolute decisiveness of His Divine worthiness. With this, He refers to the evidence of John the Baptist, who was highly respected by the Jews, but together with He says that He bears more testimony than John: this is the testimony of His God the Father, the testimony of signs and miracles that His Son performs according to His Father’s order, for they are included in the plan for the people’s salvation — which was given to Him by His Father for fulfillment. God the Father testified about His Son already at the moment of His baptism, though He gave the greater testimony about Him as the Messiah, through the Prophets in the Old Testament. But the Jews do not heed this Scripture, because the Word of God had not taken root in their hearts, and therefore is not there: they do not hear God’s voice or see His face in the self-revelation in His scriptures. *“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me”*. Further on, Christ rebukes the Jews for their disbelief, telling them that He does not need glorification from them, for He does not seek the glory of the people, but He grieves for them, because, not believing in Him as in God’s Messenger, they reveal the lack of love towards God the Father, Who had sent Him. As they do not love God, they do not accept Christ that had come with His commandments — but when the other, the false messiah comes, with his self-styled teachings, they will accept him even without any signs.

Since Christ’s times, the Jews have had over 60 such false messiahs, and the last one will be anti-Christ, whom they will accept as their expected Messiah. The reason for their disbelief lies in that they seek human glory, and they welcome not the one, who accuses them, if though he had the right to do so, but the one who glorifies them, even without any right to do that. In conclusion of His speech, the Lord destroys the Jews’ last basis upon which they were building their hopes. He tells them that their accuser at God’s judgment will be none other than Moses, in whom they trust — and he will accuse them of disbelief in Christ, because he wrote about Him. Here He supposes both the direct prophecies and promises in the books of Moses (Genesis 3:15, 12:3, 49:10; Deuter. 18:15), and the whole law, which was a shadow of the coming blessings in Christ’s Kingdom (Heb. 10:1) and the tutor (the leader of children) in Christ (Gal. 3:24).

The Plucking of Cornheads on Saturday.

(Matt. 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5).

After this, Jesus left Judea and went to Galilee. On the way back to Galilee, on a Saturday that Saint Luke calls the *“second Sabbath after the first”*, i.e. the first Saturday after the second day of Pascha. The Lord was passing with His Disciples through the sown fields. Feeling hungry, the disciples commenced to pluck the corn, rubbing them between their palms and eating the grain. This was permitted by the Law of Moses, forbidding only the use of scythes on a foreign cornfield (Deut. 23:25). Regarding even this as a violation of the Sabbath, the Pharisees did not miss the opportunity to reproach the Lord for allowing His disci-

ples to do this. In order to defend His disciples from the censure, the Lord reminds the Pharisees about the incident with David, as described in the first book of Kings (21st chapter).

Fleeing from Saul, David came to the city of priests, Nob, and asked Ahimelech the priest to give him 5 breads or whatever he could find. The priest gave him some bread that was brought as offerings and according to the Law, could only be eaten by priests. The efficacy of this example is in the fact that if no one judged David, who driven by hunger was eating that bread, then the Lord's disciples do not deserve condemnation for that in serving God they sometimes do not have time even to eat and being overtaken by hunger on the Sabbath violated the peace of the Sabbath to such an unimportant extent. Thereupon, the Lord reveals the source from which the unjust condemnation of the disciples emanated: it is the erroneous understanding of the demands of God's law. If The Pharisees understood that compassionate love for a sufferer is greater than the tradition and custom, they would not condemn the innocent that plucked cornheads in order to satisfy their hunger.

A human was not created for the Sabbath, but the Sabbath was given to the human for his benefit; that is why the man himself and his preservation from death and exhaustion are more important than the law of the Sabbath. The fact that the law does not appear to prohibit any type of activity, can be seen from the fact that on the Sabbath, the priests in the temple slaughter the sacrificial animals, skin them, prepare the offering, and burn them. And they, nevertheless, are not guilty in violating the Sabbath. But if the innocent servants of the temple are not guilty in violating the Sabbath, then the more innocent are the servants of the One, Who is greater than the temple and Who is **the Lord of the Sabbath**, possessing the authority to abolish it, just as He had established it.

The Healing of the Man with a Withered Hand.

(Matt. 12:9-14; Mark 3:1-6; Luke 6:6-11).

With this healing the Lord again aroused indignation of the Scribes and Pharisees that evidently accompanied the Lord everywhere with the aim of accusing Him of violating the Law of Moses. Posing the question to the Pharisees: "*What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift it out?*" (Matt. 12:11), the Lord showed that in His opinion, the works of mercy are far more important than the fulfilling of the law about the peace of the Sabbath, and that in general, for the sake of doing good, it is not only permissible, but necessary to interrupt this peace.

The Lord Avoids Fame.

(Matt. 12:15-21; Mark 3:7-12).

After leaving the synagogue where the Lord healed the man with a withered hand, He was followed by many people from Galilee, Judea and even from the Jordanian and heathen countries. He performed many miraculous healings, though prohibiting telling about Him. Saint Matthew sees in this the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy about the Beloved Son of God (42:1-4). Undoubtedly, in this prophecy which has to do with the Messiah, the Prophet glorifies the meekness and humility of Christ. In citing this prophecy, Saint Matthew wants to show the Jews that their idea of the Messiah as of the earthly king-conqueror, who will exalt the Jewish kingdom and will rule with the outward splendor and glory on the throne of David are false, and that the Prophets of the Old Testament predicted the meek and humble Messiah, Whose Kingdom will not be of this world, but Who, nevertheless, will present the law to the heathens, and on Whose name will rely all the nations.

Choosing the Disciples.

(Matt. 10:2-4; Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-19).

Having spent the whole night on the mountain (in the opinion of the ancients, on the Mt. Tabor), in prayer, which was undoubtedly about the strengthening of the Church He had been establishing, the Lord called His disciples and chose the twelve from them, so that they

would be constantly with Him, and later, would be able to testify about Him. They would be as though leaders of the future twelve tribes of New Israel. The figure 12 has a denominative meaning in the Holy Scripture, as a product of 3 and 4; three is the eternal non-created Divine Being, and four — the number of the world, of the four sides of the world. “Twelve” denotes the filling of the human and the earthly with the Divine. The first three Evangelists and the Book of Acts, give us the names of all the twelve Apostles. The remarkable thing about this list is that everywhere the Apostles are divided into 3 groups of 4 people each, and together with that in the head of every group are put the same names, and these groups include the same persons.

These are the names of the Apostles: 1) Simon-Peter, 2) Andrew, 3) James, 4) John, 5) Philip, 6) Bartholomew, 7) Thomas, 8) Matthew, 9) James, Althaeas son, 10) Lebbaeus (or Thaddeus, as Judas, the son of James), 11) Simon the Canaanite (or Zealot), 12) Judas Iscariot. Evangelist John calls Bartholomew, Nathanael. “Canaanite” is the Hebrew translation of the Greek word **zealot**, which means **an ardent follower**. “Zealot” was the name used by the Jewish party, zealously battling for the independence of the Jewish state. The word **Iscariot** is composite, made up of: **is** (man) and **cariot** (the name of the city). The very word **apostle** is the translation from Greek, and means **a messenger**, which corresponds to the designation of those chosen — to be sent for the sermon. In order to have greater success with their sermons, the Lord endowed them with powers of healing the sick and expulsing the demons.

The Sermon on the Mount.

(Matt. 5-7 chapters; Luke 6:12-49).

The full Sermon on the Mount is narrated only by Evangelist Matthew. Saint Luke recounts the Sermon in the abridged version, the excerpts of which are encountered in his entire Gospel. The Sermon on the Mount is remarkable, because it embodies the essence of the Evangelic teaching.

Not far from the sea of Gennesaret, between Capernaum and Tiberias, up to this day they show the “mount of beatitudes”, from which, due to the great number of people, the Lord gave His Sermon on the Mount. Proud of being chosen and unwilling to accept their loss of autonomy, the Jewish people began to dream of such a Messiah, who would free them from the foreign domination, would take vengeance on all their enemies, rule them and conquer for them all the people on earth, while the Jews would receive the fairytale-like wellbeing: He will command the sea to expel all its pearls and other treasures, clothe them in purple robes and feed them with manna, even more sweeter than that sent to them in the wilderness. With such false wishes of the earthly blessings, which the Messiah would give them, the Jews surrounded Jesus in the expectation that He was about to declare Himself the King of Israel, and there would arrive that blessed, anticipated by them era. They assumed that the end of their suffering and humiliation was at hand, and from that point on they would be happy and blessed.

The Beatitudes.

(Matt. 10:2-4; Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-19).

In response to these thoughts and feelings, the Lord reveals to the Jews His evangelical teaching about the beatitudes (blessings), shattering their fallacy at its core. He teaches them the same He said to Nicodemus: that in order to create God’s Kingdom on earth, that lost by the people paradise, it is essential that we should be reborn spiritually, and through this prepare for ourselves the blessings of eternal life in the Heavenly Kingdom. The first step towards this is to realize our spiritual poverty, our sin and insignificance, to be humble. That is why: *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”* (Mat. 5:3). Blessed are they, who in seeing and realizing their sins, which are impeding their entry into

this Kingdom, weep, because then they have the opportunity to reconcile themselves with their consciences and be comforted. Those weeping over their sins reach such inner state of tranquility that they become incapable of being angry with anyone — they become meek. Indeed, the meek Christians have inherited the earth, which was previously ruled by the heathens. They also will inherit the earth in the coming life, which will arise after the destruction of this perishable world, “*new earth*” (Exodus 26:13; Rev. 21:1). “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled*” (Mat. 5:6), i.e. those who fulfill God’s will in everything, will attain that righteousness and God’s exculpation, which gives the genuine yearning to live according to God’s will. Merciful God demands mercy from people – the virtue, which is attained by those genuinely striving to live according to His will. For that reason: “*Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy*” (Mat. 5:7), and on the contrary: “*For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy*” (James 2:13). The genuine works of benevolence cleanse the human heart of all iniquities, and the “pure in heart” will “*see God*” (Mat. 5:8) with their spiritual eyes. Those who see God, strive to resemble Him, imitate His Son, who had reconciled the man with God and brought peace, i.e. tranquility to the human soul. Those seeing God abhor hostility and consequently become peacemakers, striving to instate peace everywhere. That is why they are blessed for “*they shall be called sons of God*” (Mat. 5:9). Those, having achieved such a high spiritual level, should be prepared for this sinful world, the world that “*lies under the sway of the wicked one*” (1 John 5:19), will hate them for God’s truth, the bearers of which they are. They will be denounced and vilified by it, and persecuted in all the ways for their fidelity to the Lord Jesus Christ and His Divine teaching. Those who would endure much in the name of Christ here, can expect great rewards in Heaven (Mat. 5:12).

These nine New Testament commandments, which are called the *Commandments of Blessedness*, present themselves as though the whole Gospel in the abridged form. Their characteristic differences from the Old Testament Ten Commandments are: the Old Testament examines the man’s outward actions and applies strict bans in the definitive form, whereas the New Testament speaks more about the inner disposition of the man’s soul, expounding not demands but only conditions, with observance of which the eternal joy is reachable.

Evangelist Luke makes the teachings of Saint Matthew on beatitudes more complete. He cites the words of Jesus Christ that contain a warning to those who see happiness only in the delight with the earthly blessings: “*But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation*” (Luke 6:24) — says the Lord, comparing to them those poor in spirit. Here of course, are meant not simply those that possess some type of earthly welfare, but those who rely on it, proud, haughty, those who treat the others with contempt. “*Woe to you who are full, for you shall hunger*” (Luke 6:25) — in comparison to those who “*hunger and thirst after righteousness*”, because these people are not seeking God’s truth but are satisfied with their own false beliefs. “*Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep*” (Luke 6:25) — here, the reference is made to the careless people, light-heartedly treating their sinful life, which is being seared. The world, steeped in the evil, loves those who indulge it, those who live in sin, that is why: “*Woe to you when all men speak well of you*” (Luke 6:26), for this is the sign of the unfortunate moral state.

The Light of the World.

Further on, the Lord states that all His followers who fulfill His directives will be called the “*salt of the earth*” (Mat. 5:13). Salt preserves food from spoilage, makes it sound and pleasant to the taste: similarly, the Christians should preserve the world from the spiritual spoilage and contribute to making it sound. Salt communicates its properties to any matter it comes into a contact with; similarly, the Christians should report Christ’s Spirit to all that are not yet Christian. Salt does not change the essence or outward appearance of the substance in which it dissolves, but only adds taste to it; similarly, the Christianity does not bring about

any type of outward fracture in the man or human society, but ennoble the human soul and through it transforms his whole life, giving it the unique, Christian character. *“If the salt loses its flavour, how shall it be seasoned?”* (Mat. 5:13). Indeed, in the east, there is a type of salt that loses its taste under the influence of humidity, the wind and sun. It is impossible to restore the taste of such salt: similarly, those who once tasted the sublime communication with the Holy Spirit and subsequently fell into an unforgivable sin, are incapable of transforming spiritually without God’s special help.

The light of the world is essentially our Lord Jesus Christ, but because the believers in Him absorb this light and reflect it into the world, they too appear to be “the light of the world”. Such are the Apostles and their successors, whose designation is to shine with Christ’s light: the pastors of the holy Church. They have to live in such a way, so that in seeing their good deeds, people would praise God.

Wishing to show His attitude towards the Old Testament, the Lord at the outset calms the Jews’ zeal about the Law, emphasizing that He came not to violate but to fulfill it. Indeed, Christ came to earth so that the entire Old Testament Word of God would be fulfilled in Him, to reveal, fulfill and confirm the whole power of the Law and the Prophets, to show the true spirit and meaning of the Old Testament. “How did He fulfill the Law?” — asks the blessed Theophilactus. — First, with the fact that He fulfilled all that was foretold about Him by the Prophets. He fulfilled all the commandments of the Law, for He committed no iniquities and there was no flattery in His words. He fulfilled the Law as well in that He completed it, having perfectly written that which was only a shadow in the Law”. He gave a full and deep understanding of all the Old Testament commandments, preaching about the insufficiency of the outward and formal submissiveness to the Law alone. *“For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot (the smallest letter in the Jewish alphabet) or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled”* (Mat 5:18) — says the Lord, emphasizing that even the smallest in God’s law shall not remain unfulfilled. The Pharisees divided the commandments into the major and “minor” ones — and did not think the violation of the latter, assigning there the commandments regarding love, mercy and justice, to be a sin. *“Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven”*. According to the quality of the Greek expression, *shall be called the least*, means — will be rejected and will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees is characterized by their outward fulfillment of the demands and prescriptions of the Law, and with that, mainly of the trivial ones: and therefore, this righteousness co-existed in their hearts with conceit, arrogance, without the spirit of humility and meek love, and was outward and hypocritical; behind this mask, there could nest various vices and passions, in which Christ repeatedly and vigorously accused them. Against such outward, false righteousness the Lord warned His successors.

Two Measures of Righteousness.

All along the 5th chapter, commencing with the 21st verse, Saint Matthew narrates about how the Lord testifies, in what specifically He came to complete the Old Testament law: He teaches the deeper and more spiritual understanding and fulfillment of the Old Testament commandments. It is not enough not to kill a person physically; one should not kill him morally by getting angry with him needlessly: *“Whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, “Raca” (an empty person), shall be in danger of the council (Jewish supreme court). But whoever says, “You fool!” shall be in danger of hell fire”* (Mat. 5:22). Here, according to the Jewish understanding, the various degrees of anger at the neighbor are indicated. The ordinary city court dealt with lesser felonies than the Great Sanhedrin — the highest court, situated in Jerusalem and made up of 72 members, presided by a high priest. To call someone “**raca**” meant to express one’s scorn to him, while to say to someone “**You fool**” meant to express to the neighbor the extreme contempt or rejection: not only a foolish was called by this name, but also an inde-

cent, shameless individual. The punishment for such excessive anger was “the Gehenna fire” (this was the name given to the valley of Hinnom, situated to the south-west of Jerusalem, where the unrighteous kings carried out the repugnant rituals to the god Moloch, by leading the children through the fire and bringing infants as sacrifices (2 Kings 16:3; 2 Chron. 28:3). After these idolatrous practices ceased, the valley became the subject of horror and revulsion. They began to carry there all types of impurities and cadavers, left without a burial, from Jerusalem; sometimes, the executions were conducted there; the air in that valley was so infected that continuous fires were maintained in order to clear it. Consequently, the frightening and repulsive area, named as the “*valley of fire*”, began to serve as an example of the eternal suffering of sinners.

The Christian meekness and love towards the neighbor should spread not only over not being angry with anyone, but also not evoking any anger against oneself from the neighbor, possessing the unkind feeling. This interferes with praying with the clean conscience, consequently, it is necessary to make peace with your brother before the prayer. In the Roman court proceedings, where the lender had the right to forcibly bring his debtor to court, our offended brother is called our **rival**, with whom we must make up while we are “on the road” of this earthly life, so that he does not give us out to Judge-God and we would not get the deserved retribution. Thus, Apostle Paul hastened the offender to make peace with the offended, saying: “*Do not let the sun go down on your wrath*” (Ephes. 4:26).

Likewise, it is insufficient to fulfill God’s 7th Commandment purely outwardly: “Thou shalt not commit adultery!” by guarding oneself from sin just physically. The Lord teaches that not only actions but also thoughts, inner desire or a craving look at a woman — is already a transgression. Saint Athanasius the Great states: “A man commits adultery in his heart when he is willing to fulfill his desire, but is impeded by place, time or fear of the law”. Not every glance at a woman is a sin — but a glance with the desire to commit the sin of adultery. In such cases, it is necessary to show total decisiveness to curb the temptation, not sparing even the most precious possession, which for the man are the parts of his body: an eye or a hand. In this instance, both an eye and a hand are shown by the Lord as a symbol of all that precious to us, which we must sacrifice in order to deracinate the passion and avoid sinning.

In connection with this, the Lord forbids a husband to divorce his wife, “*except sexual immorality*”, i.e. if she had been found in adultery. The Old Testament law of Moses (Deut. 24:1-2) permits a husband to divorce his wife, giving her a certificate of divorce as a written testimony that she was his wife and that he is releasing her from him for a certain reason. In those days, the position of a woman was very hard.

In Mark’s Gospel, the Lord states that the permission to divorce with the wife was given to the Jews by Moses “because of hardness of the heart”, although at the beginning, it was: “*What God has joined together, let no man separate*” (Mark 10:9). A marriage can break up only in the case of adultery of one of the spouses. However, if “*whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery*” (Mat. 5:32).

The law of the Old Testament forbids the use of God’s name in vows in the trifle matters, especially in lies. The third commandment of God’s law forbids the use of His name casually and any light-minded approach to a vow with God’s name. The contemporary to the Lord Jesus Christ Jews, wishing to fulfill this commandment in the literal sense, instead swore by heaven and earth, by Jerusalem, their heads, and consequently, although not mentioning His name in vain, still swore by Him in vain, and in lies. These are the types of vows that the Lord Jesus Christ forbids, for absolutely everything was created by God; and to swear by His creation is to swear by the Creator, and to swear in a lie is the same as to violate the sanctity of the vow. A Christian should be so much honest and righteous that he would be believed after his personal word alone, without any swearing. However, this does not forbid giving the lawful oaths or vows in the important matters. When the high priest exclaimed: “*I*

put You under oath by the living God”, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself confirmed the oath in judgment when He replied: *“It is as you said”*, for such was the form of the judicial oath by the Jews (Mat. 26:63-64). And Apostle Paul swears, by calling God to be the witness to his words (Rom. 1:9; 2 Cor. 1:23, 2:17; Gal. 1:20 and others). Empty and light-minded vows are forbidden.

In the Old Testament, the practice of vengeance was so widespread, that it had to be somehow curbed, and that did the Old Testament law. However with His new law, Christ totally forbids vengeance in any form, preaching love for the enemies. At the same time, the statement *“not to resist an evil person”* (Mat. 5:39) must not be understood in the sense of non-opposing the evil — as Leo Tolstoy and the similar to him false teachers do. The Lord forbids to revolt against the man who had inflicted evil, with the response of anger, but towards every type of evil, as it is, a Christian must be totally uncompromising and must fight with the evil with all the means at his disposal, not permitting it to enter his own heart under any guise. One should not understand the words: *“But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other also to him”* (Mat. 5:39) in the literal sense, for we know that during the high priest Annas’s interrogation, Christ Himself reacted completely differently when He was slapped on the cheek by one of servants (John 18:22-23). What is prohibited is the evil feeling of vengeance, but not the struggle with the evil. And not only those doing evil, but also our offenders, we must try to change, about what there is the direct commandment from the Lord in the Gospel of Matthew (18:15-18). Quibbling is prohibited and instead, the satisfaction of the needs of your neighbor is prescribed: *“Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away”*. By itself, this commandment excludes those situations where help to that asking for it will not be beneficial but detrimental; genuine Christian love towards the neighbor, for example, will not allow a killer to pick up a knife, or, will not allow a person to access the poison to commit suicide.

The Old Testament does not have the commandment *“Hate thy neighbor!”* yet evidently the Jews extracted it from the commandment about love towards the neighbor, for they treated as **neighbors** those, who was close to them in faith, origin or by mutual favors. Whereas the rest, i.e. people of other faiths, strangers or those who have exhibited some type of animosity, were treated as **enemies**, and love for them was supposed to be inappropriate. But Christ decreed so: just like our Heavenly Father, a stranger to the feelings of anger and hatred towards anyone, loves everyone, even those bad and unrighteous, as His Own sons — so we, desiring to be the worthy sons of the Heavenly Father, should love everyone, even our enemies. The Lord wishes that in the moral sense, His followers should be higher than the heathens and Jews. Essentially, their love towards the others, is based on self-centeredness. On the contrary, love for the sake of God, for the sake of God’s commandments is worthy of a reward. But love through the natural inclination or for the sake of obtaining recompense, is unworthy and cannot deserve anything. Thus, in ascending higher and higher the ladder of the Christian completeness, a Christian will eventually reach the highest and most difficult level — impossible to reach for the not revived person — love for the enemies, with which the Lord concludes the first part of His Sermon on the Mount. And wishing to show how the fulfillment of this commandment brings the weak and imperfect man closer to God, He ascertains that the ideal for a Christian is — God: *“Be perfect, just as your Father in Heaven”* (Mat. 5:48). This is completely coincides with God’s plan, expressed with the creation of the man: *“And God said, Let us make man in Our image, after Our likeness”* (Gen. 1:26). The divine holiness is unattainable for us, which is why here we have the inequality between God and us. However, here is meant the inner likeness, the gradual advancement of the human soul towards its Primal Image with the help of the grace.

The Main Task is to Please God.

2. The second part of the Sermon on the Mount, narrated in the 6th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, expounds the Lord’s teachings on mercy, prayers and fast, and also the ex-

hortation for the man to strive towards the main goal in life — God’s Kingdom. Having warned His disciples what they have to, and what they shouldn’t, in order to reach the blessedness, the Lord went over to the question, how exactly they are to fulfill that, what He had commanded. No works of mercy, either worshipping of God — in particular fasts and prayers — should not be performed to show off, for the sake of fame among the people, because in this case, our only reward would be this public acclaim. Vainglory, like a moth, devours all good deeds, that is why it is better to perform them secretly, so as not to be deprived of our reward from the Heavenly Father. Naturally, one should give alms, but this has to be done without the aim of turning attention to oneself, seeking the praise from the people. It is not forbidden to pray in church - only to pray to show off intentionally. According to the Saint Chrysostom’s thought, one can pray in the room alone, led by vainglory, but then “the closed doors will not bring any benefit”.

Verbosity in prayer is interpreted as the heathen’s opinion of prayer, as of a spell, which, when repeated many times, can produce a result. We pray not because God does not know our needs, but only for to cleanse our heart and become worthy of His mercy, having entered with our spirit into the inner communication with Him. This communication with God is the objective of prayer, the attainment of which is not reliant on the quantity of the pronounced words. Censuring verbosity, the Lord at the same time commands to pray with no ceasing, teaching that one has to always pray and not to faint (Luke 18:1), Himself spending the nights in prayer. A prayer must have sense: we must turn to God with such requests that are worthy of Him, the fulfillment of which will be saving for us. Teaching us to pray this way, the Lord gives, as a model, the prayer “*Our Father*” — for which it received the name of **the Lord’s Prayer**.

The Prayer “Our Father”.

This prayer in no way excludes other prayers — the Lord Himself used other prayers (John 17). Calling God our Father, we acknowledge ourselves His children, and in relation to one another — brothers and we pray not only for ourselves, but also from everybody, from the entire humanity. Uttering the words “*Who art in the Heavens*”, we separate ourselves from everything earthly and ascend with the mind and heart into the celestial world. “*Hallowed be Thy name*” means: Let Your Name be holy for all people, let all people glorify Your Name in word and deed. “*Thy Kingdom come*” — i.e. that the Kingdom of the Messiah Christ, about which the Jews were dreaming, is incorrect, concerning the visualization of this Kingdom; but here we also pray so that the Lord would rule in the souls of all people, and after this temporary earthly life, make us worthy of the eternal and blessed life, in communion with Him. “*Thy will be done on earth, as it is in Heaven*” — let everything occur according to the ever-good and ever-wise will of God, and let us humans fulfill His will on earth just as willingly, as do the Angels in Heaven. “*Give us this day our daily bread*” — means, give us today all that is essential for our body; what will happen with us tomorrow, we do not know and we need only the things of “this day” — i.e. the daily, necessary to support our existence. “*And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*” — Saint Luke in his Gospel (11:4) clarifies these words so: “*And forgive us our sins*”. The sins are our debts, because in not sinning, we do not fulfill what is required of us, and become indebted towards God and people. Under *debts*, one should understand all that good we could have done, but we did not — because of our laziness or egotism. Thus, the understanding of the word *debts* is wider than the notion of sins, as of the direct violations of the moral law. The appeal for the forgiveness of *debts* with the special force suggests us the necessity to forgive all the offences committed against us by our neighbor, for not forgiving the others, we have no right to ask God to forgive our debts for Him, and we do not dare to utter the words of the Lord’s Prayer.

“*And do not lead us into temptation*” — here we are asking God to protect us from the downfall, if the trial of our moral forces is inevitable and necessary. “*But deliver us from the*

evil one” — from every type of the evil and its cause — the devil. The prayer ends with the conviction: that what has been requested, will be fulfilled, because everything in this world belongs to God: the eternal Kingdom, the infinite power and glory. In translation from Jewish, the word “*Amen*” means “*Thus, indeed, truly, let it be*”. It was said by those praying in the synagogues — in confirmation of the prayer, said by the elder.

The Lord’s teaching on fasting, which also had to be fulfilled for God and not for the public acclaim, clearly testifies of how wrong those who say the Lord did not prescribe fasting to His followers are. In fasting, one should not change his outward appearance, so as not to attract attention to himself, but appear before people the same as usual: it was common in the East that after a bath the body was rubbed with oil, especially the head; however the Pharisees, during fasts, did not wash and did not comb or oil their hair. This attracted the general attention to their unusual appearances, and that is what the Lord censured.

The Eternal Treasure.

From the 19th verse of the 6th chapter, Saint Matthew describes in his Gospel how the Lord teaches us to seek, first of all, God’s Kingdom and not to be distracted from this pursuit by other concerns — not to worry about accumulating the earthly, makeshift treasures, which are easily exposed to spoilage and disintegration. The person having such a treasure continually thinks of it, desires and feels it; that is why a Christian, who needs to have his heart belonging to Heaven, should not be aspired by the earthly accumulation, but strive for acquiring the Heavenly treasures, which are virtues. Therefore, it is necessary to guard the heart like the apple of our eye. We must protect our heart from the earthly vices, so that it remains chaste and would not stop being our bearer of the spiritual, Heavenly light, just as the eyes are our bearer of the physical light. The one, who intends to serve God and Mammon (Mammon is a Syrian deity; the protector of the earthly wealth, the personification of the earthly treasures) simultaneously, is like a servant trying to please two masters that have contrasting, almost opposite, characters and making the different, as well opposing, demands; and in this situation “*he will hate the one or love the other, or else he will be loyal to one and despise the other*” (Mat. 6:24).

The Lord leads us towards the heavenly and eternal, while the wealth — towards the earthly and physical. That is why in order to avoid such duality, which interferes with the matter of eternal salvation, it is essential to avoid excessive, needless, anxious and oppressive concerns about food, drinks and clothing — those anxieties that devour all our time and attention, and distract us from the concerns about the salvation of our souls. After all, if God cares so of the unwise creatures, giving food for birds and adorning the flowers in the fields, moreover, He will not leave the man, having created him in His similarity and called to be the inheritor of His Kingdom, without all the necessary. Our whole life is in God’s hands and does not depend on our efforts: as an example, can we ourselves increase our height by even one inch? At the same time, this in no way means that we have to put our concerns aside and plunge ourselves in idleness — just as some heretics interpreted this part of the Sermon on the Mount. Labor was commanded to the human by God already in Paradise, before his downfall (Gen. 2:15), which was confirmed anew when Adam was driven out of Paradise (3:19). It is not the labor that is criticized, but the excessive and onerous concern about the future, about the next day, which is not in our power and till which one still has to live. What is indicated is the degree of values: “*But seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness*”, for which the Lord Himself will reward us with His personal concern, so that we will have everything necessary for our earthly life. Therefore, thoughts about these things should not torture or oppress us like they do the unbelieving heathens. This part of the Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 6:25-34) presents to us the marvelous picture of God’s Providence, taking care of His creations. “*Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things*” — this means that the next day is not in our power for us to worry about, for we

do not even know what it will bring: perhaps such cares that we did not and do not even think about.

Do Not Judge.

3. The third part of the Sermon on the Mount, contained in the 7th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, teaches us not to judge our neighbor, protect the holy things from desecration, about steadfastness in prayer, about the wide and narrow paths of life, about false prophets, about true and false wisdom.

“Judge not that you be not judged” — Evangelist Luke conveys these words like this: *“Judge not, and you shall not be judged”* (6:37). It is not the opinion of a person that is forbidden, but **judging** him in the sense of gossiping, which mainly, come out from conceited and impure impulses — from vainglory, pride; what is forbidden is slander, bad-mouthing, malicious condemnation of others’ drawbacks, which emanate from the feeling of hatred and malevolence towards the neighbor. If in general, any opinion of the neighbor and his actions was forbidden, then the Lord would not have said: *“Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine”* (Mat. 7:6); and the Christian would not be able to fulfill their responsibility — to expose and enlighten the sinners, which is decreed by the Lord Himself in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 18, verses 15-17. What is forbidden, is malicious feeling, spitefulness, but not the **appreciation** itself of the actions of a neighbor. Because not noticing the evil, we would also easily start treating the good with indifference, and subsequently lose our feelings of differentiation between the good and evil.

This is what Saint Chrysostom says about it: “If somebody is committing adultery, surely I have the right to say to him that adultery is the evil, and surely I have the right to correct the profligate. Correct him — not as an enemy, subjecting him to punishment — but as a doctor, offering him a medicine. You need to enlighten, but not reproach and denounce; not accuse but lament; not to attack with pride but correct with love” (Discourse 23). Christ forbids reproaching people for their deficiencies, not noticing the own faults, which possibly are greater than theirs. Of course, this does not apply to the civil court, what some false teachers are trying to show, or to the general appreciation of the man’s actions. The Lord was talking about the conceited Pharisees, who treated other people with merciless judgment, regarding only themselves as being righteous. Immediately after, the Lord warns His disciples about preaching His teachings — this true pearl — to those people who like dogs or swine, are incapable of appreciating it because of their extreme petrification in the evil and who, deeply entrenched in depravity, vices and evil deeds, treat every type of the good with bitterness and hatred.

Steadfastness in Prayer.

Further on, it is said: *“Ask, and it will be given to you”* as the Lord teaches steadfastness, patience and fervency in prayer. A genuine Christian, recalling the Lord’s directive: *“Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness”* will not start to pursue gaining anything harmful to the soul’s salvation, therefore he should be convinced that as the answer to the one who prays fervently, as the Lord promised, it will be **given** and **it will be opened** to him. Evangelist Matthew states: *“Your Father, who is in Heaven give you good things to those who ask Him!”*; while Saint Luke elucidates, which specific blessings one should and need to ask for, through the words: *“Your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him”*. A father will not give something harmful to his son. That is why the Lord will give the man only that which is truly a blessing to him.

In concluding His directions, concerning our relationship with the others, the Lord pronounces the rule that they call **golden**: *“Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them”*. This rule contains *“The law and the Prophets”* (Mat. 7:12), for love for the others is the reflection of love for God, just as love for the brothers is the reflection of love towards parents.

The Narrow Path.

Christ warns that to follow His commandments is not that easy, because “*difficult is the way that leads to life*” and the “*gate narrow*” (Mat. 7:14), but they lead into the eternal and blessed life, while the path that is wide and spacious and attractive to those who dislike struggling with their sinful passions, leads to death.

About the False Prophets.

At the end of His Sermon on the Mount, the Lord warns the faithful against the false prophets, comparing them with wolves in sheep’s clothing. The “dogs” and “swine” about which the Lord just spoke are not as dangerous to the faithful as the false prophets, because their iniquitous lifestyle is obvious and would only repulse from them. The false prophets pass off the lies as truth and their own rules of life as those of God. One has to be very perceptive and wise, in order to realize what spiritual danger they represent. Such comparison of the false prophets with wolves, pretending to be sheep, was very convincing for the Jews, which listened to Christ, because over the period of many centuries, these people tolerated many disasters, coming from the false prophets.

On the background of the false prophets, the virtues of the true Prophets were especially evident. The genuine Prophets differed in their non-covetousness, obedience to God, fearless exposure of people’s sins, deep humility, love, self-discipline and chaste life. Their aim was to attract people towards God’s Kingdom, and they were the constructive and uniting element in the lives of their people. Although these genuine Prophets were often rejected by the general mass of their contemporaries, and persecuted by the people who were the head of the authority, their actions cleansed the society, enlivened the best sons of the Jewish people for the virtuous life — in other words, led them towards the divine glory. Such were the fruits, brought by the activity of the true Prophets, which amazed the following generations of the faithful Jews. They recalled with gratitude such Prophets as Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and the others.

The false prophets, who were not few, pursued completely different aims and had the other manner of acting. Avoiding the exposure of sins, they skillfully flattered people, and that secured their success among the common mass of people and the mercy of those with the earthly power. Promising prosperity, they lulled the conscience of the people, what in turn led to the societal moral decay. While the true Prophets were doing everything for the good and unity of God’s Kingdom, the false prophets sought the personal glory and benefits. They were not rejecting perjurying the true prophets and persecuted them. In the final run, their activity contributed to the nation’s ruin. Such were the spiritual and social results of the false prophets’ activity. But the quick-ripening glory of these false prophets soon rotted quicker than their mortal bodies, and the following generation of Jews recalled with shame, how their ancestors submitted themselves to this deceit (Saint Jeremiah the Prophet, in his “Lamentations,” bitterly complains about the false prophets that ruined the Jewish people, see Lamentations 4:13).

During the periods of the spiritual decline, when God sent His true Prophets so that they may direct the Jews towards the true path, simultaneously, a great number of the false prophets used to appear in their midst. Thus, for example, there was especially a great number of them preaching from the 8th to the 6th century BC, when the Israelite and Judean kingdoms were destroyed, and later — on the eve of the destruction of Jerusalem, in the seventies of our era. In accordance with Christ’s and the Apostles’ predictions, before the end of the world, there will come many false prophets, some of whom will even work astonishing wonders and signs in nature (of course, the false ones) (Mat. 24:11-24; 2 Pet. 2:11; 2 Thes. 2:9). In the New Testament time, just like in the days of the Old Testament, the false prophets caused much harm to the Church. In the Old Testament time — by lulling the people’s conscience, they accelerated the process of moral decay, and in contemporary days — by leading

people away from the truth and implanting heresies, they tore the branches off the tree of God's Kingdom. The contemporary abundance of every type of sects and "denominations," is undoubtedly, the fruit of the modern false prophets. All sects sooner or later disappear and others sprout in their place. Only the true Church of Christ will remain till the end of the world. About the future of the false teachings, Christ said that: *"Every plant which My Heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted"* (Mat. 15:13).

It has to be explained, that it would be an exaggeration and strained interpretation to assign every contemporary pastor or non-Orthodox preacher to the false prophets. After all, among the religious ministers of different faiths, undoubtedly are many genuinely faithful, deeply selfless and decent people. They belong to one or another branch of the Christianity, not according to the objective choice but through inheritance. On the other hand, the false prophets are precisely the founders of the non-Orthodox religious flows. The modern television "wonder-workers," exalted demons' exorcists and vain preachers that represent themselves God's elects, and all those that have converted religion into the personal money-making enterprise, can be called the false prophets.

In His Sermon on the Mount, the Lord warns His followers against the false prophets, teaching them not to trust their outward attraction and eloquence but to pay attention to the "fruits" of their activities: *"A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit"*. The term "bad fruit" should not necessarily be understood as sins or abominable deeds, which the false prophets skillfully conceal. The harmful fruits of the false prophets' labors, common to all of them, are **pride** and **wrenching people away from God's Kingdom**.

A false prophet is unable to conceal his pride from the sensitive heart of a believer. One Saint commented that the devil could show the form of any virtue, except one — **humility**. Just as the wolf's teeth become visible from under the sheep's skin, so does pride emerge in the words, gestures and gaze of a false prophet. The seeking popularity false teachers love to perform, in front of the large amount of public, "healings" or "exorcism", to strike their audience with bold thoughts, and evoke excitement from the public. All their shows end with the large collections of money. How distant this cheap pathos and boldness is from the meek and humble image of the Savior and His Apostles!

Further on, the Lord reminds of the false prophets' references to His miracles: *"Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?'"* What wonders are they talking about? Can a false prophet work wonders? No! But the Lord sends His help according to the faith of the asking, and not through the merit of the individual that projects himself as a wonder-worker. The false prophets attributed to themselves those deeds that the Lord performed through His compassion towards people. It is also possible that the false prophets, in their self-delusion, imagined that they worked wonders. Anyway, on the Final Judgment Day, the Lord will reject them, pronouncing: *"I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!"*

Thus, although the false prophets weaken the Church in wrenching careless sheep from It, the faithful children of the Church should not be embarrassed by the lack of Its members and the seeming weakness of the true Church, because the Lord prefers the small number of people that safeguard the truth, to the large number of misguided individuals — *"Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom"* and promises to the faithful His Divine protection from the spiritual wolves, saying: *"And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand"* (Luke 12:32, John 10:28).

Thus, you can distinguish the false prophets by their lives and deeds. The following words of the Lord, are targeted as if against the contemporary sectarians, who preach the man's justification through faith alone, without good deeds: *"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in*

Heaven” (Mat. 7:21). This clearly shows that only the faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is insufficient, but what is also needed is the life that is **consistent with faith**, i.e. the fulfilling of Christ’s commandments, good deeds. In the initial stages of the Christianity preaching, there were indeed many, who worked wonders with Christ’s Name, even Judas received such power with the twelve Apostles on an equal basis. However, this does not save, if the man does not care about the fulfilling of God’s commandments.

In conclusion of His Sermon on the Mount, the Lord repeats this thought: the one, who hears the Lord’s words and does not fulfill them, does not do good deeds, is like a person that builds his house on the sand; while a person that fulfils Christ’s commandments in reality, is like a person that had built his house on the rock. Such a comparison was close, and therefore understandable for the Jews, for in Palestine the frequent torrential rains, accompanied by the storms that swept away the houses, built on the sandy soil, were a normal phenomenon. Only those that fulfill Christ’s commandments will be able to withstand in the hour of trial, alike to the storms of intense temptations., Those who do not fulfill these commandments, easily fall into despair and perish, denying Christ; that is why our Church asks in the chants to affirm us on “His rock of commandments”.

Evangelist Matthew concludes his narration about the Sermon on the Mount with the testimony about how the people were amazed with this new teaching, because the Lord taught as One having authority and not like the Scribes and Pharisees. In the main, the Pharisees’ teachings consisted of trivialities, of useless verbiage and contentious words; while the teachings of Jesus Christ were plain and elevated because He spoke from Himself personally, as the Son of God: “*And I say to you...*” — one clearly feels His Divine authority and power in these words.

The Healing of the Leper.

(Mat. 8:1-4)

After the Sermon, when the Lord Jesus Christ came down from the mountain, a great multitude of people followed Him; they were undoubtedly very much struck. And as it happened once before, here again (about what Evangelists Mark 1:40-45, and Luke 5:12-16 narrate) He was approached by a leper, who was pleading to be cured from this terrible disease. Needless to say, this was far from being a single case of curing lepers, taking into account many miraculous healings, which the Lord performed during the period of His service to the people. It is also not surprising that this case is very similar to the first; it is not surprising either, that the Lord directed to the cured leper to come to a priest so that he, in accordance with the Law of Moses, would officially testify about the fact of healing. Without that, the former leper would not be able to return to the society of the healthy people, as everybody would avoid him and be scared of him, knowing that he had the dreadful and contagious leprosy.

Some interpreters suppose that if the cured leper had not gone to Jerusalem to the priest straight then, but would spread the news of the wonder happened to him everywhere, then that information would have reached Jerusalem before his arrival. Then the priests that treated the Lord with animosity would start to assert that the as if cured leper was never ill.

The Healing of the Capernaum Centurion’s Servant.

(Mat. 8:5-13)

Following this, the Lord went to Capernaum where, once again, He performed the miracle of distant healing of the Roman centurion’s servant, who was, as it seems, in the head of the local garrison of 100 soldiers. Some of the cities in Palestine, under the authority of the Roman Empire, were guarded by the military garrisons of Romans stationed there for protection. Although the centurion was a heathen by birth, he was disposed towards the Jewish religion, the testimony of what is the synagogue built by him. According to Saint Matthew, his

servant suffered greatly with the paralysis, while according to Saint Luke — who tells about this case in more detail - states that he even was close to death.

Initially, the centurion sent the Jewish elders with a request to come and heal his servant. Thereupon, he sent his friends and finally — as Saint Matthew writes — he himself went out to meet the Lord, Who was approaching his house. His words: *“Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy that You should enter under my roof. Therefore I did not even think myself worthy to come to You. But say the word, and my servant will be healed”* (Luke 1:6-7) sound so unusual for a heathen in terms of faith and humility, that the Lord — as both the Evangelists tell — “marveled” and considered it necessary to emphasize before those that were present, that He did not find such faith even among the representatives of God’s chosen people — the Israelites. Further on, as Saint Matthew alone tells, the Lord refutes the Jew’s opinion that only they can be the members of the Messiah’s Kingdom. He also foretells that many of the heathens “from the east and west” — together with the Old Testament forefathers — will be found worthy to inherit this Kingdom, while at the same time, the “sons of the Kingdom”, i.e. the Jews, will be cast down into the absolute darkness, where *“there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”* (Mat. 8:12) for their disbelief in the arrived Messiah. As in many of the Lord’s sayings and parables, the Kingdom of Heaven is presented as a supper, or feast, at which (in the East) people did not sit but reclined. The guests who did something wrong, were led out of the banquet room, where was the supper, into the outside (absolute) darkness, into the cold, opposite to the warm and light room — where the driven out gnashed their teeth from cold and sorrow; this image, understandable to everyone, was taken to give the more visual presentation of the eternal torment of sinners in hell. The faith and humility of the centurion were instantly rewarded, as soon as the Lord pronounced: *“Go your way; and as you have believed, so let it be done for you”* (Mat. 8:13).

The Resurrection of the Nain Widow’s Son.

(Luke 7:11-17).

Only Evangelist Luke describes this event, connecting it with John the Baptist’s subsequent dispatch of his followers to Jesus Christ.

The Lord traveled from Capernaum to the town called Nain, which was located close to the southern border of Galilee, on the northern side of the mount Minor Hermon, in the former territory of the Issachar tribe. Apparently, Nain (pleasant) received its name from its location in the magnificent and rich with grazing-grounds territory of the Esdraelon valley. The Lord was accompanied with His disciples and a multitude of people. In ancient times, the cities were ringed by the solid walls for their protection against the enemies, so that one could enter and exit the city only through one gate. And here at such a city gate, the Lord came across the funeral procession; a deceased youth, the only son of a widow, was being carried out of the city. Seeing the depressed by grief woman, the Lord had mercy on her. He said: *“Do not weep”* and touched the open coffin where the youth laid, giving by that the sign for the procession to stop, and resurrected the youth with the words: *“Young man, I say to you, arise”*.

Everybody became gripped with fear, still none of those who saw the wonder did not acknowledge Jesus as the Wonder-Worker Messiah, regarding Him as a “great prophet”, and this opinion spread throughout the whole Judea and its suburbs.

The Messengers of John the Baptist.

(Mat. 11:2-19; Luke 7:18-35).

Saint John the Baptist could not doubt the Divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ (see John 1:32-34). Nevertheless, finding himself in a dungeon, he sends two of his disciples to Jesus Christ with the question: *“Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?”* (Mat. 11:3; Luke 7:19). John did not need an answer to this question, but his disciples did, because in hearing much about the wonders of the Lord, they were baffled, why He does not openly pro-

claim Himself the Messiah, if He was the One indeed. However, the Lord does not give a direct answer, because for the Jews, the name of the Messiah was associated with the aspirations of the earthly glory and splendor. Only the one, whose soul had been cleansed by Christ's teachings of everything earthly, was worthy to listen and know that Jesus was indeed Messiah-Christ. That is why instead of a direct answer, the Lord cites Isaiah's prophecy (35:2-6), directing John's disciples' attention to His wonders as to the proof of His Divine Representation, adding: "*And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me*" (Mat. 11:6; Luke 7:23), or in other words: "*Blessed is he who does not doubt in Me, seeing My humble appearance*". And so that people did not think that John himself doubted the greatness of the Lord, after the departure of John's disciples, the Lord began to speak of John's high worthiness and ministry as the highest of all the prophets: "*Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist*" (Mat. 11:11; Luke 7:28), — these words indicate the superiority of the Christianity over the highest Old Testament righteousness.

"And from the days of John the Baptist until now the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John" (Mat. 11:12-13). Here, Christ's Church of the New Testament is placed opposite to the law and the Prophets, i.e. the Old Testament Church. With John — standing on the border of both the Testaments — the Old Testament having only a temporary, preparatory meaning, ended, and Christ's Kingdom, into which enters anybody who was taking pains, opened. Based on the prophecies of Malachi (4:5), undoubtedly concerning Christ's Second Coming, the Jews were expecting the appearance of Elijah before the Messiah's coming. But Malachi prophesied only of an Angel, who will prepare the way for the Lord (3:1). The Angel, foretelling Zachariah about the birth of John, said: "*He will also go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah*" (Luke 1:17); but he would not be Elijah himself. John himself responded in the negative to the question as to whether he was Elijah. The meaning of the Lord's words: "*And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come*" (Mat. 11:14) is such: if you understand Malachi's prophecy on the coming of Elijah before that of the Messiah in the literal sense, then know that the one who had to appear before the Messiah, has arrived: this is John; pay particular attention to My testimony about John and "*He who has ears to hear, let him hear!*" (Mat. 11:15).

In stating "*But to what shall I liken this generation?*" (Mat. 11:16; Luke 7:31), the Lord means the Scribes and Pharisees. Like capricious and willful children, they can never be satisfied by their friends. To them, the Pharisees and Scribes that were awaiting the Messiah as the great king-conqueror, the great faster John — calling them towards lamentation and contrition about their sins — could not please them: similarly, they could not be convinced by Jesus Christ Himself, Who, opposite to John, did not refuse to share His meal with sinners in the hope of saving them. The Lord's words: "*wisdom is justified by her children*" (Mat. 11:19; Luke 7:35) are excellently interpreted by Blessed Theophylactus: "When, Christ says, neither John's life nor Mine pleases you, and you reject all paths for salvation, then I — God's Great Wisdom — turn out to be right, not before the Pharisees, but before My children." These "children of wisdom" — the common Jewish people, repenting publicans and sinners, who believed in Christ and accepted His Divine teaching with all their heart; they are the ones who "justified" God and His wisdom, i.e. showed that the Lord had arranged the salvation of the people correctly and wisely. And exactly to them was revealed the wisdom of God, inaccessible to the proud Pharisees.

Exposing the Cities of Galilee.

(Mat. 11:20-30; Luke 10:13-16 and 21_22)

It is with the sincere sorrow that the Lord pronounces "woe" to the cities of Chorazin (to the north of Capernaum) and Bethsaida (to the east of it) for not repenting, even though they witnessed many wonders made by Christ. The Lord compares these cities with the heathen

Tyre and Sidon of neighboring Phoenicia, confirming that the situation of the latter, on the Day of Last Judgment, will be better than that of the Jews, who were given the opportunity for salvation, but who did not want to repent like after Jonah's sermon repented Nineveh: dressed in a coarse garment, made of abrasive hair (which inflicted pain to the body), seated on ashes and sprinkling ashes on the head as a sign of deep contrition. The Lord also predicts the destruction of Capernaum, for its consequential pride and as a consequence of its internal fortuity and prosperity. The Lord compares Capernaum with the Greek cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, destroyed by God for indecency with a rain of sulphur and fire. Indeed, God's punishment fell on all these cities soon after: the Romans destroyed them to their foundations, as well as Jerusalem in the same war. Proud with their imagined wisdom and knowledge of the Holy Scripture, the Pharisees and Scribes did not understand the Lord Jesus Christ and His teachings because of their spiritual blindness. And the Lord praises His Heavenly Father that the truth of His teachings while concealed from the "wise and the prudent", turned out to be open to "the babies", i.e. simple and artless people, like the Apostles and His closest disciples and followers, who sensed not with their minds but with their hearts that Jesus was truly the Messiah-Christ.

"All things have been delivered to Me by My Father" (Mat. 11:27; Luke 10:22) — the Lord said, meaning the following: everything had been placed under His authority: the corporeal world, which is seen, and the spiritual world, the invisible — both given to Him not as to the Son of God, Who always has such authority, but as to Human God and the Savior of the people, so that He could turn all this over to mankind salvation. *"And no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal to Him"* (Mat. 11:27; Luke 10:22) — these words of the Lord mean that nobody can comprehend all the greatness and goodness of the Son, as well as the greatness and goodness of the Father. Only the Son, within Himself, reveals the Father to those who come to Him, while He in His turn, beckons for everyone to come to Him: *"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden"* (i.e. exhausted from the fussy and fruitless labors under the pressure of sinful passions, emanating from pride and vanity), *"and I will give you rest"* (i.e. I will give you peace from these passions) (Mat. 11:28). In offering to take up His "yoke", the Lord means the yoke of the Gospel law, comparing it to the yoke of passions: *"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart"* (Mat. 11:29), *"For My yoke is easy and My burden is light"* (Mat. 11:30). The Lord Himself gives strength in the form of goodness of the Holy Spirit to bear His burden, and by the Personal example inspires us to carry His yoke.

Forgiving the Sinful Woman in the House of Simon the Pharisee.

(Luke 7:36-50).

One Pharisee, called Simon, who seemed to be nurturing love for the Lord, although not having the firm belief in Him, invited the Lord for a meal, in order that maybe, plunging into His speech and teaching, to enter into the closer association with Him. The woman, known throughout the town as a great sinner, entered unexpectedly, and having stopped humbly behind the Lord, she bent down to his feet, and seeing that His feet were not washed of the dust of the trip, began to shed floods of tears, washing, in such manner, the feet of the Lord, instead of water, with her tears and wiping them with her hair instead of a towel. Thereupon, kissing His feet, she began to anoint them with the expensive myrrh that she had brought with her. According to the Pharisees' understanding, a touch of a sinful woman defiles that person, therefore Simon, completely unaffected by the moral conversion that had occurred in the soul of this wanton, does nothing but only judges the Lord for accepting these honors, thinking to himself that He cannot be a prophet for He would have known *"what manner of woman this is"* and would have rejected her.

Revealing the hidden thoughts of the Pharisee, the Lord narrated to him the parable about the two debtors. One owed 500 denarii's (approx. 125 rubles) while the other — 50 de-

narii's. As they did not have the money to pay the lender, he excused both the debts. It is easy to respond to the Lord's question: who of the two loved the lender more? Of course, the one that was forgiven more. In confirming the correctness of the answer, the Lord adds: "*To whom little is forgiven, the same loves little*". According to the context, those words were directed against Simon, who had little love for Christ and was sparse in good deeds — even though he invited Him to his house, he did not demonstrate any signs of attention towards Christ: kissing Him or washing His feet. From the parable, Simon should have understood that in the moral sense, the Lord places the repentant woman-sinner higher than him, Simon the Pharisee, because she showed more love towards the Lord than he did, and for such love her sins were forgiven. The words "*to whom little is forgiven...*" contain an oblique reference to Simon that because of his disposition towards the Lord, he too is forgiven some debts before God, although much less than the woman-sinner.

The other guests reclining with Simon (evidently, also Pharisees), did not understand the Lord's words and began to be annoyed internally, that was why Christ sent the woman away with the words: "*Go in peace!*"

The Healing of the Possessed and the Exposure of the Pharisees.

(Mat. 12:22-37; Mark 3:20-30; Luke 11:14-23).

The Lord heals the possessed, in which muteness and blindness accompanied the demon's presence, and all the people marvel at this miracle. Wishing to eliminate among the people all discussions about Jesus being Christ (i.e. the Messiah), the Pharisees began to spread rumors that He expulses demons with the power of Beelzebub — the prince of demons — that He Himself has the unclean spirit (Mark 3:30), even calling Him Beelzebub (Mat. 10:25). The Lord responded to this with a questioning supposition: would satan begin to destroy his own kingdom? "*Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation*" (Mat 12:25; Luke 11:17; Mark 3:24). In the devil's kingdom, there should be the unity in authority and action, and consequently satan is incapable of acting against himself. "*And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out?*" — said the Lord (Mat. 12:27; Luke 11:19). Here, the word *sons* means both the Apostles, having received the power from Christ to expulse demons, and the disciples of the Pharisees that practiced exorcism, and that individual, about which the Apostles said to Christ, that he expulses demons with His name, while not being with Him (Mark 9:38; Luke 9:49).

"*Therefore they (sons) shall be your judges*" (Mat. 12:27; Luke 11:19) i.e. they will reveal their premeditated lies on the Judgment Day. "*But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the Kingdom of God has come upon you*" (Mat. 12:28; Luke 11:20); here the Lord means that the Kingdom of God arrived, instead of the kingdom of satan, who is fleeing from the world, being pursued by Christ: expulsing demons, the Lord proves that He has "bound" the "strongest" — satan. The Lord then adds the following thought: "*He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me, scatters abroad*" (mat. 12:30; Luke 11:23). In Christ's Kingdom: he, who is not with Him, is hostile to Him because he brings division into the united "house" under one authority. It is different, when a person is not yet in Christ's Kingdom, yet has not been called there; then, he at least should not be against Christ, is not in unity with the world that is hostile to Christ. Such a person already partly belongs to Christ: he can have one goal with Him and enter His Kingdom. But the one, who is not with Christ in His struggle with satan in gathering all the people into God's Kingdom, is against Him, for anybody, who, hearing and understanding Christ's teaching, does not join Him, is already His enemy, and especially the one who goes against Him.

The conclusion from this is: "*Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come*" (Mat. 12:31-32; Mark 3:28-29). God's mercy is eternal, and there is no sin that could defeat it: but anyone that stubbornly rejects

this very mercy, who stubbornly opposes the very saving grace of God, will obtain no mercy and his sin remains unforgiven, and such a person perishes. This **intentional opposition to the saving grace of God**, which is the grace of the Holy Spirit, the Lord calls **blasphemy against the Spirit**. This was clearly expressed in the fact that the Pharisees dared to call the almighty works of God the works of the devil. Why it happens that there is no forgiveness for this sin “*either in this age, or the age to come?*” That is because, if a person rejects the evident actions of the Holy Spirit’s saving grace, he would not be able to evoke the feeling of repentance, without which there is no salvation. If a person blasphemes against Christ, seeing Him in a humbled state, that sin will be forgiven, for this is a simple error, easily washed out through repentance.

This was not the case with **the stubborn opposition** against the actions of God’s saving power, which was noted by the Pharisees and was far from repentance. He explains the Pharisees’ slander against the Lord’s deeds with the anger, which is in their hearts: “*Brood of vipers! How can you, being evil, speak of good things? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks*” (Mat. 12:34). The Lord threatens the Pharisees that they will have to answer for every idle word on the Judgment Day, because their angry replies show the presence of the evil and contrary to God will in them.

The Lord’s Answer to Those, Waiting for the Signs from Him.

(Mat. 12:38-45; Luke 11:29-32, 24_26)

The Jews were tempted by Jesus Christ’s humbleness and they were demanding a sign from Him, which would clearly indicate His Divine worthiness of the Messiah. Those miracles which Christ performed through His love for suffering people, on prayers of some individuals, were not enough for them. They wanted to see “*a sign from Heaven*” (Mat. 16:1). Like enemies, they hypocritically ask for signs and Him therefore calls them as “*evil and adulterous generation*” (mat. 12:39; Luke 11:29), in the sense that they are not faithful to God. At this unfaithfulness pointed already the Prophets, presenting the Jews’ idolatry in the form of unfaithfulness to God — adultery (Exod. 57:3; Ezekiel 16:15, 23-27). The Lord tells them that they will not be given any signs, pointing to the greatest miracle in the past and placing it as a symbol of the new: the preservation of Prophet Jonah in the bowels of a whale during 3 days; similarly Jesus, upon His physical death, will resurrect in three days. Actually, Christ spent one day and two nights in the tomb, but in the East there always existed the tradition to count the part of a day or night as a whole (e.g. 1 Kings 30:12; Genesis 42:17-18; 2 Chron. 10:5-12, and others). **The Ninevians** — the inhabitants of the city Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian kingdom on the bank of the Tiber river (to the north of Babylon) — who repented as a result of Prophet Jonah’s sermon, will judge the Jews at the Last Judgment for not accepting their Messiah’s sermons, and because of their stubbornness did not want to repent. Queen Sheba of the south, who came from Arabia, also will judge the Jews, because she came from far way to listen to the Wisdom of Solomon, while the Jews did not want to listen to the Very Incarnated Divine Wisdom, Which was “*greater than Solomon*”. Further on, the Lord narrates the parable about the unclean spirit that after leaving a person re-entered him with the others that were more evil than him. Through this parable, the Lord visually explains that although He could force the Jews to believe in Him by performing an astonishing miracle, but because their moral decay is so great, -- within the short time, their disbelief would appear again with even greater strength and stubbornness. Disbelief and decay within them — is the very evil spirit from the parable about the possessed. If a person remains careless, idle and inattentive to himself, then the evil spirit and passions that once were driven out of him, return with greater ferocity.

A Woman Glorifies the Mother of Jesus.

(Luke 11:27-28; Math. 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35; Luke 8:19-21).

One woman was so astonished by the Lord's sermon that she could not curb her delight, and publicly glorified Him and His Ever-Pure Mother, Who was outside their house with his brothers (Mat. 12:46 and Mark 3:31). According to the tradition, that woman was Martha's servant (Luke 10:38), Marcella. That is why on the Mother of God's feast-day, this fragment is always joined to the Scripture narrating about the Lord's visit to Maria and Martha, and is read as one Gospel.

"Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts which nursed You" (Luke 11:27), or in other words: blessed is the One, Who gave birth and brought up such a Teacher. At this point of time, commences the glorification of the Mother of God in fulfillment of Her own prediction: *"Henceforth, all generations shall call Me Blessed"*. Saint Evangelist Matthew notes that it was specifically at this particular time when the Mother of God and the so-called brothers were outside the house, and sent a message to tell Him that they were unable to squeeze through, because of the crowd of people surrounding Him. The Lord always nurtured gentle feelings towards His Mother, and even when He was crucified, was still concerned about Her and charged His beloved disciple, Apostle John to care about Her. However, at this moment, in saying His exhortations to the people, He showed them that the fulfillment of the Heavenly Father's will is greater than His family feelings: *"Whoever does the will of My Father in Heaven is My brother and sister and Mother"* (Mat. 12:50; Mark 3:35; Luke 8:21).

The mentioned here **Christ's brothers** in some sections of the Gospel, are named as: James, Josses, Simon and Judas (Mat. 13:54-56). Comparing the narrations of all the four Evangelists, it can be seen that the mother of all these "brothers" of Christ was Maria Clopas, whom Saint John calls as *"His Mother's sister"* (John 19:25). Maria Clopas was supposed to be the cousin to the Mother of God, for She was the only daughter of Joachim and Anna. According to one tradition, that Maria was the wife of Clopas, who, in fact, was the father of Christ's "brothers." While according to another, those "brothers" were Joseph the Betrothed's children from his first marriage. In order to bring both traditions to the accordion, it can be accepted that the "brothers" were the sons of Joseph, and (according to the law of the family ties) of the wife of his brother that had died childless, or of a close relative of Maria Clopas. In any case, the Jews called as "brothers" not only their blood brothers, but also the first and second cousins, and close relatives in general.

The Lord Jesus Christ's Teaching in Parables.

About the Sower; About tares; About the invisibly growing seed; About the mustard seed; About the leaven; About the treasure hidden in the field; About the precious pearl; About the dragnet, cast into the sea.

The word **parable** is made up of two Greek words: "paravoli" and "parimia." In the literal translation, the word "**parimia**" means "a brief statement that express the rules of life" (such for example, are the parables of Solomon); "**paravoli**" — is a story, containing the concealed meaning, that express the higher spiritual truth through the images, taken from everyday life. Correctly speaking, the Scripture's parable is a **paravoli**. The parables, narrated in the 13th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, and in the parallel sections of the other two forecasters, Mark and Luke, were told by the Lord before such a multitude of people, that He was forced to enter a boat, to distance Himself from the besieging crowd, and then address the people standing on the bank of the Gennesaret lake ("sea").

Saint Chrysostom explains: *"The Lord spoke in parables to make His words more expressive, to imprint them in the memories of the listeners and present the actual matters visu-*

ally". The Lord's parables are the allegorical teachings, images and examples, taken from everyday life of the Jewish people and from the surrounding nature.

To the question: "*Why do you speak to them in parables?*" the Lord responded: "*Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, but to them it has not been given*" (Mat. 13:10-11; Mark 4:10-11 and Luke 8:9-10). As the future messengers of the Gospel, the Lord's disciples — through the special blissful mental enlightenment — were given the knowledge of the Divine truths, even though not fully, before the descent of the Holy Spirit. While the rest, not having such knowledge, were not ready to accept and understand those truths. This served as a reason for the moral coarseness and false ideas of the Messiah and His Kingdom, spread by the Scribes and Pharisees. Already Isaiah had prophesied that (6:9-10). If this truth was shown to the morally corroded and spiritually hardened people in its natural state, without enveloping it into something that they understood, then they would see it without seeing it, and hear it, without hearing it. Only when the truth is enveloped into a parabolic cover, joined with the notions of the well known subjects it, the truth, becomes suitable for perceiving and understanding: not forcibly, but by itself the coarsened thought rises from that what is seen to the unseen, from the outward aspect to the higher spiritual meaning.

In the fact that the Lord spoke in parables, Saint Matthew sees the fulfillment of Asaph's prophecy: "*I will open my mouth in a parable*" (Psalm 77:2). Although Asaph was saying that about himself, but being a prophet, he was a symbol of the Messiah, which can be seen from the following words of the same verse: "*I will utter dark sayings of old*", which only befits the Omniscient Messiah, and not a mortal individual. The concealed mysteries of God's Kingdom are of course, known only to God's hypostatic Wisdom.

The Parable about the Sower.

(Mat. 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:4-15).

In this parable, the Lord envisages Himself as being the Sower, the seeds as the preached by Him Divine Word and the soil upon which they are sown, as the hearts of the listeners. The Lord cogently reminded them of their native fields — interrupted by the road running through them, some sections of which were overgrown with thorny bushes (brambles), while the others were covered with only a thin layer of the ground. The sowing is a magnificent example of preaching God's Word, which, falling into the heart, remains either fruitless or brings a fruit, greater or lesser — depending on its state.

"For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him", — repeatedly mentions the Lord throughout the different sections of the Gospel (e.g. Mat. 13:12, 25:29; Luke 19:26 etc.). The meaning of this saying is that with the effort, a rich person becomes richer, while a poor individual, if he is lazy, loses even what little he has. In the spiritual sense it means: you, the Apostles, already gifted with the knowledge of God's Heavenly mysteries, are able to penetrate into these mysteries further and further, understand them more completely. At the same time, the people would lose even their sparse knowledge of those mysteries which they had retained if, with the revelation of those mysteries, they were not given the assistance through the sermon that was more appropriate for them. Saint Chrysostom explains it this way: "*He, who wishes and strives to obtain the gifts of grace, God Himself would grant everything; but he, who has neither a wish, nor effort, would not have any profit from that what he seems to have*". The one, whose mind is darkened and heart -- hardened to such an extent that he does not comprehend God's Word, this Word settles on the surface of the mind and heart, not taking root, as the seed along the road, exposed to every passer-by, and the sly one — satan or a demon — entices it and makes the heard fruitless. The stony surfaces are those who, while interested in the Gospel's sermon as with the good news — at times even sincerely and with the open heart, finding pleasure in the sermon, still have their hearts cold, hard and immovable, like a rock. Such people are incapable of changing their life-style, leaving

their beloved, habitual sins for the sake of the Gospel's demands and commence the struggle against temptations, tolerating sorrows and deprivations for the sake of the truth of the Gospel's teaching. In their struggle with temptations, they become tempted, fall in the spirit and betray their faith and the Gospel. The ground with thorns represents the people's hearts that are entangled with passions: to the wealth, delights, and the earthly blessings in general.

The good and fertile soil represents the people with kind and pure hearts, who hearing the Word of God firmly decided it to be the guide of their lives and to bring the fruits of virtues. "The kinds of virtues are different, just as are different those who succeed in the spiritual wisdom" (Blessed Theophylactus).

The Parable about the Tares.

(Mat. 13:24-30).

"The Kingdom of Heaven" is the earthly Church, established by the Heavenly Founder and leading people towards Heaven. "*The Kingdom of Heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field*". "*But while men slept*" — i.e. during the night, when things can be done in secret, hidden from everyone — what indicates the cunningness of the enemy — "*his (people's) enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way*". Tares are called the weeds which, while they are small, very much resemble wheat. But when they are fully-grown and begin to differ from wheat, pulling them out poses a serious threat to the roots of wheat-stalks. The Teaching of Christ is being sown all over the world — but so does the devil sowing the evil among the people with his temptations. In the extensive field of the world, everybody lives together: both the worthy sons of the Heavenly Father (wheat) and the sons of the sly one (tares). The Lord tolerates the latter, leaving them until the "harvest time," i.e. until the Dread Judgment, when the inhabitants — God's Angels — would gather all the "tares" and cast them into the fiery stove for the eternal hellish torture. The Lord will then direct the "wheat" to be gathered for His granary, i.e. into His Heavenly Kingdom, where the righteous will shine like the sun.

The Parable about the Invisibly Growing Seed.

(Mark 4:26-29).

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a seed that having been thrown into the ground invisibly grows by itself. This inner process of that can be neither grasped nor understood: how from a tiny seed the whole plant emerges — nobody knows. Similarly, the transfiguration of the human soul, performed with the power of God's grace, can be neither grasped nor understood.

The Parable about the Mustard Seed.

(Mat. 13:31-32; Mark 4:30-32; Luke 13:18-19).

In the East, a mustard tree can reach the enormous size, although its seed is that small that the Jews even had a saying: "Tiny, as a mustard seed". The meaning of the parable is in that, although the beginning of God's Kingdom is evidently small and insignificant, the power concealed in it overcomes all the obstacles, and is capable of transforming it into the great and worldwide kingdom. St. Chrysostom comments: "With this parable, the Lord wanted to show the way in which the Gospel's sermon will be spread. Although His disciples were the most helpless of all, and the most humble, but because they possessed the great hidden power, it (the sermon) spread throughout the whole universe". Christ's Church, small in the beginning and unnoticeable to the world, expanded on the earth in such a way the multitude of nations shelter under its canopy, that like birds in the branches of a mustard tree. Precisely the same thing occurs with the soul of every individual: God's winnowing grace, initially hardly perceptible, envelopes the soul more and more until it becomes the receptacle of various virtues.

The Parable about the Leaven.

(Mat. 13:33-35; Mark 4:33-34; Luke 13:20-21).

The parable about the leaven has the same meaning. “Like the leaven — says Saint Chrysostom — that reports its properties to the great amount of flour, so will you (the Apostles) transfigure the whole world”. Likewise in the soul of every individual member of Christ’s Kingdom: the power of grace invisibly, but gradually and actively starts to possess all the powers of his spirit, and sanctifying, transfigure them. Some interpret the three measures as being the three powers of the soul: the mind, feeling and will.

The Parable about the Treasure Hidden in the Field.

(Mat. 13:44).

A person learns about the treasure, buried in a field that did not belong to him. In order to make use it, he sells all that he owns, buys the field and becomes the possessor of the treasure. Similarly, to the wise, God’s Kingdom presents itself as a treasure in the sense of the inner enlightenment and spiritual gifts. Having concealed the similar treasure, a follower of Christ sacrifices everything and rejects everything in order to possess it.

The Parable about the Pearl.

(Mat. 13:45-46).

The meaning of this parable is the same as that of the preceding one: in order to acquire the Heavenly Kingdom as the greatest treasure, it is necessary to sacrifice everything, all the welfare which one possesses.

The Parable about the Dragnet, Cast into the Sea.

(Mat. 13:47-50).

This parable has the same meaning as that of wheat and tares. The sea is the world, the dragnet is the teaching on faith, the fishermen are the Apostles and their successors. The “dragnet” represents people of all kind: the barbarians, Hellenes, Jews, fornicators, publicans, robbers. The beach and the sorting of fish are understood like the end of the world and the Dread Judgment, when the righteous will be separated from the sinners, just like the good fish will be separated from the bad fish, caught in the dragline. It is necessary to focus on the fact that Christ the Savior often takes opportunities to differentiate the fate of the righteous and the sinners in the next world. Consequently, one cannot agree with the opinion of those, who like Origen, think that everybody will be saved, even the devil.

Interpreting the Lord’s parables, one should remember that when He taught through them, He used examples from everyday life of His listeners, and not those imaginary. According to Saint John Chrysostom’s explanation, the Lord acted that way to make His words more meaningful, to envelop the truth in a living image and to fix it deeper in the memory. Consequently, with parables, one has to look for similarities, likeness — but only **in the general sense and not in the details** — not in every word, taken separately. Naturally, apart from this, every parable has to be understood in the relation with the others, homogenous and with the general spirit of Christ teaching.

It is important to note that in His sermons and parables, the Lord Jesus Christ quite clearly delineates the understanding of the Kingdom of Heaven from that of God’s Kingdom. He calls **Kingdom of Heaven** that eternal blissful state of the righteous, that will be revealed to them in the **next life**, after the Final Dread Judgment. As **God’s Kingdom** He calls the community of believers that He had established, who try to perform the will of the Heavenly Father. This God’s Kingdom that was revealed with the coming of Christ the Savior enters into the souls of people and transfiguring them internally, prepares them for the inheritance of

the Heavenly Kingdom, which will open at the end of this age. The above-mentioned parables are devoted to the revealing of these notions.

When on the question posed to the disciples, whether they understood everything that was said, they responded in the affirmative, He called them “the scribes”, but not those Scribes-Jews, hostile to Him, who only knew “the Old Testament things” and even then distorted and perverted them, understanding and interpreting them incorrectly, but those scribes, **instructed in the Kingdom of Heaven**, who were capable of being the preachers of the Kingdom of Heaven. Having been instructed by Jesus Christ, they then knew the “old” prophecy and the “new” teaching of Christ about the Heavenly Kingdom. Consequently, they will be able in their forthcoming sermon, just like a prudent owner that withdraws from his treasury both the new and the old, to use either one or the other, according to the prevailing need. Likewise, all the Apostles’ successors should use both the Old and the New Testaments in their sermon, because God has revealed the truths of the both.

About the Owner, Preserving the New and the Old.

(Mat. 13:51-52).

And Jesus asked them: have you understood all this? They respond: yes, Lord! He then told them: Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the Kingdom of Heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasury, things new and old.

The Lord’s Response to Those Hesitating to Follow Him.

(Mat. 8:18-22; Luke 9:57-62).

The Lord was surrounded and jostled by people to such an extent, that He was unable to seclude Himself for the prayer and conversation with the Apostles (Luke 4:42) — He did not even have time to eat (Mark 3:20). Then once, the Lord directed to His disciples to sail to the other side of the Tiberias Lake. When they were ready to enter the boat, a Scribe approached the Lord, expressing his desire to follow Him, wherever He went. Wishing to warn the Scribe that he, probably, was about to undertake the task that was beyond his capabilities, the Lord reminded him about His nomadic type of life: “*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head*” (Mat. 8:20; Luke 9:58); i.e. the Lord wanted to say that He had no place where He could seclude and rest from His labors.

Calling Himself “*the Son of Man*”, the Lord humbly underlines His human nature. Together with this, for those aware of Daniel’s prophecy (7:13-14), He incisively indicates His **Messianic worthiness** with this name. Apparently, this response made a great impression on the people with the Lord, who already belonged to the number of His disciples. And one of them started to evade the immediate following the Lord, saying that he first had to bury his father, to what the Lord said: “*Follow Me, and let the dead bury the dead*” (Mat. 8:22; Luke 9:60). The two words of the same root *dead* and *the dead*, used here, have two different meanings; the first has the meaning of the spiritually dead. The Lord meant that for the sake of the great undertaking, for the sake of the good news on the Kingdom of Heaven, it is necessary to leave everything and everybody who is “dead”, deaf to the word of God, to His great undertaking. It is as though the Lord is saying: leave those who are totally attached to the earthly life to bury their dead, while you, heeding the word of life, which is being preached by Me, follow Me.

With alike, not fully understandable prohibition of giving last tribute to his deceased father, the Lord apparently wanted to either to test the character and loyalty of this disciple, or to save him from his relatives, who could have distracted him from following Him. Another disciple, not waiting to be called, expressed to the Lord his desire to follow Him. However, first he asks permission just to part with his relatives. To this request the Lord replied: “*No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God*”. In other words: the one, who decided to follow Christ, should not look back at the world with its

family ties and earthly attachments, for any type of the earthly bond prevents from the complete commitment to the teaching of Christ.

Calming the Storm.

(Mat. 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25).

When they left the shore, exhausted from His daily activities, the Lord fell asleep at the bow of the boat. A great tempest arose, one of those that happened frequently on the Lake of Gennesaret, surrounded by mountains and ravines, therefore the local residents called it a sea. The disciples, nearly all of them being the local fishermen and accustomed to fighting with local storms, were exhausted and in desperation began to wake their Teacher. On the one hand, this decision expresses the fear for the personal safety, while on the other — the hope for the Lord's omnipotence. According to Saint Mark, the disciples even permitted themselves to reproach Jesus: "*Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?*" (Mark 4:38). In response, the Lord rebuked them: "*Why are you so fearful? How is it that you have no faith?*" (Mark 4:40; Mat. 8:26 and Luke 8:25). The Lord stopped the storm, rebuking the winds and the sea. The disciples and the people, apparently accompanying them in the other boats uttered in amazement: "*Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?*" (Mat. 8:27; Mark 4:41; and Luke 8:25)

The Casting Out of a Legion of Demons.

(Mat. 8:28-34; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 8:26-40).

Having crossed the lake, Jesus and His disciples arrived to the country lying on its southern bank, which Evangelists Mark and Luke call Gadarenes (after the name of one of its cities, Gadara), while Saint Matthew calls it Gergesenes (after the name of another city, Gergesa); both the cities were among the "Decapolis".

The possessed with the evil spirit met them on the bank. Evangelists Mark and Luke speak of one person, while Saint Matthew — about two. This variance happened most probably due to the fact that one of them was a well-known citizen of Gadara, being in the awful state of demonical possession, while in comparison the other individual was hardly noticed. The nature of possession is in the fact that the demons deprive the man of his conscience, and subduing his mind, control his whole body and spiritual strength, causing him the unbelievable tortures through his own actions.

The greatness and omnipotence of the Son of God, concealed from the human sight, but apparent to the evil spirits who have the perfect vision, brought them into terror and trepidation. And so the possessed begin to cry, calling Jesus the Son of God and begging Him not to cause them the intolerable torture, which they experienced because of His closeness. According to the Gospels of Mark and Luke, to Christ's question what his name was, the most ferocious demon answered: "*Legion*" (Mark 5:9; Luke 8:30), indicating that countless numbers of demons dwelled in the possessed. The demons begged the Lord "*that He would not command them to go out into the abyss*" (Luke 8:31) and "*that He would not send them out of the country*" (Mark 5:10), but instead, permitted them to enter the big herd of swine, grazing nearby at the mountain. We are not that familiar with the nature of the evil spirits to understand why it is essential for them to dwell in the living beings. However, it is characteristic that they chose the most unclean, despised animal in the eyes of the Jews, so that the Lord would not drive them out of the country and thereby, would not deprive them from operating there. The Lord allowed them to enter the herd, and the swine, going mad, threw themselves from the mountain into the sea and drowned. Apparently allowing that, the Lord wanted to enlighten the Gadarenes who, despite the commandments of the Law of Moses, bred swine, and in such large numbers (according to Mark 5:13, nearly 2000).

Together with this, the situation attracted special attention of the inhabitants of that country to the Lord Jesus Christ, for they saw the well-known demonically-possessed, cured and sitting at the feet of Jesus. However, these events still did not enlighten them: they expe-

rienced inexplicable terror and, in all probability, misgiving, thinking that the Lord's further stay might bring them more great losses. Their feeling of regret over the loss of their pigs triumphed over the natural, as it would seem, feeling of gratitude for the miraculous riddance of their country of the possessed — and they asked Him to leave. What huge folly it is on the part of those people who do not wish to have within their boundaries the One, Who came to destroy the devil's deeds!

Contrary to the usual prohibition of the Lord to tell about His miracles, on this occasion Christ directs the cured possessed to return to his house and tell them what great things God had done for him. It has to be surmised that the Lord did that, because He did not have those misgivings in this country, which He had in Galilee and Judea, where the ideas of the Messiah were incorrect: as the earthly leader of Israel; and the Lord did not want His name to be linked with the political desires of the Jewish patriots, wishing the overthrow of the Roman rule. Apart from that, it was apparent that the Gadarenes were outstanding in their unusual religious-moral coarseness and wildness, so the Lord wanted to arouse their hearts with a sermon about Himself and His works through the healed possessed, endowed by Him with blessings, who indeed, as Saint Mark told, began to preach about the Lord throughout the whole Decapolis and thus prepared the country to the following Apostles' sermon and conversion to Christ.

The Healing of a Woman with a Flow of Blood and the Resurrection of Jairus's Daughter.

(Mat.9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43; Luke 8:41-56).

Having entered the boat with His disciples, the Lord Jesus Christ sailed back to the opposite western bank of the Gennesaret Lake, where the town of Capernaum was situated. Here, crowds of people awaited Him, among them there was Jairus — one of the synagogue's leaders — whose only twelve-year-old daughter was about to die. Although the leaders of the synagogue belonged to the party, hostile to Jesus (John 7:47-48), he apparently had heard about the many miracles performed by the Lord and perhaps, having witnessed the healing of the Capernaum centurion's servant, was enlightened with hope that Jesus would heal his daughter. Although Jairus did not possess such faith for which the Centurion was praised by the Lord, He nevertheless went to the synagogue leader's house and to lay His hands on the dying girl upon Jairus's request. Seeing this, the crowd streamed after Him with especial curiosity towards Jairus's house, and as everyone wanted to be close to the Great Wonderworker, everybody jostled Him.

One woman, who suffered of a flow of blood for 12 years and had lost all hope to be cured, made her way behind Jesus and unnoticeably touched His clothing. According to the Law of Moses, the women having such a disease were regarded as unclean and were obliged to stay home. They are not permitted to come into contact with anyone (Lev. 15:25-28). However, that miserable woman had such fervent faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that she decided to leave the house and touch His clothing, being sure that only a touch would give her the total cure. And her faith was just: she was cured instantly as she felt the source of the flow of blood to desiccate. Saint Mark gives the most detailed description of this event. He tells that as Jesus felt His strength leaving Him, He asked those surrounding Him: "*Who touched My clothes?*" (Mark 5:30; Luke 8:45) Of course, He knew who did that, and posed the question for the people's edification in order to reveal the faith of that woman in front of them, and the miracle that followed because of that faith. The woman, realizing she could not hide, fell before the Lord's feet and exposed the truth to everybody. According to the understanding of the Jews, in entering the crowd and making every person that she had to touch unclean, she committed an offence; consequently, she awaited in fear and trepidation the condemnation of her act, but the Lord calmed her: "*Daughter, be of good cheer; your faith has made you well. Go in peace*" (Luke 8:48; Mat. 9:22 and Mark 5:34).

During that time Jairus's daughter had died, and someone of the family came with that sad message and to request not to burden the Teacher unnecessarily. Seeing the despair of the grief-stricken father, the Lord calmed him: *"Do not be afraid; only believe, and she will be made well"* (Luke 8:50; Mark 5:36). Arriving at the house, they found there the professional mourners invited to cry over the dead. Such type of mourning over the dead usually went on for 8 days, and over a well-known person — one month; flutes and pipes accompanied it. The Lord said to Jairus and his domestics: *"Do not weep; she is not dead, but sleeping"* (Luke 8:52; Mat. 9:24 and Mark 5:39). These words cannot be understood in the literal sense, just as about Lazarus, having reposed 4 days in the coffin and commencing to decompose, the Lord said that he had fallen "asleep" (John 11:11-14), and only later added: "Lazarus is dead". The real death of the girl was so obvious to everyone that they began to laugh at Jesus. Because such a great miracle could only be witnessed by those worthy and capable of evaluating this mystery of the Divine omnipotence, the Lord directed that everybody should leave the room, except for His 3 Apostles — Peter, James and John — and the parents of the dead girl. Taking the girl's hand, the Lord calls, saying: *"Talitha, cumi"*, which means: *"Little girl, I say to you, arise!"* (Mark 5:41; Mat. 9:25 and Luke 8:54), resurrecting her immediately. With that, notwithstanding the long period of her grave illness, she was so strong that she began to walk as a health one. Everyone got amazed, and the Lord directed that she should be given some food so as to convince her parents, that before them was their real daughter — and not a ghost of the dead. According to His custom, the Lord banned spreading the news about the miracle.

The Healing of Two Blind Men.

(Mat. 9:27-34).

When the Lord left Jairus's house, a crowd of people followed Him. Among them were two blind men, who were crying out: *"Son of David, have mercy on us!"* The Lord as if did not pay any attention to those cries, apparently aiming to test the faith of the two that were calling Him Son of David, i.e. the Messiah. Only when the Lord reached the house (of the unnamed owner), He asked the blind men, who were appealing to be cured, if they believed that He could cure them. Having received the affirmative answer, the Lord touched their eyes, and they opened. As in all such cases, the Lord strictly forbade them to speak of that miracle. However, moved by joy and their gratitude to their Healer, they could not restrain themselves and *"spread the news about Him in all that country"*.

Just after the cured men left, the mute, possessed by the evil spirit, was brought to Jesus. The possessed could not plead for himself as the evil spirit took power of his tongue. Therefore, the Lord did not inquire (as He usually did) him if he had faith, but commanded the demon to leave him, and the ability to speak came back to the man. Amazed, the people declared that nothing like that had ever happened among the Israelites, while the Pharisees, intending to demean this effect that was created by the miracle, were saying that Jesus was casting out demons through the power of the prince of demons, i.e. the devil.

The Second Visit to Nazareth.

(Mat. 13:53-58; Mark 6:1-6).

After that, Jesus returned *"to His own country"* (Mat. 13:54; Mark 6:1), i.e. to Nazareth — His Mother's and His so-called father Joseph's land of birth, and to the place where He was brought up. There, the Lord began to teach His countrymen in the synagogue, amazing them and prompting them to say: *"Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works?"* (Mat. 13:54; Mark 6:2). This was not the type of amazement that was shown to Him in other places — this was mixed with scorn: as though, *"Is this not the carpenter's Son? Is not His Mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas?"* (Mat. 13:55; Mark 6:3). The Nazarenes either did not know, or did not believe in the miraculous incarnation and birth of Jesus Christ, regarding Him simply as the Son of Joseph and Mary.

This is quite inexcusable, as in the past there were many inconspicuous parents who had children, who further on became famous. As an example, such were David, Amos, Moses and the others. The Nazarenes should have shown reverence towards Jesus, especially because having such plain parents He showed such wisdom that definitely proved to come not from the human education but from the Divine grace. Of course, the similar disbelief emanated from the usual human envy, which is always sly. People often look with envy and hatred upon those, who came from their own environment, and once revealed extraordinary gifts, thereby becoming more prominent than them. Perhaps, Christ's friends in earthly terms and those of the same age that were in constant contact with Him, did not want to acknowledge His extraordinary abilities precisely due to this reason. "*A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house*" (Mat. 13:57; Mark 6:4), — although this should not be so, it is more likely, for the people pay more attention to what is being preached, rather than to the preacher; and if someone is worthy of the Divine selection and calling, he is still regarded as an ordinary person that they are used to see, not finding the prophecies in his words and not believing them. The Lord adds this, in all probability, national saying: "*and in his own house*" meaning that even His own "brothers" did not believe in His Divinity (John 7:5). Nowhere Jesus found so much opposition towards Himself and His teaching, as in His own "**native**" town, where they even tried to kill Him (Luke 4:28-29).

In Nazareth, the Lord "*did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief*" (Mat. 13:58, Mark 6:5), because He always performed miracles as a reward **for having faith**, and not to satisfy idle curiosity or to prove His supernatural powers.

The Plentiful Harvest, but Few Laborers.

(Mat. 9:35-38; Mark 6:6; Luke 8:1-3).

The crowds of people that the Lord observed in walking through the towns, He compares to the flocks of sheep, wandering without a shepherd — an allegory that was especially understood in Palestine, the land of shepherds. The spiritual leaders of these people are not true shepherds and teachers, they themselves are blind and not only do they not enlighten the people, but further corrupt them. "*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few*" (Mat. 9:37), a splendid representation, understood by all. The field that is covered with ripe wheat, which needs harvesting, but there are few reapers. The meaning of these words is this: there is the great number of people willing to enter into the Messiah's Kingdom, and already prepared for this, but there are few that are ready for the great task of teaching. "*Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest*" (Mat. 9:38); i.e. to ask Father-God to facilitate the preparation of new workers that are not instructed in the Pharisee spirit, to preach on the coming Messiah's Kingdom. During this trip of the Lord with the sermon in Galilee, the Lord was accompanied by a number of women, blessed by Him in one way or another and who, because of the feeling of gratitude, served Him with their personal resources. They were the ones that then followed the Lord to Golgotha and formed that image of the Myrrh-bearing Women, who are glorified by the Holy Church.

Christ Sends His Apostles on their Mission.

(Mat. 10:1-42; Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6, 12:11-12).

Having mercy on the multitudes of people not having a pastor, and not having the opportunity to have them by His side perpetually, the Lord sends His disciples for the sermon, this mission is different to that which will follow Christ's Resurrection. Then, the Lord will send the Apostles into the whole world to preach the New Testament to "*every creature*" and to lead all the peoples into His Kingdom through the Mystery of baptism, teaching them faith in Christ. However at this time, the Lord sends them only "*to the lost sheep of Israel*" (Mat. 10:6), i.e. to the Jews only. He directs them only to preach that "*The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand*" (Mat. 10:7). This sermon is only preparatory, for the Apostles had not been enveloped

with **Power from above**, which was subsequently granted to them afterwards, through the descent of the Comforter — the Holy Spirit. The Lord sends the Apostles **in pairs** so that they would be able to support one another, and also, so that the Jews would believe their testimony more, as the Law of Moses states that **“at the mouth of two witnesses....shall a matter be established”** (Deuter. 19:15, John 8:13). Knowing that they will demand from the Apostles to show signs to prove the genuineness of their sermon, the Lord endowed them with the power over the demons, and the power to heal and resurrect the dead. In order that their sermon would be successful, He warns them against the love of money and all concerns about the food, clothing and dwelling, saying: *“for a worker is worthy of his food”* (Mat. 10:10). Consequently, God will not allow His workers, who divert any concerns about themselves for the sake of the service trusted to them, to be deprived of the necessary for life. In every town or village they had to stay at such a house that would not evoke criticism, so that, as Blessed Jerome states, *“the sermon would not be compromised by the host’s unsavory reputation”*, and also not to go from one house to another, which is natural of the light-minded people. *“And when you go into a household, greet it”* (Mat. 10:12). Such a greeting was normal for the Jews, but to wish peace still does not mean to give it. That is why the Lord explains, that their desire for peace will really bring it to that household or town where they will be welcomed joyfully and with pure heart; in the contrary situation, the greeting will remain barren, and it would *“let your peace return to you”* (Mat. 10:13).

Further on, the Lord states that where the Apostles will be denied hospitality, they should shake the dust off their feet. The Jews considered that the very soil and dust upon which walked the heathens is unclean, and it was necessary to shake it from the feet in order to remain clean; so in giving such a directive, the Lord wanted to say that those Jews were like the heathens, and that *“it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah (punished in their time for disgrace and debauchery) in the day of judgment than for that city”* (Mat. 10:15; Mark 6:11), which will refuse to accept the Apostle’s sermon; and that those having rejected the sermon about Christ as the law of God, are more criminal than those who did not know the law of God but rejected only the demands of the natural law, which is not so clear and categorical.

Initially, the Lord sends His Apostles only to the Jews, because they were regarded as God’s chosen people, to which the Messiah was promised by the Old Testament Prophets, and among whom He appeared. Then later, there followed the edifications, concerning the apostolic service in general. The Lord warns them of those dangers, which the Apostles will be subjected to: they will feel themselves defenseless, akin to sheep, surrounded by wolves. *“Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves”* (Mat. 10:16) — says the Lord, i.e. be careful and without an extreme necessity, do not expose your life to danger. Consider where it is necessary to sow God’s seeds and where it is better to withhold — according to the law *“nor cast your pearls before swine”*; but at the same time, be such so that nobody could reproach you for anything blameworthy, be understandable for the people.

The Lord predicts that the Apostles would have to testify about Him before lords and kings, meaning not their current, temporary assignment, but their future, universal apostolic activity; that they would be subjected to much oppression and persecution. The Lord warns them not to be anxious or ponder over how and what to say at the forthcoming trials, for the Holy Spirit will be suggesting them the necessary words; and that the hatred towards the evangelical sermon and its preachers and confessors would be so strong in people of this world (called as wolves earlier), that even the strongest and sacred family ties will not be able to withstand it. All this was precisely fulfilled during the era of the Christian persecution, when indeed a brother subjected a brother to death, and when all the true followers of Christ experienced the most heinous hatred from the enemies of the Christianity. *“But he who endures to the end will be saved”* (Mat. 10:22), — predicted the Lord — meaning that the one who will tolerate everything up to the end (death) and will not renounce Christ, will attain the eternal joy in the Kingdom of Heaven. The Lord added that the Apostles themselves should

not sacrifice their lives imprudently, for they carry within them the salvation of very many other people. Consequently, if they are being persecuted in one town, they are not forbidden to flee to another one. *“You will not have gone through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes”* (Mat. 10:23). This does not refer to the Second Coming of Christ to judge before the end of the world. The coming of Jesus Christ in His Kingdom is the same as the moment of revealing of this Kingdom — and that revealing of Christ’s Kingdom occurred with His Resurrection and the sending of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, after what they went out into the whole world with the sermon about the revealing of it. This statement of the Lord has the following meaning: while the Apostles will still be traveling through Palestine with their sermon about the approaching of Christ’s Kingdom, the hour, revealing His Kingdom through His sufferings, the Resurrection from the dead and the ascension of the Holy Spirit will arrive.

The Lord showed to the Apostles the shortage of time at their disposal, for the hour of His sufferings at the cross and His departure from this world was approaching. Sending the Apostles for their preliminary sermon, which be useful for them, like Saint Chrysostom notes, as “a positive battlefield institution, in which they could prepare themselves for the exploits of the evangelical sermon in the whole world” (The interpretation of Mat. 32). The Lord warns them that they should not expect any honors and, on the contrary, be ready for insults, for if the Jews are rudely slandering the Lord Himself and calling Him Beelzebub, then they will even more defame His disciples: *“A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master”* (Mat. 10:24). *“Therefore do not fear them (enemies). For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known”* (Mat. 10:26), — said the Lord to the Apostles; i.e. there is no need to fear slander: with time, faith and innocence will be clearly revealed.

“Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops” (Mat. 10:27); here, the Lord means the following: that about what the Lord discussed with them in private and in the small corner of Palestine, they will have to preach throughout the whole world, to all nations — from the roofs of the houses. *“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul”* (Mat. 10:28), for without the will of God, nothing will happen because the Divine providence covers everything, even the smallest birds and the number of hairs on the man’s head. *“Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin?”* (Mat. 10:29, a copper coin, assary — 1/10 part of denary, something like 2 kopecks).

The one, who disregarding slander and persecution, will faithfully confess Christ before people, Christ will confess, as His true servant, at the judgment before the Heavenly Father. He will also turn away from those, who turn away from Him. *“I did not come to bring peace but a sword”* (Mat. 10:34); these words should not be understood in the literal sense. They mean that disagreement and enmity between people will be the inevitable and necessary reason for the Lord’s arrival to the earth, because human hatred will raise the severe war against God’s Kingdom, His followers and preachers. *“And a man’s enemies will be those of his own household”* (mat. 10:36); i.e. for the sake of serving Christ, one has to sacrifice all the earthly attachments, even family love. *“And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me”* (Mat. 10:38; Luke 9:23), — this image is taken from the Roman custom, according which those condemned to crucifixion, had to carry their cross to the place of execution; these words of the Lord mean that, having become the disciples of Christ, we must bravely endure all trials and sufferings in His Name, even the most difficult and humiliating ones — if God decides to send them to us.

“He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it” (Mat. 10:39; Luke 9:24): he who prefers the earthly blessings to those of the Heavenly Kingdom, who sacrifices the future blessings for the sake of the earthly ones, who even renounces Christ to save his earthly life, will destroy his soul for the eternal life; but he who sacrifices everything for the sake of Christ, right up to his own life, will save his soul for the eternal life.

Instructing and comforting the Apostles, the Lord Jesus Christ mentioned the reward awaiting all those who will receive them in His Name: *“He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him Who sent Me”* (Mat. 10:40). The further words mean that the one who receives the Apostles as the prophets and righteous, will receive the same reward as a prophet or the righteous; and even if someone quenches the thirst of one of His disciples with a cup of cold water, he will not be left unrewarded.

Having finished His edification to the 12 Apostles, Jesus went out to preach in the towns of Galilee, while the Apostles, dividing themselves into pairs, went to the settlements *“and preached that people should repent”* (Mark 6:12). The Apostles’ answer to the Lord’s question (Luke 22:35), posed to them at the Last Supper, clearly shows that during their sermon they did not lack anything necessary. Apparently, they all gathered anew with the Lord when He found out about John the Baptist’s death.

The Beheading of John the Forerunner.

(Mat. 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:7-9).

The Evangelists describe this event in connection with that the tetrarch Herod-Antipas got the idea that Jesus Christ was the resurrected from the dead John the Baptist. Although Saint Luke does not fully narrate about that, he does explain in brief that that thought did not originate from Herod, but that he accepted it later, under the impression of the conversations with people surrounding him.

While the Jews were not accustomed to celebrating birthdays, Herod once on his birthday, in imitating the eastern kings, held a huge feast for the lords, military commanders and Galilean elders. According to the eastern custom, women were not permitted to be present at those feasts, except for slaves that danced before the men. Though Salome, the worthy daughter of her depraved mother Herodias, who cohabited illegally with Herod, ignoring that custom, appeared at the feast as a dancer in the skimpy costume of a dancer and fired Herod with her sensuous dance to such an extent, that he promised to fulfill everything she desired. Salome left the hall to consult with her mother, not present at the feast, who unhesitatingly stated that the best present she could get was the death of the hated John the Baptist — the accuser of her offensive connection with Herod. She demanded: *“The head of John the Baptist”*. However, on the one hand Herod was afraid of the people and on the other, he respected the Baptist as *“a just and holy man”* and even *“when he heard him...did many things”* (Mark 6:20); consequently, fearing that the promise would not be fulfilled, Herodias suggested her daughter to demand the immediate execution. *“Give me John the Baptist’s head here on a platter”* (Mat. 14:8), — Salome demanded from Herod. *“The king was sorry; nevertheless, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he commanded it be given to her”* (Mark 6:26, Mat. 14:9). It meant, Herod did not want to execute John, but his pride and false shame did not allow him to violate his vow, so he sent his executioner to cut off the Prophet’s head and bring it to the feast on a silver platter. It must be assumed that the feast did not take place at Tiberias, Herod’s usual place of residence, but in his beyond-the-Jordan residence in Julias, which was not far from the fortress at Machaerus where John was confined; or perhaps the feast was held at the fortress itself.

The tradition states that Herodias taunted the Baptist’s head for a long time: she was piercing his tongue with a needle for accusing her of wantonness and ordered his body to be thrown into the gully that surrounded Machaerus. John’s disciples picked up his beheaded body and as St. Mark states, placed it in the coffin, in a cave. According to the tradition, that cave, situated near the township of Sebaste, built on the place of former Samaria contained the remnants of Prophets Obadiah and Elisha. This sad event of John the Baptist’s beheading is celebrated each year by the holy Church on the 29th Aug., having settled at this day the strict fast. Herod received the deserving his action punishment: he met with the total defeat at the war, and, traveling to Rome, he was deprived of all his privileges and estates, and togeth-

er with unrighteous Herodias was imprisoned at Gaul, where he finally died. Whereas Salome, in traveling on a frozen lake, fell through the cracked ice and was decapitated by it.

Having buried their teacher, John's disciples told the Lord Jesus Christ about what had happened, apparently seeking soothing, and at the same time wanting to warn Him of the possible danger, for exactly at that time He was preaching in the area that was under Herod's control. Evangelist Mark tells us that by that time the Apostles gathered at the Lord's side, telling him about everything that they managed to do and what they managed to teach the others.

Having learned of the Baptist's violent death, the Lord withdrew into the wilderness. Evidently, at that time, He was somewhere close to the Gennesaret lake because He "*departed from there by boat*" (Mat. 14:13). That secluded i.e. sparsely populated area (according to Saint Luke), was situated close to the town of Bethsaida. Saint Luke also adds that Herod, under the influence of rumors and comments, thought that Jesus Christ was John the Baptist resurrected from the dead — and "*sought to see Him*" (Luke 9:9).

The Miraculous Feeding of Five Thousand People.

(Mat. 14:15-21; Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:10-17; John 6:1-15)

All the four Evangelists describe this miraculous event. Moreover, Saint John connects this with the Lord's teaching about the heavenly bread and the Mystery of Communion of His flesh and blood and gives us the important chronological indication, that all this was happening at the time of "*the Passover, a feast of the Jews, was near*" (John 6:4), the third Passover in the Lord's service time.

Having received the news about John the Baptist's death, the Lord Jesus Christ withdrew from Galilee with His Apostles, who recently returned from their preaching trip. They sailed across to the eastern side of the Sea of Tiberias, to a desolate area close to the town of Bethsaida. As only Bethsaida was located on the western bank near Capernaum, it can be supposed that this was another town, Bethsaida-Julias, situated to the east from the place, where the river Jordan flowed into the lake of Gennesaret. According to Evangelist Mark's narration, the people, after having determined where the Lord was going with His Apostles, "*ran there on foot from all the cities. They arrived before them and came together to Him*" (Mark 6:33). Seeing the multitude of people that have gathered around Him, the Lord took pity on them, "*because they were like sheep not having a shepherd. So He began to teach them many things*" (Mark 6:33), and was telling them about God's Kingdom (Luke 9:11) and cured the sick (Mat. 14:14). After a while, according to Saint John, He ascended the mountain and sat down there with His disciples, when He saw a crowd of people coming towards Him. The day was starting to give way to the evening. Then all the Apostles approached Him and exclaimed: "*This is a deserted place and the hour is already late. Send the multitudes away, that they may go into the villages and buy themselves food*" (Mat. 14:15; Mark 6:35-36; Luke 9:12). However, the Lord did not want to send the people away, saying to His disciples: "*They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat*" (Mat. 14:16; Mark 6:37; Luke 9:13).

Meanwhile, the Lord testing Apostle Philip's faith asked him: "*Where shall we buy, that these may eat?*" (John 6:5), to what Philip replied: "*Two hundred denarii worth of bread is not sufficient for them, that every one of them may have a little*" (John 6:7). The rest of the disciples were telling the same. Then the Lord said: "*How many loaves to you have? Go and see*" (Mark 6:38). Having found out, Andrew replied to Him: "*There is a lad (probably, a person, selling food and following the crowd) here who has five barley loaves and two small fish, but what are they among so many?*" (John 6:9). Then the Lord said: "*Make them sit down in groups of fifty*" (Luke 9:14, Mark 6:39-40). And the people sat down on the green grass — 100 across and 50 crosswise. Thus, it was possible to count that there were 5000 individuals, excluding women and children (Mat. 14:21; Mark 6:44; Luke 9:14; John 6:10).

Taking the five loaves and two fish, the Lord raised His eyes to the sky, gave thanks (John 6:11), blessed them (Luke 9:16), broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, so that they distributed them among the people; likewise He divided the fish for all the people (Mark 6:32; John 6:11). “*So they all ate and were filled*” (Mat. 14:20; Mark 6:42; Luke 9:17). When everybody was full, the Lord directed His disciples to collect the remaining portions, so that nothing would be wasted; and they collected 12 full baskets.

Evangelist John tells us that the people, who witnessed that miraculous feeding of the five thousand, exclaimed: “*This is truly the Prophet Who is to come into the world*” (John 6:14); they wanted to come and unexpectedly take Jesus, and take advantage of the coming feast of Pascha, lure Him to Jerusalem and proclaim Him the King in the presence of people. But the Lord naturally did not want to indulge those false ideas about the Messiah as the earthly king. He directed His disciples to go to the western side of the lake, while He Himself having calmed the people excited by the miracle, sent them away and “*departed again to the mountain by Himself alone*” (John 6:15), for to pray.

The Lord’s Walk on the Water.

(Mat. 14:22-36; Mark 6:45-52; John 6:16-21).

Compelled by the Lord to go to the western bank of the Gennesaret Lake, the Apostles got into the boat and sailed off. The darkness descended and “*the sea arose because a great wind was blowing*” (John 6:18), “*the boat was now in the middle of the sea (i.e. lake), tossed by the waves*” (Mat. 14:24), and the Lord was not with them; He remained alone on land, but “*saw them straining at the rowing*” (Mark 6:48). “*They had rowed about three or four miles*” (John 6:19) away from the eastern bank. It was the fourth watch of the night, i.e. close to the sunrise, and suddenly the Apostles saw Jesus walking on the water towards them “*and would have passed them by*” (Mark 6:48). They thought it was a spirit and cried out in fear. But the Lord calmed them with the words: “*Be of good cheer! It is I; do not be afraid*” (Mat. 14:27; Mark 6:50; John 6:20).

Possessing a fiery temperament, Apostle Peter became inflamed with the desire to greet the Lord by walking towards Him, and asked permission to do so — to which the Lord replied: “*Come*” (Mat. 14:29). Peter stepped out of the boat, and the power of his faith made a miracle — he walked on the water. However the strong wind and turbulent waves distracted Peter’s attention from Jesus: the fear that seized him weakened his faith, and he started to sink, crying out in despair: “*Lord, save me!*” (Mat. 14:30). The Lord immediately stretched forth His hand to support him and said: “*O you of little faith, why did you doubt?*” (Mat. 14:31). As soon as “*they got into the boat, the wind ceased*” (Mat. 14:32), “*and immediately the boat was at the land where they were going*” (John 6:21). Then, everybody who was in the boat came up to Jesus and exclaimed: “*Truly you are the Son of God*” (Mat. 14:33).

As soon as the Lord landed, the local inhabitants immediately surrounded Him: they recognized Him and informed all the people in the neighboring settlements, who brought Him all their sick. The faith in the miraculous power that emanated from the Lord was so strong, that the local residents, in receiving permission from the Lord to touch His clothing instantly got cured.

The Talk about the Heavenly Bread.

(John 6:22-71).

The Lord’s miraculous crossing of the Gennesaret Lake, provoked amazement among the people, who already tried the miraculous bread. This event is narrated by Evangelist John alone, who also conveys the Lord’s sermon about Himself as about the bread that had descended from heaven, revealing the necessity to have communion of His Flesh and Blood in order to be saved.

Knowing that the Lord did not enter the boat with His disciples, the people sought Him in the wilderness. Having found Him on the other side of the lake, teaching in a synagogue at Capernaum, they were astounded and began to question Him about how He got there. The Lord did not respond the question; He used it as a reason to give the detailed sermon about Himself, as about the Heavenly Bread. He began the talk with reproaching the Jews for the fact that they remain slaves to their sensations in everything — even in following Him. *“You seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of loaves and were filled”*; i.e. not because they were enlightened through the miracles by God’s goodness, which offers eternal and incorrupt blessings, but because through the miracle, made the day before, their hunger was satiated — just as the other miracles stopped the other physical sufferings; but nobody was concerned about the satisfaction of the needs of the spirit, for which, after all, Christ came down to earth. *“I am the Bread of life, he who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst,”* — this reproach of the Lord was directed at those who treat the Christianity valuable only because it is beneficial for establishing the welfares of our temporary earthly life. *“Do not labor for the food which perishes”* together with the body, *“but for the food which endures to everlasting life,”* i.e. about that, which remains forever and serves the eternal life. This food *“the Son of Man will give you”* — says the Lord — *“because God the Father has set His seal on Him”*. Under the word *“seal”* must be understood those signs and miracles, which the Lord performed on God’s will. Excited by the reproach, the Jews asked Him: *“What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?”* They understood that His words contained the demand for moral actions on their part, but they did not understand which ones exactly. To that, instead of pointing at many deeds of pleasing God according to the Law of Moses, the Lord points at just one: *“This is the work of God, that you believe in Him Whom He sent”*. This is the main work that is pleasing to God, without which there is no life that is God-pleasing in general, for in it, like in a seed, are contained all the works that are pleasant to God. Comprehending that Jesus is calling Himself *“the Messenger of God”*, the Jews reply that they do not have such faith in Him, as the Israelites had in God and Moses, His prophet, because the signs that He was performing were not enough.

Here is the proof of how unstable the faith, when it is based on miracles alone, is: it demands greater and greater miracles. And the Jews are no more satisfied that Christ had fed 5000 people with 5 loaves, and start demanding a greater miracle, something like the miraculous manna from Heaven that was sent to them during their forty-year wandering period in the wilderness. The Lord responds to that saying that the miracle performed by God through Moses is less important than that which He performed through Messiah-Jesus, giving them not the visual manna but *“the true bread from Heaven”*. This bread *“gives life to the world”*. However, the Jews understand that like the sensual, physical bread, although somewhat special — and they express their desire to always receive that type of bread. This response reflects their extremely physical inclination of their thoughts and ideas of the Messiah — as being a wonder-worker and nothing more. Then the Lord directly and decisively reveals the teaching about Himself as about the “bread of life”, saying that He is that bread, which *“comes down from Heaven and gives life to the world”*; that the one who comes to Him will have no hunger, and the one who believes in Him will never thirst again. The Lord notes with sorrow that, although the Jews do not believe in Him, that will not interfere with the realization of the Heavenly Father’s will. Everybody seeking salvation through the Lord, “who come to Him”, will become the inheritors of the Messiah’s kingdom established by Him, and they will be resurrected by Him on the last day and become worthy of the eternal life. Nonetheless, the Jews are bewildered and with complaints start to discuss among themselves how Jesus could say that He had descended from Heaven when everybody knows His earthly origin. The Lord explains their complaints by saying that they are not among those elected by God, whom God the Father attracts to Him through the power of His grace. Without such a blissful call, it is not possible to start believing in the Messiah — His Son, sent to the earth by

Him to save the people. However, this thought does not destroy the concept of the man's free will.

As blessed Theophylactus wrote: "God the Father attracts those who have the capability, **with their consent**; but those, who have **made themselves incapable**, He does not attract to faith. Just as a magnet does not attract all that it comes into the contact with, but only iron, so does God, coming close to everyone, attracts only those who are capable of revealing some resemblance to Him". It is as though the Lord is saying: "Do not complain about Me, but about yourselves, for not having the ability to believe in Me as in the Messiah."

All the Old Testament books testify to the coming of Christ, and those who consciously study them, cannot but be taught by God, and accept the Messiah-Christ sent by Him. The teaching given by God is not like looking at God, for God the Father is only seen by the One, Who is from Him, i.e. Messiah-Christ. A person studies as though directly from God Himself when he studies the Scripture attentively and with faith, for the main theme of the Scripture is Christ. "*I am the Bread of life*", says the Lord of Himself: not lifeless as the manna was, but the bread that is alive. The manna fed only the body, and that was why those who ate it died anyway; the real Bread, that comes down from heaven is such, that all who eat it will not die but receive the eternal life. And this Bread is the very Lord Jesus Christ. Following this, the Lord says more clearly and definitively: this Bread that has come down from heaven is His Flesh, Which He gives for the life of the world; here He is talking about His forthcoming death on the cross at Golgotha for the redeeming of humanity from its sins. In connection with the approaching feast of Pascha with Himself, the Lord teaches about Himself, as about the true Paschal Lamb that accepts the sins of the whole world upon Himself.

The paschal lamb was only a symbol of Lamb-Christ, — through which the Lord wanted to show His listeners that the time of the symbolism had passed, because the Very Truth had arrived in His person: the partaking of the paschal lamb will be replaced in the New Testament by the partaking of the Body of Christ, brought as a sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. The Jews, having accepted the words of the Lord literally, became confounded and started arguing among themselves over those words: "*How can this Man give us His flesh to eat?*" They indeed understood those words literally and not figuratively, just as the contemporary sectarians who reject the Mystery of the Holy Communion, which grants the blissful unity with Christ, want to treat them. In order to stop their argument, the Lord decisively and categorically repeats: "*Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the Flesh of the Son of Man and drink His Blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My Flesh and drinks My Blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day*". Here, the Lord reveals in all its fullness and clarity, His teaching on the necessity of Communion of His Flesh and Blood, in order to have the eternal salvation. With their fleeing from Egypt, the Jews smeared the door jambs and the entrances of their dwellings with the blood of sacrificial lambs, in order to save their new-born from the hands of the Angel-slayers (Exodus 12:7-13). With the killing of the paschal lamb at the temple, its blood was used to smear the entrance to the altar, reminding the doorjambs and entrances of the Jewish dwellings. On the paschal supper, the blood was symbolically replaced with wine. Because the paschal lamb was a symbol of Christ, just as the liberation of the Jews from the Egyptian captivity served as a symbol of the world's redemption, then in the words of Christ that in order to have eternal life it is essential to "*eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood*", one should see as the replacement of the Old Testament lamb with Christ's Body, and the symbolic wine — with His Blood. This is **the New Pascha**, which is prophetically depicted by the Lord in His sermon.

The meaning of Christ's words is consequently in the fact that the one, who wants to understand the atonement performed by Christ through His death on the cross, must eat His Flesh and drink His Blood. Otherwise, he will not become a participant of this atonement, will not have within himself eternal life, i.e. will remain alienated from God, which is, actually, eternal death. By the Lord's own words, His Flesh and Blood are **food indeed** and **drink indeed**, for only they report to a person **eternal life**. This occurs because they give the par-

taker the closest internal communion with Christ, mysterious joining with Him (56). In such a way, through this Mystery, the man that had fallen into sin, is **grafted** a new life. Just like a gardener grafts a piece of cutting from one tree to another in order to make it fruit-bearing, so does Christ, wishing to make us the participants in the Divine life — He Himself physically enters into our body, desecrated by sin, and gives the start for the internal transformation and sanctification, making us **a new creation**.

In order to be saved it is not sufficient just to believe in Christ. It is necessary to fuse with Him, abide in Him so that He too may abide in us, and this is achieved only through the means of the Holy Communion of His Body and Blood. However, these words of the Lord were so unusual for the Jews that at that time not only His enemies but some of His disciples were tempted, saying: *“This is a hard saying; who can understand it?”* Having read their thoughts and feelings, the Lord replied: *“Does this offend you? What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before?”* Here, the Lord means how they would be tempted, seeing Him crucified! Further on, the Lord explains how to understand His words properly: *“It is the Spirit Who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life”*. So, Christ’s words need to be understood in the spiritual sense and not sensually or roughly, as though He is offering His Flesh, like the meat of an animal, to satisfy bodily hunger.

It is as though the Lord is saying that His teaching is not about the meat or food, which nourishes the physical life, but about the Divine Spirit, the grace and eternal life, which is developed in people through the blissful means. Stating *“The flesh profits nothing”*, the Lord was not speaking of His own Flesh — not at all — but of those, who understood His words sensually. What does it mean to understand sensually? It is too look upon the objects simply and think about nothing more but satisfying one’s natural needs. In other words, it is to accept life purely physically or sensually. However, one should not judge according to what he sees. All its mysteries have to be viewed with the inner sight. This means to understand life spiritually (St. Chrysostom). If Christ’s Flesh was separated from His spirit, it would not be able to give life; and of course, it goes without saying, Christ’s words are not about His soulless and lifeless Flesh, but of the Flesh that is united with His Divine Spirit.

“But there are some of you who do not believe”. Of course it is difficult to believe in the humble Divinity, without the assistance of God’s grace. As it can be seen later, these words of the Lord contained the first indication at Judas-betrayer. The teaching about the Holy Eucharist was and will be the touchstone of faith in Christ. There are many people that are impressed by Christ’s moral law, but who yet do not understand the necessity of unity with Him in this Mystery. Meanwhile, without this Mystery of unity with Christ, without the grafting of His “cutting,” it is impossible to follow even the moral law in one’s life, because it is beyond the human power. That is why after this sermon, as the Gospel states, many people left Christ, especially because the talk went against the Jews’ earthly understanding of the Messiah. Then the Lord, testing His closest disciples, the twelve Apostles, in their faith in Him, asked if they would like to leave Him too. But in response Peter-Simon, speaking undoubtedly on the behalf of the rest, pronounces the great confession of faith in the Lord as *“Christ, the Son of the living God”*. However, the Lord noticed that not all the twelve believed in Him, and that one of them was **devil**; of course, not in the literal sense, but as the enemy of Christ and His works. With that the Lord wanted to give a warning to Judas himself, as He knew beforehand that he was planning to betray Him. On the feast-day of Pascha, the Lord did not go to Jerusalem this time, because the Jews were seeking to kill Him (John 7:1), while the hour of His sufferings on the cross had not arrived.

The Third Pascha.

Exposing the Pharisees' Traditions.

(Mat. 15:1-20; Mark 7:1-23).

At the third Pascha, the Lord was not in Jerusalem. However, but the Jerusalem Pharisees never paused their surveillance on Him and not finding Him in Jerusalem, went to Galilee. Meeting Him with His disciples there, they renewed their previous condemnations of His disciples for not following the traditions of the elders. Their reason was that His disciples did not wash their hands before eating. According to the laws of the Pharisee piety, before eating and afterwards, the hands had to be washed obligatory. Moreover, the Talmud determines precisely the required measure of water; the time and order of washing the hands, depending on the fact if there were more than 5 people, or if there were less. Following these rules was supposed to be so important that those who violated them, were subjected to the Sanhedrin's punishment — up to excommunication. The Jews believed that Moses received two sets of commandments on the Sinai: the one was recorded in books, while the other was not, and passed orally from fathers to sons, and thereafter was eventually recorded in the Talmud. That second law was named “the elders' traditions”, i.e. the traditions of the ancient men, ancient rabbis. The unwritten law was remarkable for its great pettiness. Thus, for example, the law on washing the hands, initially inspired by the strife for hygiene and was useful by itself, became a prejudice and together with the similar requirements, obscured the more important demands of the law of God, becoming senseless and harmful.

The disciples, with their Divine Teacher were working for a great matter, building God's Kingdom on earth and did not have time to even eat bread (Mark 3:20, while the Pharisee's demanded that they should strictly follow all these petty traditions. The Lord Himself responds to the Pharisees' accusations: “*Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?*” (Mat. 15:3; Mark 7:9). “Through this, the Lord showed that the one sinning in great deeds should not note, with such solicitude, the minor transgressions of the others” (St. Chrysostom). Specifically, the Lord pointed out that in the name of their tradition, the Pharisees were violating the direct and definite commandment about honoring parents. This tradition permitted children to deprive their parents of the material support, if they declared their possessions as “**Corban**”, i.e. as dedicated to God. And such dedication as a gift to God could include everything: a house, a field, sanctified and un sanctified livestock; at the same time, the one who dedicated could continue using his possessions by making a small payment into the temple's coffer. But for that, he regarded himself free of any social obligations, even from the responsibility to take care of his parents — denying them even the very necessary for life and sustenance.

Calling the Pharisees hypocrites, the Lord ascribes Isaiah's prophesy (29:13) to them, confirming that they honor God superficially, while their hearts are far away from Him; and it is futile to think that in such a way they are pleasing God, and fruitless that they are teaching the others to do the same thing. Addressing then all the people, the Lord further added that to expose the Pharisees: “*Not what goes into the mouth defiles a man; but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man*” (Mat. 15:11; Mark 7:15). The Pharisees did not understand the difference between physical and moral cleanliness. They presumed that if food is unclean or is taken by the unclean hands, it was capable of soiling the person morally, making him unclean before God. But the Lord shows that what makes a person morally unclean is everything what comes out from an unclean heart.

However, sectarians and the other opponents of fasting, maintain a completely groundless presumption that these words of the Lord were against the fasts, established by the Holy Church. Naturally, the food entering the mouth does not make a person unclean, if this is not associated with gluttony, disobedience and other types of sinful inclinations of the

heart. We fast not because we are afraid to desecrate ourselves with the non-Lenten food, but for the sake of making it easier to struggle with the other sinful passions, to conquer our sensuality, to train ourselves to curb our will through the obedience to the Holy Church determinations. For example, acknowledging that drunkenness is the evil, we do not assert that wine is the evil because it desecrates a person. The Pharisees got tempted because the Lord had no respect for the tradition of the elders, and evidently, not even for the Law of Moses, which established the strict difference between different types of food. The Lord calmed His disciples, calling the Pharisees *“blind leaders of the blind”* (Mat. 15:14), and so there was no need to follow the invented by them teaching: any similar teaching that does not emanate from God will be uprooted. Further on, the Lord explains to the Apostles that the food, coming through the mouth, bypasses the soul and is expurgated, not leaving any trace in the soul. But the sins that come forth from the mouth and heart of the man, desecrate him.

The Healing of a Canaanite Woman’s daughter.

(Mat. 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30).

Leaving Galilee, the Lord departed to *“the region of Tyre and Sidon”* (Mat. 15:21; Mark 7:24), i.e. to the heathen land of Phoenicia, to the northwest of Galilee, and their major towns of Tyre and Sidon. From the words of Saint Mark *“and wanted no one to know it”* (Mark 7:24), it can be assumed that the Lord’s aim of departing into the midst of other tribe’s population of different faith was to be alone for a while; to rest from the ubiquitous crowds following Him constantly in Galilee, and perhaps from the implacable hatred of the Pharisees. *“But He could not be hidden”* (Mark 7:24), because the woman, who Saint Matthew calls a **Canaanite**, while Saint Mark — a **Syrian-Phoenician**, heard about Him. According to Saint Mark’s words, an evil spirit possessed this heathen woman’s daughter and she began asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. Aware from the Jews of the coming Messiah, she called Him *“Son of David”* (Mat. 15:22), thereby professing her faith in His Messianic worthiness. Testing her faith, the Lord *“answered her not a word”* (Mat. 15:23), so that even the disciples began to ask on her behalf. Jesus replied: *“I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”* (Mat. 15:24); after all, the Jews were God’s chosen people and it was to them that God’s Redeemer was promised, and to nobody else, and it was to them specifically, that He had to come in the first instance; to save them and perform miracles among them.

Wishing to discover the full measure of the woman’s faith in front of His Apostles, and to edify them, perhaps the Lord adapted His words in such a manner as to reflect the Jews’ idea of the heathens. Gradually getting closer to Jesus, the woman finally, on the words of Saint Mark, fell at His feet, pleading for her daughter to be healed. Although knowing her faith, but continuing to test her, the Lord refuses the woman with the words that might have seemed cruel, if they were not said by the Lord, filled with love for the suffering humanity. *“It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the little dogs”* (Mat. 15:26; Mark 7:27). The meaning of these words is that the Lord did not withdraw from the chosen people, so as to take away His grace-giving miraculous power and dissipate it in the land of the heathens. Of course, those words were uttered so as to reveal before everyone the power of that woman’s faith, and also to show that even the heathens, when they believe, are worthy of God’s mercy — contrary to the contempt that the Jews nurtured towards them. Through her response to the Lord, the woman truly displayed the full stature of her faith, together with the extraordinarily depth of humility, by accepting the offensive name of a dog, being a heathen: *“Yes Lord, yet even little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters table”* (Mat. 15:27; Mark 7:28). Such great faith and deep humility were rewarded immediately: *“O woman”* — said the Lord — *“great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire”* (Mat. 15:28; Mark 7:29). And at that moment, the daughter of the Canaan woman was healed. This miracle is noteworthy in that it was performed at a distance from the ill person, just as the healing of the Centurion’s servant at Capernaum (Mat. 8:13), also the same heathen, whose faith also earned God’s praise.

The Healing of the Speech-Impeded Deaf Person.

(Mat 15:29-31; Mark 7:31-37).

The Lord came through the borders of the Decapolis from Phoenicia to the Lake of Galilee. This land represented a union of ten cities, which, with the exception of the city Scythopolis, was situated to the east of the lake of Galilee; from the time of the Assyrian captivity of Jews, the land was populated essentially by the heathens. On the way, the Lord healed a speech-impered deaf individual, about what is narrated only by Evangelist Mark. Usually, the Lord healed only with His word. However, that time He led the afflicted person aside — apparently to evade idle curiosity of the semi-heathen crowd — inserted His fingers into the ailing person's ears, and having spat, touched his tongue: apparently all that was done to arouse faith in the sick person — an essential prerequisite for healing — for he was deaf, and it was impossible to communicate with him. Looking up to heaven He sighed in prayer, so as to make clear to the surrounding people that He is healing through the Divine — and certainly not through demon's power, as the Pharisees said of Him in the slanderous rumors. Having pronounced authoritatively **“Ephphatha”** (Mark 7:34), what means **“open”** in Syrian, the Lord healed him. As usual, He commanded the surrounding eyewitnesses not to tell anyone, in order perhaps not to excite the people and thereby not to arm the Pharisees further against Himself. But no matter how much He prohibited that, the more those who had witnessed the miracle told and repeated about what they had seen.

According to Saint Matthew, having passed through Decapolis, the Lord arrived at the Lake of Galilee, more than likely, from the east or the northeast. Here, as usual, masses of people awaited and followed Him, and wherever He stayed, there was an instant congregation of people. They brought to Him the lame, blind, mute, maimed and those suffering with different types of illnesses. Their faith in Christ's miraculous power was so great that they did not ask Him for anything, but just silently placed the ill at His feet, *“and He healed them”* (Mat. 15:30). Seeing those miracles, the people *“glorified the God of Israel”* (Mat. 15:31), regarding Him, like the chosen people, as their own God.

The Miraculous Feeding of Four Thousand People.

(Mat. 15:32-39; Mark 8:1-9).

The Lord spent three days with the people on the barren bank of the Gennesaret Lake. The supplies of bread were over, there was nowhere to buy it and the Lord performed the miracle of feeding the masses anew; that time — feeding four thousand with 7 loaves. On this occasion, there were 7 baskets of bread remaining. Having fed the people, the Lord let them go, while He and His Apostles made their way to the western bank in the boat, to the region of Magdala or, as Saint Mark notes, to the Dalmanuthian region. Dalmanutha was a small village beside the city of Magdala that was located on the western bank of the Lake of Galilee.

The Exposure of the Pharisees Seeking the Signs.

(Mat. 16:1-12; Mark 8:11-21).

As soon as the Lord stepped off the boat, the Pharisees and Sadducees approached Him, evidently waiting for Him specially. Normally, the Pharisees (the conservatives) and the Sadducees (the liberals/free thinkers) were hostile towards each other, but they were united in one spirit against the Lord. They tempted Him, hypocritically and insincerely asking Him to show them such a sign from heaven that would serve as a definite proof of His Divine worthiness as the Messiah to them and to the rest of people. Being convinced that the Lord would refuse them, they wanted to use that as another reason to proclaim to the people that because Jesus could not give them a sign, He could not be the Messiah. The Lord sternly answered the Pharisees, calling them hypocrites, because while knowing how to judge on the forthcoming weather, they did not want to notice the evident signs testifying of His Messianic worthiness.

And again He told them that no signs would be given to them, “*except the sign of the prophet Jonah*” (Mat. 16:4).

Not wishing to continue conversing with the hypocrites, the Lord, having just arrived at that side of the lake, got back into the boat with the Apostles and went back. Such a rash did not give the Apostles an opportunity to replenish their bread supply. Meanwhile, grieving over the spiritual blindness of the Pharisees and Sadducees, and wishing to warn His Apostles of the same destructive state, the Lord said: “*Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees*” (Mat. 16:11). Saint Mark replaces the word “*Sadducees*” with another — “*Herod’s*”, which doesn’t change the meaning of the phrase, for Herod-Antipas belonged to the Sadducees sect. However, the Apostles did not understand the Lord’s warning, thinking that He was reproaching them for wasting the opportunity of obtaining bread. The Lord then truly chastised them for their lack of faith, for their lack of understanding and forgetfulness, and reminded them of the twice happened miracle of feeding several thousands with few loaves. Only then did the Apostles realize that the Lord was warning them against the Pharisees’ and Sadducees’ teaching.

The Healing of a Blind Person in Bethsaida.

(Mark 8:22-26).

The miracle about which only Saint Mark narrates, the Lord performed after He and His disciples went to the eastern bank of the Gennesaret Lake. On the way to Caesarea Philippi, in the town of Bethsaida (also known as Julias, in the name of Tetrarch Philip’s daughter Julia), a blind person was brought to the Lord so that He could cure him with the touch of His hands. More than likely, he was not born blind, for with the first touch of the Lord’s hands, he announced that he could see trees and people; i.e. he was already aware of what people and trees looked like. Having cured him, the Lord acted as He did with the healing of the speech-impaired deaf individual: He led the man out of the settlement, spat on his eyes and his sight returned, not instantly but gradually, after the Lord laid His hands on him twice. Apparently, by His actions the Lord once again was trying to arouse faith in the man, which was essential for the performance of the miracle. Thereupon, the Lord sent him home, commanding him not to enter the settlement, and not to tell anyone there about the miracle.

Peter’s Confession: Jesus is Christ, the Son of God.

(Mat. 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21).

From Bethsaida-Julias, the Lord and His disciples headed towards the land of Caesarea Philippi. This city (formerly known as Panis, located on the northern boundary of Naphtali tribe, at Jordan’s river-bed, at the foothill of the Mount Lebanon), was expanded and decorated by the Tetrarch Philip, and named Caesarea — in honor of the Roman Caesar (Tiberius). In the contrast to the other — Palestinian Caesarea, situated on the banks of the Inland Sea, this Caesarea was called Philippi.

While the Lord’s earthly life was coming to the end, the preachers of His Teaching, those chosen by Him, were not so well-prepared for their grand mission. Consequently, the Lord sought opportunities to be alone with them more frequently. In His conversations with them, He attempted to accustom them to the idea, that the Messiah is not an earthly king that will help the Jews to conquer all the nations of the world, but that the Messiah is the King, Whose Kingdom is not of this world, Who will suffer for the world, Who will be crucified and will then resurrect from the dead. And so it was during that long journey, being left alone with His Apostles and wishing to provoke the talk about Himself, the Lord said: “*Who do man say that I, the Son of Man, am?*” (Mat. 16:13; Mark 8:27 and Luke 9:18) The Apostles answered that the people had different opinions of Him: for example, the court of Herod-Antipas regarded Him as resurrected John the Baptist, while the people considered Him to be

the one of the great Old Testament Prophets (Elijah or Jeremiah or some other one). There was a belief among the people that before the arrival of the Messiah, another prophet will precede Him, and not regarding very Jesus as the Messiah, they supposed Him to be just the forerunner of the Messiah.

The Lord then poses a direct question to His disciples: *“But who do you say that I am?”* (Mat. 16:15; Mark 8:29; and Luke 9:20) Then the “always fervent Peter”, “the voice of the Apostles” — as Chrysostom called him, exclaimed: *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”* (Mat 16:16; Mark 8:29 and Luke 9:20). With those words, Evangelists Mark and Luke limit the narration of that episode, stating that the Lord commanded them not to tell anyone about this. However, Saint Matthew adds to this, that the Lord praised Peter, telling him: *“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood had not revealed this to you, but My Father Who is in Heaven”* (Mat. 16:17).

With those words, the Lord showed to Simon-Peter that he should not regard his faith as the result of his watchful mind, for it is the precious gift from God. *“And I also say to you, — adds the Lord in the sense that, well you told Me, now I am telling you: You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it”* (Mat. 16:18). It was at the first meeting that the Lord named Simon as Peter in Greek, or Cephas in Syrian-Chaldean, meaning **“a rock”** (John 1:42). Then, He as if was witnessing that Peter was justifying the name given to him, and that he by the firmness of his faith is truly a rock. However, can an assertion be made that through these words, the Lord promises to establish His Church on Peter’s personality — just like the Roman Catholics are doing, trying to justify their false teaching on the primacy of the Roman Pope, as the successor of Apostle Peter, over the whole Christian Church?

Certainly not! If the Lord had in mind very Peter’s personality, He would have said something like this: *“You are Peter, and I shall build My Church upon you!”* However, what was said was totally different, which is especially evident in the Greek text of the Gospel, which it is necessary to consult in the cases of misunderstanding. The word **Petros** is not repeated there, although it too means **a rock**. What is used is the word **petra**, meaning **a cliff**. From this, it is clear that the Lord addressing Peter promises to establish His Church not on him but on that faith, which Peter displayed, i.e. on the great truth that *“Christ is the Son of the Living God”*. This is the way how Saint Chrysostom and other great Fathers of the Church interpreted this extract. Under the word “rock” they understood the confession of faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the Son of God, or even simply faith in very Jesus Christ, Who is often mentioned in the Holy Scripture as **a rock** (e.g. Exodus 28:16; Genesis 4:11; Romans 9:33; 1 Cor. 10:4).

It is remarkable that Apostle Peter himself in his first Epistle calls Jesus Christ as the stone, but not himself. He encourages the faithful to approach the Lord *“as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious”* (1 Peter 2:4), and themselves would *“be as living stones”* (1 Peter 2:5), being a part of the spiritual dwelling. Apparently, Peter is teaching the faithful to walk on the same path as he had done, having become **“Petros”** after confessing his faith in Christ the Rock.

Thus, the meaning of this profound and wonderful statement of Christ is in the following: *“Blessed are you Simon, the son of Jonah, because you comprehended this not through the human means, but through My Heavenly Father’s revelation; and I shall tell you that it was not by chance that I named you Peter, having affirmed Myself on what you have confessed as on a rock; you will truly remain the rock and My Church will be erected indestructible; no hostile forces of hell will be able to conquer It”*.

The expression “the gates of hell” was characteristic of the eastern customs of those times: because of the possibility of attacks, the gates of a city or a fortress were always especially reinforced, and there the people in authority gathered for various deliberations, trials and punishment of the guilty individuals, as well as for other societal matters.

Apparently, the further promise was given to Peter alone: *“And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven”* (Mat. 16:19).

The same promise was later given to all the Apostles and is the part of the authority of the Apostles and their successors — bishops: to judge and punish sinners, up to their excommunication from the Church. The power to *loose* means the authority to forgive sins, accepting people into the Church through confession and baptism. After the Lord’s Resurrection, this grace was granted by Him to **all** the Apostles equally: *“So Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.’ And when He said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained’”* (John 20:21-23).

The Lord prohibited His disciples to speak of Him as of Christ, so as not to inflame passions among the people, as they had the false understanding of the Messiah.

The Lord Foretells His Death and Resurrection.

(Mat. 16:21-28; Mark 8:31-38 and 9:1; Luke 9:22-27).

The Lord summons the disciples for professing Him as the Messiah and the Son of God, and notifies them of the sufferings awaiting Him in Jerusalem in order to prepare them to the thought about the earthly fate of the Messiah, and also to refute the Jews’ sensual ideas of the Messiah and to consecrate them into the great Mystery of His redeeming exploit. Although already deeply devoted to the Lord, but still not free from the Jews’ ideas of the Messiah as of the earthly king, ardent and decisive Peter could not tolerate such a revelation of his deeply beloved Teacher, but, not wishing to disagree with Him in front of everyone, Peter takes Him aside saying: *“Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!”* (Mat. 16:22). These words express the thought that suffering and death are incompatible with the worthiness of Jesus Christ as the Messiah, as the Son of God. The Lord responds to this with indignation: *“Get behind Me, satan!”* (Mat. 16:23; Mark 8:33). He clearly felt that it was not Peter that was saying that to Him — attempting to turn Him aside from the forthcoming sufferings — but the seducer-satan himself, taking advantage of Peter’s pure feelings, wanted Christ’s human nature to hesitate before His exploit of redeeming mankind. The remarkable thing is that the Lord, having just recently named Peter **“a rock”** suddenly calls him **“satan”**; this disproves the false Roman-catholic teaching that Christ’s Church was built upon Peter’s human personality. Can the foundation of Christ’s Church, when *“the gates of hades shall not prevail against it”*, be so mutable, inconstant and unreliable? And if we are to take all of Christ’s words literally, we would be obliged to come to the completely absurd, yet strictly logical, from the catholic point of view, conclusion that the Church is established on satan!

The Lord further says: *“You are an offence to Me!”* (Mat. 16:23). Here, the Lord means that Peter, “in opposing Him and in wishing that the aim for which the Lord came and which has the eternal pre-destination of God not to happen, he becomes an obstacle” (Evph. Zigaben). And the Lord adds: *“You are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.”* (Mat. 16:23; Mark 8:33). In other words, the Lord wants to say that Peter is not thinking of that what is pleasing God, and what He had predetermined concerning the sufferings and death of the Messiah but about that, what is advantageous to the Jews: treating the Messiah as an ordinary person — although the powerful king-conqueror. It is natural for a person to preserve his life, avoid sufferings and strive for contentment and earthly pleasures and delights. But this is the path upon which the devil tries to attract people, wishing their destruction. This is not Christ’s path and that of His genuine followers. *“If anyone desires to come after Me (be a faithful follower), let him deny himself (deny yourself, reject your natural will and inclinations), and take up his cross (condition yourself in such a way, in order be ready for any deprivations and sufferings, including death, for the sake of Christ), and follow Me (imitate Christ in His exploit of self-renouncement and self-denial).”* *“For whoever desires to*

save his life will lose it (in the sense of earthly blessings), *but whoever loses his life for My sake* (who will not spare himself for Christ) *will find it* (will save his soul for eternal life). *For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world* (will attain all the world's honors and pleasures, acquire all its impermanent treasures for his personal use) *and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?*" (Mat. 16:24-26; Mark 8:34-37 and Luke 9:23-25). The human soul is more precious than all the treasures of the world, and the ruined soul it would not be possible to save with anything, with none of the earthly treasures.

The Lord couples the thought about the eternal destruction of the people that maintain themselves for this world only, with the thought of His Second and Dread Coming, when each one will get rewards "*according to his works*" (Mat. 16:27). This is the important thought, as it refutes the Protestant and sectarian assertions that good deeds are not important in order to be saved. Evangelists Mark and Luke similarly report of the other important words of the Lord: "*For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation* (he who is ashamed to be in the number of the followers of Christ, particularly to fulfill the commandment of carrying his cross), *of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed* (will refuse to recognize him as His follower) *when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy Angels* (on the Judgment Day)" (Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26).

The Lord concluded this conversation with the following significant words: "*Assuredly I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His glory*" (Mat. 16:28; Luke 9:27). Those words gave (and are still giving) cause for some people to conclude about the nearness of the Second Coming of Christ — tempting them to think that the prophecy was not fulfilled. However, the other two Evangelists — Saints Mark and Luke — define this, making it possible to understand the Lord's words correctly. Saint Luke conveys it so: "*But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Kingdom of God*" (Luke 9:27). Saint Mark adds to that: "*They will see the Kingdom of God present with power*" (Mark 9:1). From these words, it can be seen clearly that the conversation is not of the Lord's Second Coming, but of the revelation of God's Kingdom, i.e. about its blessed power on earth among the faithful — about establishing Christ's Church. So "*the Kingdom of God present with power*" is Christ's Church, established by the Lord, which dissemination across the face of the whole world many of His disciples and contemporaries were worthy to see.

The Transfiguration of the Lord.

(Mat. 17:1-13; Mark 9:2-13; Luke 9:28-36).

All the three Evangelists narrate about this event; moreover, it is worthy to note that they all link it to the Lord's sermon, made six days — 8 days according to Luke — prior to His forthcoming sufferings, about the carrying of the cross by His followers and about the imminent revelation of God's kingdom, coming with power. Taking His closest and trusted disciples, who were with Him during the most triumphant and important moments of His earthly life — Peter, James and John — the Lord "*led them up on a high mountain by themselves*" (Mat. 17:1; Mark 9:2 and Luke 9:28). While the Evangelists do not name this mountain, the ancient Christian traditions unanimously testify that it was the Mount Tabor in Galilee, to the south of Nazareth, on the magnificent Israeli plain. This majestic mountain, the height of which is nearly 3000 feet, is covered halfway up with the beautiful vegetation, and the magnificent long-distant panorama presents itself from its top.

The Lord "*transfigured before them*", appearing before His disciples in all His heavenly glory, from which "*His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light*" (Mat. 17:2), while according to Saint Mark (9:3), "*His clothes became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth can whiten them*", and Saint Luke (9:29) simply states: "*His robe became white and glistening*". Evangelist Luke also makes an

important supplement, pointing out that the purpose of going up the mountain was to pray and that the Lord transfigured, “*as He prayed*” (Luke 9:29). The same Evangelist, as distinct from the others, adds that during the prayer, “*Peter and those with him were heavy with sleep*” (Luke 9:32) and having just awakened, saw the transfigured Lord’s glory and appearing in glory Moses and Elijah. They talked with Jesus Christ, as St. Luke clarifies, about His end, which He had to face in Jerusalem. As Saint John Chrysostom explains that the reason why especially Moses and Elijah appeared was because some of the people regarded Christ as Elijah, or as one of the Prophets. That is why “*the major Prophets appear, in order to differentiate the servant from the Lord*”. Moses appeared to show that Jesus was not a violator of his law, which is what the Scribes and Pharisees often attempted to present Him as. Neither Moses — through whom God’s Law was given — nor Elijah would not present themselves or follow the orders of the One, Who was not truly the Son of God. The appearance of the deceased Moses and Elijah, who had not seen death as he was taken up to Heaven alive, denoted the Lord Jesus Christ’s sovereignty over life and death, over the heaven and earth. The particularly amazing, grace-filled feeling that overwhelmed the Apostles’ souls was expressed by Saint Peter’s exclamation: “*Master, it is good for us to be here; and let us make three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah*’ — *not knowing what he said*” (Luke 9:33; Mat. 17:4 and Mark 9:5). It was as though Apostle Peter wanted to say: it’s better not to return to the distant world of hatred and slyness, where sufferings and death await you. Evangelist Mark, undoubtedly from Peter’s own words, testifies that the feeling of joy so overwhelmed Peter, “*he did not know what to say*” (Mark 9:6).

A miraculous cloud — being an indication of the exceptional Divine presence — enveloped them (a similar cloud that was constantly present in the Holy of Holiest was called “**sheheena**” — 1 Kings 8:10-11). The voice of God the Father was heard from the cloud: “*This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased. Hear Him*” (Mat. 17:5; Mark 9:7 and Luke 9:35). The same words were heard during the Lord’s Baptism, but with an addendum “*Hear Him*”, which must remind of Moses’ prophecy about Christ (Deut. 18:15), while its fulfillment is found in the persona of Jesus. So as not to arouse the sensate feelings of the Jews about the Messiah, the Lord directed His Apostles not to reveal this to anyone until His resurrection from the dead. Saint Mark adds a detail taken from Peter’s own words, that the disciples “*kept this word to themselves*” (9:10), bewildered, why the Lord had to die to resurrect later, and what means: “*rising from the dead*” (9:10).

Totally convinced that the Teacher Jesus is truly the Messiah, they inquire: “*Why then do the Scribes say that Elijah must come first?*” (Mat. 17:10; Mark 9:11). And the Lord confirms that indeed, “*Elijah is coming first and will restore all things*” (Mat. 17:11; Mark 9:12) (in Greek — **apokatastisi**, i.e. **to restore**). Just as the Prophet Malachi prophesied: “*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord come. And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers; lest I come and smite the earth with a curse*” (Mal. 4:5-6), i.e. it is necessary for Elijah to appear in the world and restore the original good and pure feelings in people’s souls, without what the Messiah’s work would not be successful, for it would not find the favorable ground in people’s hearts barnacled with sin and hardened by their ongoing iniquitous lifestyle. The Lord continues further: “*But I say to you that Elijah has come already, and they did not know him but did to him whatever they wished*” (Mat. 17:12; Mark 9:13), i.e. Elijah had already come like John the Baptist, who was endowed by God with Elijah’s power and spirit — but they did not recognize him, threw him into a dungeon and put him to death. The Lord concludes His thought like this: “*Likewise the Son of Man is also about to suffer at their hands*” (Mat. 17:12; Mark 9:12), i.e. just as they did not recognize Elijah and killed him, so they will not recognize the Messiah and also put Him to death.

The Healing of the Possessed Adolescent.

(Mat. 17:14-23; Mark 9:14-32 and Luke 9:37-45).

Of this healing is narrated by all the three synoptic, indicating that it was performed by the Lord, directly after He came down from the mountain of Transfiguration. During that time, many people gathered around Christ's disciples, waiting for Him at the foot of the mountain. According to Saint Mark, the disciples were arguing with the Scribes. The same Evangelist testifies that seeing Christ descending from the mountain, "*all the people were greatly amazed*". Apparently, this was because His face and His whole appearance retained some of the glow of that glory, in which the Lord glistened at Tabor. A man came to the Lord with an appeal to cure his son who, with every new moon frenzied and suffered greatly by throwing himself first into the fire, then water. With that, he added that he had already brought him to His disciples, but they were not able to cure him. Hearing about His disciples' failure to heal, even though He gave them the power over the evil spirits, the Lord exclaimed: "*O faithless generation (not having faith), how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?*"

Some interpreters assign the Lord's reproach to His disciples, because they were unable to cure the possessed because of their lack of faith, while the others — to all the Jewish people. Saint Matthew then narrates that the Lord directed the youth be brought to Him, and "*rebuked the demon, and it came out of him*". Evangelists Mark and Luke bring up some additional detail. When the youth was brought before the Lord, he went into a frightening fit of frenzy. To the Lord's question, how long the youth had been that way, the father replied that since infancy, adding: "*But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us*". To that, the Lord said: "*If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes*". Shedding tears, the father of the unfortunate youth cried out: "*Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!*" i.e. he humbly acknowledged that his faith was not complete, insufficient. Such humble confession was rewarded: the youth was released from the demon.

When the disciples inquired as to why they could not cast the demon out, the Lord replied: "*Because of your unbelief*". Perhaps learning from the father about the strength of the demon, the length of his presence and the tenacity of possession, that time they doubted that they could cast him out, and therefore failed to do so, just as Peter, having commenced walking on the water towards the Lord, and then seeing the strong wind and waves, began to have doubts in his ability to reach the Lord and started to sink. With that, the Lord added: "*If you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you*", i.e. even the smallest faith, if only it exists, is already capable to perform great miracles, because it contains the great power — similar to that hidden in a mustard seed nondescript in appearance, yet eventually growing into a huge tree. However, one should not think that faith has its own power: it is but an essential condition, with which God's almighty power works. Faith is like the conductor of His almighty power. Naturally, God can perform miracles even with insufficient faith, like He cured the possessed youth, notwithstanding his father's little faith. "*All things are possible to him who believes*" means, that the Lord is ready to do anything for a person, having his faith as the condition. Faith is like the receiver or bearer of God's grace, which works wonders.

In conclusion, the Lord said: "*However, this kind (i.e. demonic) does not go out except by prayer and fasting.*" This is because there is no genuine faith without the exploits of prayer and fasting. Genuine faith begets prayers and fasting, which in their turn further assist in strengthening it more. That is why the Orthodox Church chants praise prayer and fasting are the double-edged weapons against demons and passions. "Demons can sense a person that fasts and prays from afar," -- says Saint Theophan, the Recluse of Vyshensk, — "and flee from him so as not to receive a painful blow. Can it be surmised that where there is no fasting and prayer, there are demons? — Yes, it can be".

During that stay in Galilee with His disciples, the Lord once more "*taught His disciples and said to them, 'The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will*

kill Him. And after He is killed, He will rise the third day.' But they did not understand this saying, and were afraid to ask Him" (Mark 9:31-32). The Lord saw that it was especially at that time, that His disciples needed to know about the closeness of His sufferings, death and resurrection. Consequently, in order to prepare them for this, He reiterates that to them to fix it in their memory more firmly. However, they, who not yet renounced the usual Jewish ideas of the Messiah, found all that incomprehensible.

The Miraculous Payment of the Temple Tax.

(Mat. 17:24-27).

They required from the Lord Jesus Christ to give money for God's temple, as though for God. Of course, as the Son of God, He should have been free from the payment. However, not wanting to give a new reason for the accusations in violating the law, and not having any money with Him, He showed Apostle Peter where and how to obtain the required statir, i.e. 4 drachmas, to pay the tax for the both of them. This miracle, according to the Gospel interpreter Bishop Michael, directly testifies about the Divinity of Lord Jesus: "If He knew that the first fish that Peter would catch had a swallowed statir in its mouth, then He is omniscient. If He knew that the fish had a statir in its mouth, then He is omnipotent".

The Talk about Who is the Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Mat. 18:1-5; Mark 9:33-37; Luke 9:46-48).

After the miraculous payment of the Temple tax in Capernaum, the disciples began an argument about who was the greatest among them, i.e. who would have preeminence in power and honor in that Messiah's kingdom, which they expected to be revealed shortly. With that, they approached the Lord "saying, 'Who then is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?'" The Lord's response is direct and definite, aimed against any inclinations among His disciples towards supremacy: "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all". It is as though the Lord is saying: "Don't strive for primacy in My Church, because this is connected with the greatest labors and greatest self-renouncement, and not peace and glory as you imagine". Having called a little child — who, according to Nicephorus's testimony, further on became holy martyr Ignatius God-bearer, the Bishop of Antiochia — the Lord put him in the middle of His disciples and pointing at him said: "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the Kingdom of Heaven". In other words, if you do not abandon your false opinions about the Messiah's kingdom and your conceited hopes to obtain the first places in that kingdom, then you shall not be able to enter it. Children have pure heart. They do not have preconceived thoughts about fame or possession. They are meek and humble, they do not have envy and vainglory yet, and the desire to be first — the qualities that should be imitated by those who wish to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. "Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven" — only the one who would humble himself, acknowledge his unworthiness to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, regard himself less worthy than the others, will appear as the greatest. Therefore, the one who would set aside the imagined self-importance, who would turn away from ambition and pride towards humility and meekness, and become as diminutive as a little child, would have the greater significance in the Heavenly Kingdom.

At the same time, the Lord taught His disciples a lesson on the interrelationship between the Members of Christ's Kingdom: "Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me", i.e. anybody who will treat these little children — or any meek and humble people, akin to the children — with love in the name of Christ, i.e. to fulfill My commandment about loving all the weak and humiliated, will do it as though for Me Personally. Here the speech of the Lord, narrated by Evangelist Matthew without a break, according to

Evangelists Mark and Luke, was interrupted with Apostle John's words about the man, casting the demons out with the name of Christ.

Working Wonders in Christ's Name.

(Mark 9:38-41 and Luke 9:49-50).

The Lord's words about the fact, that whoever, receiving anyone that is weak, timid and humble resignedly receives Christ Himself, reminded Apostle John of the seen by the Apostles person, casting out demons with Christ's Name. But because he did not follow them, they prohibited him to do this. Apparently, Apostle John's tender and sensitive heart felt that in that case the Apostles acted opposite to the Lord's teachings. From the fact, that they left everything and followed Christ, as well as they became the part of His twelve closest and most trusted disciples, and accepted the grace of healing, they derived the reason for superiority and regarded themselves to have the right to prohibit the use of Christ's name to the person who did not belong to their group. Meanwhile, during the evident hostility of the leaders of the Jewish people, it was not safe to be an apparent disciple of Christ and to follow Him everywhere. Consequently, the Lord had many secret disciples, among which, as it is known, was Joseph of Arimathea. Probably, the Apostles came upon one of such disciples when he was casting out the demons with Christ's name, yet did not dare to follow Christ openly.

the Apostles refused to recognize him as one of them and forbade him to continue his activity, motivating it by the fact that he did not go with them. The Lord Jesus Christ did not approve of their action. *"Do not forbid him"*, he told them, because the one, who performs a miracle with My Name, undoubtedly believes in Me; the one who believes in Me cannot be My enemy, at least not now and in the nearest future. *"For he who is not against us is on our side"*; consequently, do not forbid the performance of good deeds in My Name to those who, for some reason, do not openly declare themselves as My disciples; on the contrary, assist them and know that everyone who gives a helping hand to any of My followers in My name, even if it is just a cup of cold water to quench the thirst, *"he will by no means lose his reward"*. The Lord spoke totally different about people that were like a meadow, which was well watered yet remained fruitless: if such people *"are not for Christ"*, if they are neither cold nor hot, this already means that their inner being is *"against Him"* (Mat. 12:30).

The Teaching about the Struggle with Temptations.

(Mat. 18:6-10; Mark 9:42-50; Luke 17:1-2).

The Apostles' argument on the primacy, the child embraced by the Lord, the news of a man casting out demons with Christ's name — directed the Lord's conversation towards the protection of the small and the weak, against temptations, to which they may be subjected by the powerful of this world: *"But whoever cause one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea"*, — whoever tempts one of Christ's followers, it would be better for him to die, because through temptation he can destroy the man's soul for which Christ died. Consequently, that person is committing the greatest crime, deserving the most severe punishment. The word "millstone" means a large upper stone at the mill that was put into motion by a donkey. The Lord continues with a heavy heart: *"Woe to the world because of offences! For offences must come"*, as the world cannot avoid temptations because it is immersed in the evil (1 John 5:19), people are in the state of sinful destruction while the devil constantly searches of prey among the people. However, this does not mean that it is permissible to tempt. On the contrary: *"Woe to that man by whom the offence comes!"* — woe to him that deliberately, or in contempt, or neglecting the neighbor, involves him into a sin. In order to show what enormous evil a person commits when he tempts, the Lord reminds anew of the sayings in His Sermon on the Mount, regarding the arm or leg that tempts. The expression that it is necessary to cut the tempting arm or leg off, either to pluck the tempting eye out and

cast them away, means that there is no greater evil for a person than to sin. Consequently, in order to avoid falling into a sin, it follows, if necessary, to sacrifice that which is closest and dearest, so as to avoid the sinful downfall. Saint Mark's expression: "*Where their worm does not die*" presents sinners in the image of a corpse that is being devoured by worms, where a worm is a symbol of conscience that incessantly tortures at the person with recollections of past transgressions (Isaiah 66:24).

"*For everyone will be seasoned with fire*" — every person has to be subjected to sufferings: consequently, the one who had not suffer in his earthly life, deadening and subduing his passions (1 Cor. 9:27), will suffer in the fire of eternal flames. Just as every sacrificial offering to God had to be seasoned with salt in accordance with the Law of Moses (Lev. 2:13), likewise, the flames of misfortune, trials and struggle must prepared the Apostles and all His followers as a sacrifice, pleasing God.

"*Have salt in yourselves*", i.e. those highest moral elements and rules, which cleanse the soul and protect it from the moral decay — the salt of genuine wisdom and sound teachings (Col. 4:6). "*And have peace with one another*", peace, as a fruit of love, as an expression of completeness, achieved through self-renouncement. One should not think of who is greater in the Kingdom of Heaven, because this can lead to divisions, dissatisfaction and animosity; but about how to be "salt" and be in peace and unity of love among themselves.

The Parable about the Lost Sheep.

(Mat. 18:10-20 and Luke 15:3-7).

This sermon depicts the boundless love and mercy of God towards the fallen human. "*Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones*" — do not despise, almost the same as "do not tempt" i.e. do not regard them as being so insignificant as to find it unimportant to even tempt them; "*those little ones*" i.e. those that have, for Heavenly Kingdom's sake, belittled themselves, — the genuine Christians. Each one of them has his Guardian Angel from God; therefore if God Himself is concerned about them, so might the people despise them? "*For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost*" — this new encouragement is to not despise these little ones, because the Lord Himself came down to earth for their salvation. In order to show more evidently how dear the salvation of mankind in the eyes of God is, the Lord compares Himself to a shepherd, who leaving the whole flock, i.e. the countless legions of Angels, went searching for one lost sheep — the fallen man.

As Blessed Theophylactus explains, the meaning of this sermon is "that God is concerned about converting sinners, and rejoices over them more than over those confirmed in righteousness". Then follow the Lord's directives on how to correct the neighbor, which is tightly bound with the prohibition of tempting him. If enticing the neighbor is contrary to love, then it is no less contrary to love to allow him to remain in sin and not worry about his correction when he sins. But this has to be done carefully, with brotherly love: initially, one should expose him privately, and if he acknowledges his sin and condemns himself, then "*you have gained your brother*", acquired that person, who was lost through the sin and ceased to be a member of Christ's Kingdom, anew. If he does not listen to your brotherly exposure and admonishment, being persistent in his sin, then it is necessary to take one or two more people, who will be the witnesses of that brother's persistent pausing in the sin, and at the same time will influence and encourage him to repent (the Law of Moses demanded that in all court matters, there had to be two or three witnesses present — Deut. 19:15). If he does not listen even to them, "*tell it to the Church*".

Here, the term "Church" naturally does not mean the whole community of believers but those placed in Its charge — the presiding clergy, the pastors to whom there has been given the authority to bound or to release. "*But if he refuses even to hear the Church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector*", i.e. if he had taken root in his sin so that he does not care about the authority of the Church pastors, then let him be excommunicated

from the communication with you, just as all heathens and tax-collectors were excluded from the communication with the Jews, because they were regarded as the extremely defiled people. The meaning of the statement is such: the person who does not recognize the authority of the Church should not be regarded as your brother; put an end to your brotherly communication with him so as not to become infected with his sickness. Such obdurate sinners that reject the authority of the Church hierarchy are totally expunged from the Church, as it is shown by Apostle Paul's example in 1 Corinthians 5th Chapter. These words of Christ provide the foundation from the apostolic times on which the Church practices excommunication called "anathema", which is in full accord with Corinthians 16:22.

"Anathema" does not mean "curse", as many contemporary people think, condemning the Church, as though permitting the act against the Christian love. "Anathema" (excommunication) is the extreme enlightening measure for the persistent sinners, unwilling to change, and also for warning the others against following them. This right was given to the Church hierarchy by the Lord Himself, Who said: *"Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in Heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven."* That, what was previously promised to Peter (16:19), now is being promised to all the Apostles. The Apostles passed this authority to bind or loose the sins to their successors — the pastors of the Church that have been placed to continue their work on earth. But in any other situation, when Christ's Apostles join for a united prayer, concerning any need, the Lord promises to fulfill their desire, *"For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them"*.

The Parable about the Unmerciful Debtor.

(Mat. 18:21-35 and Luke 17:3-4).

The Lord's edification about the forgiveness of the sinned and repentant brother, caused Peter's question as to how many times one should forgive the brother. The question was raised because according to the Jewish Scribes' teaching, one might forgive only for three times. Wishing to surpass The Old Testament righteousness and appear generous, Peter asks if it is sufficient to forgive up to seven times. To that, the Lord responded that one had to forgive until seventy times seven, i.e. one needs to forgive always, the unlimited number of times. As an explanation for such constant and boundless all-forgiveness, the Lord narrated the parable about the merciful king and the unmerciful debtor. In this parable, God appears as a king, to whom his servants owe the certain sums of money. Similarly, the man appears as a debtor before God, because he does not have good deeds, which he is obliged to do, but sins instead. "To settle accounts" means to demand the debt to be paid, which is depicted in the Parable through Gods demand of the account of every person at the Dread Judgment, and partly, at the individual judgment after the death of each man.

The debtor that owed ten thousand talents represents every man-sinner who appears before God as an unforgiven debtor. Ten thousand talents is an enormous sum: one Jewish talent equaled 3000 sacred shekels, while in turn a shekel was worth 80 Russian silver kopeks. Therefore, one talent equaled 2400 silver rubles. Instead of an uncertain sum, the specific amount of the debt is nominated here. In accordance with the laws of Moses — Leviticus chp.25; the king ordered the unforgiven debtor to be sold. However, having mercy on him after his diligent plea, the king forgave him his debt.

This is a wonderful example of God's mercy towards every penitent sinner. The forgiven debtor, locating his agent who owed him some 100 denarii, (one denary being worth 20 cents) — an amount that could not be compared to the first sum — started choking him (according to the Roman laws, the lender could torment his debtor until the amount was paid), demanding the repayment of that insignificant amount. He did not have mercy on him, in spite of his plea to wait and put into a jail. Having seen that and feeling upset, his friends went and told about all that to the king. Angered by the evil servant's actions, the king summoned him, and after giving him a severe reprimand for not following his example of mercy

towards his debtor, he was handed over to his tormentors, until the time, when he would pay his debt — i.e. forever, as he will be in no position to repay such a huge sum ever (a sinner is saved only through God's mercy — he, with his own forces, is never in the position to satisfy God's just judgment, just like the unforgiven debtor).

The meaning of the parable is briefly expressed in the last 35th verse: "*So My Heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses*". Through this parable the Lord wishes to suggest us that as all of us sin so much, so that we appear before God as unforgiven debtors; the sins of our brothers against us are as insignificant as that sum of 100 denarii — in comparison with the huge sum of 10,000 talents; however, through His boundless mercy, the Lord forgives us our sins only if we, in our turn, reveal the merciful attitude towards our neighbors and forgive them their sins against us; although, if we show ourselves cruel and merciless towards our neighbors and do not forgive them, then the Lord will not forgive us, but will subject us to eternal tortures. This parable appears to be a wonderful demonstrative explanation of the petition in the Lord's Prayer: "*and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*".

Christ Goes to the Feast of Jerusalem.

(John 7:1-9).

Having described in the 6th chapter the Lord's conversation with the Jews about Himself as of the "bread of life", Evangelist John narrates that after that the Lord walked in Galilee. As we have read above, the Lord's long stay in Galilee and His works there are depicted in detail by the first three Evangelists. The Lord didn't want to go to Judea, as "the Jews sought to kill Him," while His hour of suffering had not arrived yet. "*Now the Jews' Feast of Tabernacles was at hand*". This was one of the three main Jewish feasts (Pascha, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles) and was celebrated for 7 days from the 15th day of the month of Tisrah, according to our calendar, at the end of September and the beginning of October. It was established in the memory of the 40-year-wandering of the Jews in the wilderness. The whole 7 days of the feast was spent by the people in the tents, especially constructed for this occasion. Because the feast was celebrated shortly after the harvest time, the celebrations were very merry with partaking of wine, which gave cause for Plutarch to compare it with the heathen celebrations in the honor of Bacchus. Before that feast day came, the Lord had not already visited Jerusalem for nearly one and a half years (from the second to the third, and from the third to the Feast of Tabernacles were nearly 6 months), and His brothers were suggesting Him to go to Jerusalem for the feast. They wanted the Lord to enter Jerusalem triumphantly, like the Messiah in the absolute miraculous manifestation of His power. The Lord's rejection of human glory was not understandable to them, and was tempting them. "*For even His brothers did not believe in Him*" notes the Evangelist: they were perplexed about their named Brother and wished to be released from that state of perplexity; on the one hand, they could not deny His extraordinary deeds, being the witnesses of them; while on the other hand, they were unwilling to accept the man, with Whom they were in the ordinary earthly relations since their childhood, as the Messiah.

In that state of the spirit, they suggested Him to get out from such an uncertain (in their opinion) position which Jesus maintained. If He was truly the Messiah, why He was afraid to appear before the whole world in Jerusalem, as the Messiah should do? He must appear there in all His greatness and glory (the Interpretation of the Gospel by Bishop Michael). In reply, the Lord explains to His brothers that His appearance in Jerusalem has a meaning, which differed to that, maintained by the others, including His brothers. His brothers will not see any hatred towards themselves there, because they belonged there; while the Lord will be met with hostility as the denouncer of the evil deeds of the world. Consequently, they can go there whenever they wish, but He can go there not any time, but only at the appointed hour of His suffering for the world, determined from above. Having let his brothers go, the Lord re-

mained in Galilee with the intention to come to the feast secretly, only in the company of His trusted disciples.

The Samaritans do not Accept Christ.

(Luke 9:51-56).

The Lord was already famous in Samaria, but the hostility between the Jews and Samaritans was such that He didn't hope to meet the kind reception. Consequently, he sent some of His disciples in advance to predispose the Samaritans. It is unknown which settlement the Lord's messengers visited. However, it can be surmised that it was probably located in the north of Samaria, closer to Galilee, one day traveling distance from there, where presumably they would stay overnight. "Because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem", the Samaritans apparently did not receive Him because of the deep hatred they had for the Jews. James and John, who were named by the Lord "*Sons of Thunder*" (Mark 3:17), because of their spiritual strength and energy, and for their rash and strong impulses, got the fire of zeal because of the insult of their Teacher's honor. Recollecting how the Prophet Elijah dealt with those that were sent to seize him, destroying them with fire from the heavens (2 Kings 1:9-12), they asked their Teacher if He wanted them, by their word, to bring down fire from heaven and destroy as well those Samaritans? Through God's will, they had already performed many miracles while giving sermons throughout Judea; consequently, they didn't feel incapable of performing such a miracle, should that be accepted by their omnipotent Teacher. To that, the Lord told them that they didn't realize of what spirit they were: the spirit of the New Testament was different to the spirit of the laws of the Old Testament — there, it was the spirit of strictness and punishment, whereas here, it was the spirit of love and mercy, because the aim of the Son of Man's coming was not to destroy, but to save (Mat 18:11). Apart from that, the Lord apparently wanted to point at the fact that in the given case, within the Apostles was not love towards Him, but sooner the feeling of animosity towards the Samaritans — and that old feeling of animosity towards people had to be forgotten by servers of the New Testament. Receiving such a reception, the Lord apparently returned to Galilee and went to Judea with the other way, which was usually used by the Jews through the-beyond-Jordan district of Perea. From the subsequent descriptions of Saint Luke, it is evident that the Lord was also in Galilee and Perea, and only went to Judea much later.

Sending Seventy Disciples to Preach.

(Luke 10:1-16).

At that time, i.e. when the Lord decided to leave Galilee permanently, as the hour of His sufferings on the cross came close, He chose other 70 disciples — additional to the 12 He had chosen previously — and sent them out in pairs into the areas that He would visit. That was done, so that the testimony of Christ would be stronger in the eyes of the people, and that they would be prepared for His arrival. The number 70 was honored by the Jews, as the numbers 40 and 7. The Sanhedrin consisted of 70 members. The names of those 70 disciples are not known with full certainty. "*The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few*" — Samaria and Judea were not much resound with Christ's sermon, while there were many souls there that had ripened like the ears of corn, ready for Christ's granary, for His Church. The instructions given further on to the 70 disciples, remind us in many ways the instructions given to the 12 Apostles before, about which Saint Matthew narrates in the 10th chapter of his Gospel. The prohibition of greeting people, met along the road, is repeated.

The explanation for such a prohibition is that the people of the East, did not express greetings like we do, with a slight bow or a handshake, but with bows to the ground, embracing and kissing, together with expressions of various good wishes, what required much time. Through that prohibition, the Lord tried to suggest His disciples the haste, with which they should visit the towns and villages. Exactly the same instructions were given in his time by the Prophet Elisha to his disciple Gehazi, when he sent him with his baton to resurrect the son

of a widow (2 Kings 4:29). “*Son of peace*” means the peaceful man, ready to accept that peace, with which he will be greeted by the messengers of peace, the Lord’s disciples, into his heart. Directing them to eat what they are offered, the Lord prescribes to His disciples to be decorous, non-demanding and non-choosy. He also tells them to disregard that squeamishness, with which the Jews treated the Samaritans, as it was unworthy of the preachers of peace and love. The Lord concludes His edification with the warning of God’s punishment to those cities, where His power was revealed, but yet they did not repent. He also points out how important His disciples’ sermons should be for everyone: the one, rejecting them, rejects Him, and the one rejecting Him, rejects the One Who sent Him, i.e. Father-God.

Jesus at the Feast of the Tabernacles.

(John 7:10-53).

Having sent His brothers to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Tabernacles, the Lord went there Himself some time later, “*but as it were in secret,*” i.e. not triumphantly — like on the eve of His last Pascha when He was going for His sufferings — without the crowds of people that usually accompanied Him, but quietly and unobtrusively. “What a sad gradation is in the Lord’s appearance in Jerusalem,” notes Bishop Michael, the Gospel interpreter, “enforced, of course, not by His own actions, but by the increasing hostility of His enemies. On the first Pascha, He triumphantly appears in the temple as the Son of God, the Messiah, with authority (John chap. 2); on the second (chap. 5), He appears as a traveler, but His actions and sermons arouse animosity towards Him, and intents to kill Him. As a consequence, He doesn’t go to Jerusalem for the next Pascha at all, but keeps away from it for 18 months, after what He is forced to come there **secretly!**”

Verses 11 to 13 give the visual representation of what was occurring at that time in Jerusalem. Everybody was talking about Christ there. It is evident that His enemies kept a vigilant eye on Him, watched Him and His actions, at what pointed the question: “*Where is He?*” Among the people, there were many ideas of the most contradictory nature about Him — but nobody spoke openly “*for fear of the Jews*”, which Evangelist John understands to be the usual hostile to the Lord party of the Jewish leaders, with the members of Sanhedrin and the Pharisees at the head. Saint Chrysostom and Blessed Theophylactus both surmise that people in general spoke well of the Lord, while the leaders spoke hostilely: “The leaders said that He was deluding the people, while the people said that He was kind”. This is evident from the fact that the leaders stood out from the people saying that “He was deceiving the people”. It was only mid-way through the feast, i.e. apparently, on its fourth day, when the Lord entered the temple and began to teach, i.e. probably, He was interpreting the Bible, which was the custom of the Jews.

Being aware that the Lord did not study at school under any known Rabbi, the Jews were amazed with His knowledge of the Scriptures that He was revealing. Characteristically, they were deaf to the content of His teachings, but fixed their attention only at the fact that He didn’t study. This indicates their contempt and hostility towards the Lord. The Lord then solved their puzzlement: “*My doctrine is not Mine, but His Who sent Me*”. With that the Lord as though said to them: “I didn’t study at your Rabbi schools, but I have the perfect Teacher, Who is the Heavenly Father that had Sent Me”. The means to be convinced in the divine source of this teaching lies in the man’s decision to do “*the will of the Father*”. The one, who decides to carry out the will of God, will be convinced through the internal feeling that the teaching is from God. The term “the will of God” must be understood as the complete moral law of God: both the law of conscience, and the Old Testament law. The one who wishes to go along the path of moral completeness in fulfilling this law, then that person through the internal feeling will understand that Christ’s teaching is the divine teaching. The Lord underlines that saying that He preaches, to seek glory of the One, Who had sent Him, and not for Himself, as the One preaching His personal teaching. Keeping in mind the Jewish leaders, the

Lord says further that they seek to kill Him for violating the law, which they themselves are not fulfilling.

Unaware of their leaders' intentions to kill Jesus, the people thought the Lord's words were said about them, and feeling hurt, some of them exclaimed: "*Who is seeking to kill You?*" and isn't it the evil spirit that prompts You to say this? "*You have a demon*". From the Lord's following sermon, it is evident that the cure of the paralytic on Saturday continued to be the subject of the talks, especially as the consequence of His opposition to the exaggerated importance of the Sabbath. The Lord points to the fact that good deeds may be performed on the Sabbath because, as an example, the circumcision occasionally takes place on the Sabbath so as not to violate the law of Moses, which decrees this be carried out on the 8th day after birth. After this, one should not be amazed that He cured the whole person on a Sabbath. The Lord concludes His sermon by calling to judge about the law not according to its written word, the outer form but by its spirit, so that the judgment can be regarded as correct. "*Moses, who broke the Sabbath with circumcision, you free from the exposure, but judge Me for breaking the Sabbath through the good deed, made to the man*" — excellently comments Blessed Theophylactus. "It is as though Christ remonstrates to the Jews, 'If you judged My act of healing from the moral point of view and not from the formal one, then you wouldn't have condemned Me; then, your judgment would have been just and not biased'" (Bishop Michael).

This powerful sermon of the Lord made an extraordinary impression upon the Jerusalemites, who knew of the Lord's enemies' intentions; that is why they find it strange that seeking His death, they permit Him to speak freely, not opposing Him. Unable to explain this, they express their thought that perhaps their leaders have been convinced "*that this is truly Christ*". But immediately, they also express their doubts. According to the rabbis' teaching, the Messiah had to be born in Bethlehem. He then had to disappear unnoticeably, and then reappear in such a way that nobody would be aware from where and how. In response to the Jerusalemites' interpretations that He cannot be the Messiah-Christ because they know where He is from, the Lord, with particular solemnity, responds in a raised voice that although they state that they know Him, their knowledge is incorrect. "Assuming that you know Me, you state that I came from Myself, i.e. I am the self-appointed messiah; but I came not from Myself but am the true messenger of Him, Who you don't know — God". Those words were particularly hurtful to the proud Pharisees and "*they sought to take Him*", but "*because His hour had not yet come*", i.e. the hour of His coming sufferings, their attempt was unsuccessful: "*no one laid a hand on Him*" because apparently His enemies were afraid of the people, who were predisposed towards Christ. Perhaps, it was because their conscience was not yet completely extinguished, as happened subsequently. Many among the people believed in Him as the Messiah, at the same time, as though objecting to the Lord's enemies, exclaiming: "*When the Christ comes, will He do more signs than these which this Man has done?*", i.e. in other words, they wanted to say that the signs and miracles, performed by Jesus sufficiently powerfully testify of Him as of the Messiah.

Having heard such talks of the people, the Pharisees arranged a meeting with the high priests. At the same time, deciding not to postpone the realization of their intentions, they sent their servants to seize the Lord. Responding to their plan to seize and kill Him, the Lord said: "*I shall be with you a little while longer, and then I go to Him who sent Me*" — that aroused within Him the thought of His forthcoming death, and He admonished the Jews to take advantage of His presence by learning from Him. The further words of the Lord have the following meaning: "Currently you are pursuing and persecuting Me, but the time will come when you will be seeking Me as the omnipotent wonder-worker, able to deliver you from your woes — but it will be too late". But the cruel Jews were not enlightened by the Lord's words and began to mock at Him: "Where does He intend to go? Does He intend to go to the Jews living in the heathen countries ("Hellenic Dispersion"), so that He can preach to the

heathens as we well (the term “Hellenes” usually meant heathens in general.) This was the unintentional prophecy of the future enlightenment of heathens through the faith in Christ.

“*On the last day, that great day of the feast,*” i.e. the eighth day, which was assigned, according to the Book of Leviticus 23:36, to the seven-day feast of Tabernacles and was celebrated with special great solemnity, Jesus stood and exclaimed, saying, “*If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink*”. In these and further words, the Lord took advantage of the rituals that were performed during the Tabernacles’ feast day: at the end of the morning offering in the temple, the serving priest and the people went to the holy well of Siloam, where the priest filled a golden vessel with water; accompanied by the joyful cries of the people and the sounds of trumpets and cymbals, he carried it into the temple and poured it over the altar of burnt offerings, thereby performing the “sacrifice of libation”, which was meant to be the reminder of how Moses produced water from a rock during the Jews’ wandering in the wilderness. At that time the people were chanting to the music the words of Prophet Isaiah (12:3), addressed to the Messiah. The Lord Jesus Christ compares Himself with the rock that gave water to the thirsty people in the wilderness, pointing to Himself as being the Source of goodness, the image of which was that very rock. The Lord also points out that whoever believes in Him will also become the source of goodness, which will quench the spiritual thirst of everyone that seeks salvation. The Evangelist explains that here, the Lord means the grace of the Holy Spirit, which had to be sent to the people after the glorification, i.e. after Christ’s Resurrection and Ascension.

The Lord’s words impressed the crowd: many among decisively passed to His side, acknowledging Him as a “Prophet,” while some were openly saying that “*this is Christ*”. The Pharisees began to suggest the people — who were not aware that Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem — that He couldn’t be the Messiah: “*Will the Christ come from Galilee?*” and this started to quarrel over Him. Wanting to carry out the orders of the authorities, the servants of the Sanhedrin attempted to seize Jesus, but every time they could not raise their arms: they didn’t dare to do that: evidently, their conscience told them that it would be a sin to touch such a man. Returning to their masters in such a mood, they confessed that the power of the Lord’s word was so mighty and overwhelming, that they couldn’t carry out their instructions. That answer caused a most annoyed response from the members of the Sanhedrin: “*Are you also deceived?*” To the servants, originating from the simple people, they say that none of the “rulers” or “Pharisees” started to believe in Christ. “*But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed*” — that is the expression of mad fury of the Jewish leaders against the common people that believed in Christ. They attempt to discredit that faith, explaining it as “the ignorance of the law.” But there, Nicodemus (himself a Pharisee and the member of the Sanhedrin) spoke, deciding to show them bravely that they themselves were forgetting the law: “*Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing?*” The law in Exodus 23:1 and Deut. 1:16 demands that the matter of the accused should be investigated and the empty rumors should not be accepted. That only aroused annoyance: “*Are you also from Galilee?*”, i.e. only a Galilean could think like that. They didn’t notice that they were falsifying the history, because for example, Prophet Jonah was from Galilee.

The Judgment of the Adulteress.

(John 8:1-11).

This is narrated by Evangelist John only. Having spent the night in prayer on the Mount of Olives — situated to the east of Jerusalem, behind the Cedron flow where the Lord used to withdraw to for the night at the time of His visits to Jerusalem — He came to the temple in the morning and again began to teach people. The Scribes and Pharisees, endeavoring to “*have something of which to accuse Him*”, brought the woman caught in the sin of adultery, and “*testing Him*” they said: “*Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?*” If the Lord would have said: “stone her”, He would have been accused by them before

the Roman authorities, because the right of proclaiming death sentences by the Sanhedrin would be revoked — especially, and especially the right to carry it out. On the other hand, if He would have said “release her”, He would have been accused before the people as being a violator of Moses’ law. Stooping, the Lord wrote on the ground with His finger, “*as though He did not hear*”.

The Evangelist does not reveal what He was writing, and it’s useless to try to guess what it was. The most common supposition is that the Lord in response was writing the sins committed by those who posed the question. As they persisted in getting the answer, the Lord lifted His head and told them: “*He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her*”. The Lord’s words produced the striking reaction on the not yet completely sleeping conscience of the Pharisees. Evidently, in recollecting their own sins — evidently, similar to that of the woman’s — they started to leave one after another, accused by their conscience, until the Lord was left alone with the woman. Thus, as we can see, the Lord responded to the cunningness of the Pharisees by shifting their question of guilt of the woman, from the abstract-legal realm into a moral one. In doing so, the Lord, as the answer to the tricks of the Pharisees, wisely transferred the question of condemning that woman from the abstract-judicial field into the moral one and placed the very accusers into a position of the accused before their consciences.

The Lord acted that way, because the Pharisees that had brought the woman, did not represent the legal court that was capable of determining a measure of punishment for her crime. They brought the sinner to the Lord with the evil intentions, exposing her to shame, talking scandals and condemning her, while forgetting about their own sins, of which they were accused by the Lord.

It is characteristic that the woman did not take advantage of the favorable moment and did not leave quickly. Evidently, her conscience and the penitent feelings awoke. This would explain why the Lord then said: “*Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more*”. Naturally, one shouldn’t interpret these words as not condemning the sin. The Lord came not to judge, but to seek out and save lost souls (Mat. 18:11; Luke 7:48; John 3:17; 12:47): That’s why He condemns the sin but not the sinners, wishing to predispose them towards repentance. Consequently, the words addressed to the adulteress have the following meaning: “I am not punishing you for your sins, but want you to repent: go forth and sin no more” — all the potency is in these final words. This extract of the Gospel teaches us to avoid the sin of judging the neighbor. Instead, it offers us to condemn ourselves for our personal sins and repent in them.

The Conversation with the Jews in the Temple.

(John 8:12-59)

This conversation, which apparently took place also on the next day after the end of the Feast of Tabernacles, the Lord applied another image from the history of the Jews and their wandering in the wilderness to Himself — that of the fiery column that miraculously lit the way for the Jews at night. The column contained Jehovah’s Angel, in which the Holy Fathers see the second Face of the Ever-Holy Trinity. And the Lord begins His conversation with the words: “*I am the Light of the world*”. Just as in the Old Testament, the column of fire showed the Jews the way out of Egypt towards better life in the Promised Land, so Christ in the New Testament shows, not only to the Jews, but to all humanity, the way from the realm of sin into eternal life. The Pharisees, relying on the commonly accepted rule that no person can be a witness to his own works, objected that His witness about Himself cannot be accepted as genuine. To that the Lord responded with exceptional power, that the human statement cannot be applied to Him, that He cannot be judged “according to the flesh”, as the Pharisees are doing, regarding Him as an ordinary person. “*I know where I came from and where I am going*” — these words, according to Saint Chrysostom, mean the same as: “*I know that I am the Son of God and not an ordinary person*”. This admittance of His origin from God the Father by the Lord confirms the absolute authenticity of His testimony about

Himself, as well as the impossibility of self-deception. The Lord adds: “My witness is also genuine from the formal point of view, because not only I testify of Myself, *“The Father who sent Me bears witness of Me”*”.

Having heard the Lord’s sermons about His Father sending Him many times, they, pretending not to understand, mockingly and blasphemously pose Him the question: *“Where is your Father?”* The Lord responds that they don’t know the Father because they don’t want to know the Son. Here is the concealed indication to the consubstantiality of God the Son with God the Father, to the fact that the Father revealed Himself to humanity in His Son. The Evangelist notes that this was uttered by the Lord *“in the treasury”*, which was located close to the meeting-hall of the Sanhedrin that was hostile to the Lord. Although the Lord testified of His Messianic merit before, so to speak, in front of the eyes and ears of the Sanhedrin, *“no one laid hands on Him”* because the hour of His sufferings had not yet arrived: in other words, the people themselves didn’t have any authority over Him. The hostile mood of the listeners turned the Lord’s thoughts anew towards the sufferings awaiting for Him, and He once again said about their hopeless situation, in which they will find themselves in, after He would go, if they did not believe in Him as in the Messiah (verse 21): *“Where I go you cannot come”*. Those words, once again, irritated them and caused their mockery: *“Will He kill Himself?”*, i.e. if He was thinking of a suicide? Ignoring their rough mockery, the Lord points at their moral character that prompts that type of their behavior: *“You are from beneath...”*, i.e. you have lost the ability to comprehend the Divine, heavenly; you judge about everything through the example of mankind, led by the earthly and sinful concepts, and therefore if you don’t believe in Me (*“that I am He”* — meaning the Messiah), *“you will die in your sins”*. The Lord didn’t call Himself the Messiah once, but He spoke so transparently, explaining it though the other words, so that the Pharisees had to understand that. However, they pretended not to understand, as they didn’t want to hear that name from Him, and therefore they asked Him: *“Who are You?”*

Likewise to that question, the Lord didn’t give them the direct answer that they expected. The Lord’s answer is translated into Church-Slavonic too literally (*“tin arhin”* — “the beginning”) — which is the peculiarity of the Church-Slavonic translation, prompted by the fear of sinning by not translating the Greek text inexactly — so consequently, it doesn’t respond to the thoughts enclosed within it; the Russian translation — *“from the Beginning”* — is also incorrect. According to the ancient interpreters, the meaning of the Lord’s answer is: “I am That, about what I was telling you from the beginning” or: “Didn’t I call Myself the Son of God — right from the start? And such I am”. Continuing His speech about the sad moral state of the Jewish people, the Lord explains that He has to do this, for the One Who sent Him is the very truth, and He has to testify about the truth that He had heard from Him. Once again they didn’t understand that He was telling them about the Father. That’s why He further tells them about the time when they will involuntarily realize the truth of His teaching about Himself and His Father Who sent Him: this will happen when they would raise Him on the cross, because the death on the cross served as the beginning of the Son of God’s glorification, that drew everyone to Him: the subsequent events, such as Christ’s Resurrection, His Ascension into Heaven, the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles — all that testified about the truth of Christ’s teaching and His Divine mission.

These words produced the great impact on the listeners, so that *“many believed in Him”*, and evidently, even some from the number of those Jews hostilely inclined towards Him before. There were those new believers which Lord addressed with His next sermon. He instructs them how to become and remain His genuine disciples. For this, they *“must abide in His word”*: only then they will know the truth — which contains genuine freedom — and the truth will liberate them from sin. Then among the listeners, the voice of national pride was heard. *“We are Abraham’s descendants”* and the Abraham’s descendants were promised by God the dominion over the world, and the blessing of the world through us (Gen. 12:7; 22:17), *“and have never been in bondage to anyone”*. Amid such a passionate and painful

cry of exacerbated nationalistic conceit, they seemingly forgot about their Egyptian, Babylonian captivity and the current Roman one.

The Lord responds that He is speaking about the different type of captivity — the spiritual one, which every sinner finds himself in: *“Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin”*. The one who is committed to sin, cannot remain in the Messiah’s Kingdom, where there should be absolute spiritual freedom and where everybody should realize that they are nothing but the children of the Heavenly Father. *“And a slave does not abide in the house forever”* because the master, being dissatisfied with him, can sell or send him away: such a position of a slave is contrary to that of the son who, as the inheritor of the whole house, cannot be sold or sent away, but remains the son forever. *“As those sinning, you are the slaves of sin. You can receive genuine freedom and become the sons of God, only if you believe in the Begotten Son of God, abide in His word — and He will liberate you from the captivity of sin”*. Further on, the Lord tells them that He does not reject their origin from Abraham — but doesn’t recognize them as his genuine children in the spirit, since they seek to kill Him only because *“His word has no place in them”*, i.e. found no favorable soil in their hearts for its growth.

As Abraham didn’t commit anything like the things they had, then their father is not Abraham or God as they keep on insisting, but the devil who *“was a murderer from the beginning”* because he injected the lethal disease of sin into humanity. Speaking of the devil, the Lord indissolubly connects the fact that he is an ancient murderer with that he is the enemy of the truth and *“father of lies.”* Accordingly, speaking of Himself, the Lord sets the same tight link between His sinless nature and the fact that He teaches the truth. If the Jews are not accepting the truth of His teaching, then let them prove the sinfulness of His life: *“Which of you convicts Me of sin?”* However, if nobody can accuse the Lord of leading sinful life, then as a consequence of His piety, the Truth taught by Him must be accepted as inseparable with it. According to the Lord’s words, the Jews clearly demonstrate through their disbelief they *“are not of God”*.

That provoked their violent indignation: *“Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?”* because only Samaritans and those possessed by the demon that hate us, the Jews, can deny our Abraham origin. The Lord quietly ignores this insult and states that through such talks, which seem to them as those of the possessed, He only honors to His Heavenly Father: I speak with you this way, because I *“honor My Father”* while you dishonor the One, Who says the truth to you on the behalf of the Father. *“I do not seek My own glory; there is One who seeks and judges”* — and that is the Heavenly Father, Who will condemn those who reject His Son. Then, addressing those that believed in Him, the Lord speaks: *“I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he shall never see death”* — of course, in the sense that *“he will receive eternal life”*. The non-believers pretended that they understood the Lord’s words literally — concerning the natural, physical death — and again found a reason to accuse Him of being possessed: *“Are You greater than our father Abraham, who is dead?”*

The Lord answers to this that He is not glorifying Himself, but is glorified by His Father, Whom He knows and Whose word He fulfils. He then shows His predominance over Abraham, as though saying to the Jews: *“Yes, I am greater than your father Abraham, for I was the subject of his expectations during his earthly life, and upon his death, was the subject of his joy — in Heaven”*: *“he saw it and was glad”*. Assigning that, what was said by the Lord about Abraham, to the earthly life, the Jews find another incongruity, in order to reproach the Lord again: *“You are not 50 years old and You have seen Abraham?”* The Lord gives to this reproach the decisive answer, which would be understood even by the Pharisees that were blinded by their own hatred: *“Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM”*, i.e. *“I am more ancient than Abraham himself, because I am — Eternal God”*.

How definitely the Lord teaches here about His Divinity! The Pharisees understood that correctly, but instead of believing in Him, they became embittered, seeing only blasphem-

my in His words, and picked up stones to beat Him. However, having finished His testimony of Himself on a triumphant note and surrounded by His disciples and other people, the Lord merged with the crowd that filled the Church yard, *“going through the midst of them, and so passed by”*.

The Healing of the Born Blind Man.

(John 9:1-41).

Evidently, this great miracle performed in the temple straight after the Lord’s sermon to the Jews about His Divine origin and worthiness, is narrated only by one Evangelist, John, and in detail. Seeing the man — known to be blind from birth — begging for alms, the disciples asked the Lord: *“Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”* The Jews believed that all major misfortunes happened with people, as the punishment for their personal sins, or the sins of their parents, grandparents or great grandparents. This belief was based on the Law of Moses that declared that God punished children for the sins of their fathers, up to the fourth generation (Exodus 20:5), and on the Rabbi’s teaching, which asserted that a child could sin in his mother’s womb, for he could differentiate between right and wrong from the day of his conception. In response to His disciples’ question, the Lord indicates the purpose for the man’s blindness instead of the cause: *“Neither this man nor his parents sinned”*, although, of course, being human beings, they were not without sin in general, *“but that the works of God should be revealed in him”*, i.e. so that his healing would reveal that Christ was the *“Light of the world”*, that He came into the world for humanity’s enlightenment, which abode in the spiritual blindness, symbolized by the man’s physical blindness. *“I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day”*, i.e. while I am on earth and can be seen by everybody, because *“night is coming”*, i.e. the time of My departure from the world, when Christ the Savior’s activity as a Wonder-Worker in the world will not be as apparent to everybody as it is now.

“As long as I am in the world, I am the Light of the world” — although Christ always was and will be the Light of the world, His visible activity on earth will continue only for the duration of His earthly life, which was coming to its end. The Lord performed many miracles with just a word of His, while sometimes He resorted to the particular preliminary actions. The same happened that time: *“He spat on the ground and made clay with the saliva; and He anointed the eyes of the blind man with the clay. And He said to him, ‘Go wash in the pool of Siloam’*. It can be assumed that all this was done in order to evoke faith in the healed man: to let him know that a miracle is about to occur with him. The bathhouse of Siloam was built on the Siloam spring, which flowed from the foot of the holy Mount Sinai, as a place of God’s special presence in Jerusalem and in the temple. Consequently, it was granted an a special gift, or sent by God to His people, as an extraordinary blessing, and therefore it was regarded as a holy spring with the symbolic meaning.

The Evangelist explains that “Siloam” means “the sent”. Was the Lord Jesus Christ trying to express that He is the true Messenger of God, the fulfillment of all the Divine blessings, the representation and symbol of which the Siloam spring was to the Jews? Having washed himself in the Siloam waters, the blind man regained his sight. That miracle produced the strong effect on his neighbors and those who knew him, even that some of them hesitated if he was the one and the same blind person that they regularly saw begging for alms. However, the cured individual confirmed that it was he, and explained to them how the miracle had happened. After listening to his narration, the people took him to the Pharisees in order to examine such an extraordinary event and to learn their opinion, how to regard it, because the miracle was performed on a Saturday, when, according to the Pharisee law regarding the Sabbath’s tranquility, even treating the ill was not permissible. The cured man explained to the Pharisees all he knew about his healing.

This story caused a quarrel between the Pharisees. Some — and it must be assumed the majority — were saying: *“This Man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sab-*

bath". The others thought just: "How can a Man who is a sinner do such signs?" Then the unbelieving in the Lord Pharisees turned to the cured man with the question, about what he could say about his Healer. Apparently they were trying to find something in his words with what to find faults, in order to reject the authenticity of the miracle or to re-interpret it. However, the healed decisively declared: "He is a Prophet". Finding no support in him, the irate Jews summoned his parents for questioning. Afraid of being excommunicated from the synagogue, the parents gave the evasive answer: they confirmed that he was their son who was born blind, but to the question why he could see again — they answered that they did not know, suggesting that they ask himself as he was an adult and could speak for himself.

Summoning the cured man for the second time, the Jews attempt to suggest him that after the detailed investigation concerning that Person, they reached the indisputable belief that "this Man is a sinner". "Give God the glory" was an oath formula to say the truth under oath applied by the Jews in those times, meaning: acknowledge Him on your part as a sinner, who violates the laws of the tranquility of the Sabbath. But the cured individual gives an answer to the Pharisees, that is filled with truth and deep irony: "Whether He is a sinner or not I do not know. One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see". Not having any success in their inquiries, the Pharisees once again request that he recount the miracle in hope of finding some new trait, which would give them a chance to condemn Jesus. However, this begins to annoy him: "I told you already, and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become His disciples?" This audacious sarcasm provoked a reproach for the daring confessor of the truth: "You are His disciple, but we are Moses' disciples. We know that God spoke to Moses; as for this fellow, we do not know where He is from". The Jewish leaders had to ascertain where that Person Who was constantly followed by multitudes of people, came from. But they lied when they said they did not know Him. Such a lie outraged the cured man even more, amplifying his boldness in defending the truth. "Why, this is a marvelous thing, that you do not know where He is from", he responds the Pharisees — yet you should know where He is from, having performed such an unheard of miracle: sinners are incapable of performing such miracles — therefore it is clear that He is a holy Man, sent by God. Astounded by such implacable logic of the simple person, the Pharisees were incapable of continuing their argument; exposing him in that he was "completely born in sins", they threw him out.

Learning about this and wishing to open his spiritual eyes as well, the Lord found him and by revealing Himself as his Healer, brought the cured man to the faith in Him, as in the Son of God. All those events gave occasion for the Lord to express His thoughts, that an unavoidable consequence of His arrival to the world was the sharp separation of people into believers and disbelievers. "For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind". "Who do not see" — are the humble, poor in spirit who believed in Christ; "who see" — are those who thought themselves to be seeing and sensible, and therefore felt no need to believe in Christ. They are the false elders, which were the Pharisees, who rejected Christ; the Lord calls them as "blind" because they were spiritually blind, not seeing the Divine truth, which He had brought into the world. To this, the Pharisees asked: "Are we blind also?" But the Lord gave them an unexpected answer: "If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains." The meaning of these words is such: if you were among those blind that I am speaking about, then you would have no sin, because your disbelief would have been a forgivable sin of ignorance and weakness. However, because you state that you can see, and regard yourselves as the experts and interpreters of God's Revelation and you have at hand the laws and Prophets, in which you can see the truth — your sin is nothing else but that of stubbornness and obdurate opposition to God's truth. And this sin is unforgivable because it is the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mat. 12:31-32).

The Sermon about the Good Shepherd.

(John 10:1-21).

This conversation is the continuation of the Lord's accusatory words, addressed to the Pharisees in connection with the healing of the man that was born blind. Having explained to them their responsibility for "those who see may be made blind" the Lord (in an allegorical form) reveals them that they are not the true spiritual leaders of the religious life of the people, as they imagined themselves to be. Because they thought more of their personal profit than about the welfare of the people, they were not "good shepherds," and as a consequence, were leading the people towards destruction instead of salvation. The Pharisees only at the very end understood the sense of that marvelous allegorical sermon, borrowed from shepherd's life in Palestine. The Lord compares the people with a flock of sheep and the leaders, with the shepherds of this flock. In order to protect the flock at nighttime from wolves and robbers, it was driven into caves or specially arranged compounds. It was common to have some flocks, belonging to different owners, driven in one compound. In the morning, the gate-keepers opened the gate, allowing the shepherds to come in and separate their flock by calling out the individual names of their sheep: the sheep would recognize the voice of their shepherds, listen to them and follow them out of the compound to graze — this practice can be witnessed in Palestine up to this day.

Naturally, afraid to confront the armed gatekeeper, the robbers secretly climbed over the fence into the compound. Making use of such a well-known example from life, the Lord uses the word "sheepfold" for the God-chosen Jewish people, or God's Church of the Old Testament, from which the New Testament church was formed; the word "shepherd" means every genuine leader of the religious-moral living; the words "thieves" and "robbers" mean all false, self-styled prophets, pseudo-teachers, heretics, false leaders of the religious life of the people, thinking only of themselves and their own interests, like the exposed by the Lord Pharisees.

The Lord calls Himself "the Door" and the "good Shepherd", Who "gives His life for the sheep" protecting them from wolves. The Lord calls Himself the "Door" in the sense that He is the only genuine mediator between God and the people, the only path for the pastors and the flock: into the Kingdom of God, depicted by Him as the "sheepfold" and only through Him the entry can be gained. Everyone, who avoids Him, "*climbs up some other way*" (not the normal way)," are "thieves and robbers," i.e. not true pastors but the imposters that are pursuing personal goals, and not the good of the flock. "Sheepfold" is the earthly Church, while "pasture" is the Heavenly Church. The Pharisees didn't understand the first part of the sermon. Consequently, in the second part, the Lord revealed Himself as the "good Shepherd". The meaning of the word "hireling" must be understood as that of the unworthy pastors who, according to the Prophet Ezekiel, "*feed themselves*" (34:2) and at the first sign of a danger, abandon their flock to the mercy of the four winds. The word "wolves" means the devil and his servants that destroy "sheep".

The Lord points out the main distinctive qualities of a genuine pastor: 1) Selflessness — even to the point of death for the sake of the flock. 2) Knowing his sheep. In the highest sense, this knowledge belongs to Him: this mutual knowledge of one another, pastor and sheep, should be akin to the mutual knowledge of God the Father and God the Son: "*As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father*".

The Lord's words "other sheep," "*which are not of this fold*" but which "*also I must bring*", mean the heathens who are also called into Christ's Kingdom. The Lord concludes His parable with the words: "*I lay down My life for the sheep*" voluntarily: "*No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself,*" because He has the power to "*lay it down*" and "*the power to take it again*" — the expression of absolute freedom, i.e. Christ's death was the chosen by Him and voluntarily fulfilled means of saving His flock. These words caused another quarrel among the Jews, resulting that some empathically accepted the Lord's words, while the others continued to declare Him as the possessed.

The Sermon at the Feast of the Dedication.

(John 10:22-42).

This festival was established by Judas of Maccabea in 169 BC, and commemorates the restoration, purification and sanctification of the Temple of Jerusalem, desecrated by Antiochus Epiphanes. This feast is celebrated annually over the eight-day period, commencing with the 25 of the month of December. It was cold, therefore the Lord walked around the covered gallery within the Temple. There, He was surrounded by the Jews asking Him: *“How long do you keep us in doubt? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.”* The Lord was unable to respond “plainly” because they associated the word “Messiah” with the false representation of the earthly leader of people, who was supposed to liberate them from the Roman rule. The Lord answers the question wisely: He points to His past testimonies of Himself, His works and His relationship to His Heavenly Father. From all this, they should have realized a long time before that He is the Messiah, although not in the same sense that they imagined. The reason why they did not understand that was because they “were not of His sheep” and “did not hear His voice.” Remembering about His sheep, the Lord pronounces the promise about granting eternal life: nobody will be able to take them from His hand, because as He said: *“I and My Father are one”* There could be no more definite testimony of Christ’s Divine worthiness than those words.

When the Jews understood them correctly and picked up the stones to stone the Lord as a blasphemer, He disarmed them with the short question: *“Many good works I have shown you from My Father. For which of those works do you stone Me?”* The unexpectedness of the question confused the Jews, and showed against their will, that they inwardly acknowledged the greatness of the Lord’s miracles. That was why they let the stones and tried to justify their actions, by stating that they didn’t want to stone Him for His good deeds, but for His “blasphemy”. In response, the Lord refers to the 81st Psalm, where the people called to judge and protect the weak from the infringements of the powerful, were titled “gods” — naturally, not in the direct sense.

In citing excerpts from this Psalm, the Lord is seemingly saying to the Jews: “you cannot accuse the Psalmist of blasphemy; if he called those that were worthy of having Divine authority, “gods,” then how can you accuse Me of blasphemy — the One Who has named Himself the Son of God and having performed works that only God can do?” The Lord continues: “You could disbelieve Me, if I had not fulfilled the deeds that are typical of God alone. However, if I fulfill these deeds, you must understand that I and the Father — are One, *“Father is in Me, and I in Him.”* Once again, the Jews attempted to seize the Lord, *“but He escaped out of their hands”* — left so that nobody dared to touch Him, and traveled over Jordan to Perea. There many, who had heard about Him from John’s sermon and convinced in its genuineness, believed in Him.

The Return of the 70 Disciples.

(Luke 10:17-24).

Evangelist Luke narrates about the return of the 70 disciples soon after their departure, although undoubtedly, the significant amount of time passed between their departure and return. Some presume that the meeting between the Lord and the disciples took place in Perea, where the Lord had not yet given any sermons. The others think that they returned to the place, from which they were sent out, i.e. to Galilee. Meeting the Lord, before anything else they expressed their joy about the fact that the demons obeyed them “in the name of Jesus”. The latter words expressed their humility. The Lord responded to this: “Do not be surprised that the demons obey you, as their leader has already been toppled: *“I saw satan fall like lightning from Heaven”*. The flash of “lightning” is used to present unexpectedness and swiftness. In other words, the Lord tells the Apostles that He witnessed the defeat of the prince of demons and his swift fall — like lightning — and therefore, if he was defeated, so

were his legions. As the Conqueror of the hostile powers, the Lord makes possible for His disciples to feel the victory over them, calling the evil spirits allegorically as “snakes” and “scorpions”. “The important thing is not this, but that you have become worthy of salvation and joy in Heaven.” In the Scripture, God is sometimes depicted with a book in His hand, into which the names and the deeds of His faithful servants are recorded. To be written in heavens, is to be the citizen of the Heavenly Kingdom. This should make one rejoice more than from any earthly deeds, even though they might be extraordinary, like the casting out of the evil spirits. The Lord’s further words of honoring God the Father (in verse 21), the statements about the knowledge of God the Father and the Son (verse 22), and pleasing His disciples (verses 23-24) we also find with Evangelist Matthew, but expressed in different situations and under the different circumstances (see Mat. 11:25-27 and 13:16-17).

It is possible that the Lord repeated those statements a number of times. However, Luke’s chronological connection is indisputable, which is identified with the words: “*In that hour,*” as well as the Lord’s movements: “*turned to His disciples and said.*” The words “wise” and “prudent” do not refer to those that regard themselves as such. Apparently, in this instance, the Lord was talking about the Scribes and Pharisees proud with their knowledge of Moses’ Law. The word “babes” means the simple folk, not having studied human wisdom at schools and not having attended the schools of the Jewish Scribes. In this case, the Lord meant His Apostles, to whom He had revealed the mysteries of God’s Kingdom. Naturally, saying about God that He had “*hidden*”, He did not mean it in the direct sense, but like, as for example, in the Romans 1:28. According to Saint Chrysostom, the word “hidden” doesn’t mean that God was the cause of that hiding, but it is rather used in the same sense as it is applied by Paul: “*For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God*” (Rom. 10:3). As Blessed Theophylactus says: “God hid great mysteries from those who think themselves to be wise, because they had become unworthy as they regarded themselves being wise”. “*All things have been delivered to Me by My Father*” — the control of the world belongs to Christ as to the “Interceder” and “Mediator” in the atonement of mankind. Understanding of the divine nature is inaccessible to any mortal. However, God reveals Himself in *His Son* (John 14:8-9) and through His Son (Heb. 1:1), to the extent of that, how the person himself through faith and love is able to accept such a revelation. Further, the Lord praises the Apostles for being worthy of seeing Him, the incarnate Son of God — of that, what the living before Prophets and righteous fathers were unable of, seeing Him only through their faith, but not with their physical eyes, like the Apostles.

The Parable about the Good Samaritan.

(Luke 10:25-37).

This parable is narrated only by St. Luke, as the Lord’s reply to the tempter’s (Scribe’s) question, wishing to trap Him in His words: “*Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?*” The Lord forces the sly lawyer to answer his own question through the words of Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, about love for God and for the neighbors. By pointing him at the demands of the law, the Lord wants to force him to plunge into the power and meaning of these demands, and comprehend how far he is from fulfilling them. Apparently, the lawyer felt this, and that’s why he, “*wanting to justify himself*” asked: “And who is my neighbor?” i.e. he wanted to show that even though he may not be fulfilling the law as required, it’s because of the uncertainty of its demands, for it is unclear, for example, whom one should regard as a “neighbor”. In response, the Lord narrated the wonderful parable about a person that fell into the hands of robbers, and was subsequently ignored by the passing priest and Levite, and who only saw compassion from a Samaritan — the man, hated and despised by the Jews. That Samaritan knew better than the priest or Levite, that in order to fulfill the law, there shouldn’t be any distinction between the people: everyone is our neighbor. As we can see, the parable is not fully suitable to the question of the lawyer. While the lawyer was ask-

ing: “Who is my neighbor?” the parable indicated how and who of the three, seeing the miserable, became his neighbor.

Consequently, the parable doesn’t instruct on who should be regarded as a neighbor, but how one **can make himself a neighbor** for every person that is in the need of compassion. The difference between the lawyer’s question and Lord’s answer is of great significance, because in the Old Testament, in order to shield God’s chosen people from vile influences, there were found the differences between the surrounding people, and only the countrymen and people of the same faith were regarded as “neighbors” by the Jews. The moral law of the New Testament abolishes those differences and teaches the all-embracing Evangelical love towards all the people. The lawyer was asking: who is my neighbor — as if fearing to love those people that he shouldn’t. The Lord instructs him that he should make himself a neighbor to the one in need, and not question, whether he is his neighbor or not: he should not be looking at the people but into his own heart, so that he would not have the coldness of the pagan priest or Levite, but the mercy of the Samaritan. If you are going to differentiate logically between the neighbor and stranger, you will not be able to avoid the cruel coldness towards the people. You will pass those who “fell among thieves”, just like the priest and Levite, even though that miserable — as a Jew — was their neighbor. Mercy is the condition of inheriting eternal life.

The Lord Jesus Christ in the House of Martha and Mary.

(Luke 10:38-42).

Apparently, a “*certain village*” that the Lord entered was Bethany — the settlement situated on one of the slopes of the Mount of Olives, near Jerusalem. The two women that met the Lord, Martha and Mary, were easily recognizable as the loved by the Lord sisters of Lazarus, whose resurrection is narrated by Saint John in the 11th chapter. Both of them appear here with the same qualities as described by Saint John: Martha was notable for her active and lively character, Mary — for quiet and deep sensitivity. Having received the Lord, Martha began to fuss over the preparation of food, while Mary sat at the Lord’s feet, listening to Him. Realizing that it was difficult to cope with everything herself, Martha turned to the Lord — as though with the reproach, which showed the friendly attitude of the Lord towards her family: “*Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore, tell her to help me.*” Justifying Mary, the Lord responds to Martha with the same friendly rebuke: “*Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her.*”

The meaning of this rebuke is that Martha’s efforts are directed at the transitory fuss, without which one can live, while Mary chose that, which is the only thing needed for a human being — attentiveness towards the Divine teaching of Christ and following it. What Mary is acquiring by listening to the Lord, will never be taken away from her. This segment of the Gospel is always read during every Liturgy that commemorates the Mother of God, because the figure of Mary appears as the symbol of Ever-Holy Virgin Mary, Who too had “chosen that good part”. This segment is connected with the verses 11:27-28, where the Mother of God is directly glorified and again are honored those who “hear the word of God and do it”.

The Parable about the Persistent Appeal.

(Luke 11:5-8).

Both Evangelist Matthew and Evangelist Luke in 11:1-4, expound the text of the Lord’s Prayer, beginning with the words “*Our Father*” and further, beginning with verse 5, the precise Lord’s teaching about the persistency in prayer. Following His inexplicable goals, God does not grant immediately that what is asked for, even though it may be in conformity with His will. By the narration about a friend, who was asking for bread and receiving it as the result of his insistence, the Lord wishes to instill the essentiality of resoluteness in prayer.

The Exposure of the Scribes and Pharisees.

(Mat. 23:1-39 and Luke 11:37-54).

The two condemnatory speeches, addressed to the Scribes and Pharisees, which are very similar in both the content and expressions, are mentioned by both Evangelists Matthew and Luke, but with a difference: the exposure presented by Saint Luke, was expressed by the Lord at the dinner to which He was invited by a certain Pharisee, concerning the washing of hands. On the other hand, the exposing speech, narrated by Matthew, was uttered by the Lord in the Temple of Jerusalem, shortly before His sufferings at the cross. It has to be assumed that the Lord not once exclaimed similar exposures in the similar expressions. It is quite probable that, while not narrating the Lord's grim sermon that was described by Saint Matthew, Saint Luke quoted a few pronouncements from it, which he attributed to the Lord when he was exposing the Pharisees during the dinner, about which he narrated alone. In both the sermons, the Pharisees are exposed for the exaggerated attention to "*outer*" cleanliness, while neglecting their "*inner*" cleanliness, i.e. cleansing their souls of sinful passions and vices.

In both the sermons, the Lord compares the Pharisees with coffins, "which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all type of dirt". As well, the Lord condemns the Pharisees for their love of being honored, that they apply unbearable burdens on men's shoulders, while they themselves "will not move them with one of their fingers," that they formally and punctually fulfill the outward requirements of the law on "tithes", "but have neglected the weightier matters of the law": justice, mercy and faith, i.e. being true to God and His moral law. The Lord also condemns the lawyers because they "*have taken away the key of knowledge*", i.e. as though they have taken complete possession of the Old Testament law, which was supposed to lead people towards Christ. And having taken possession of this key, do not enter Christ's Kingdom themselves and do not allow the others to enter, falsely interpreting the law. The Lord also accuses the Pharisees in stoning God's Prophets, sent to them by the "*Wisdom of God*", i.e. by Him, as He is the Hypostasis Wisdom of God, represented under such a name in the 8th chapter of Proverbs.

In conclusion, the Lord calls upon them the blood of all the righteous, beginning with Abel, slain by his brother Cain, to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, killed between the altar and the temple. Apparently, this was the same Zechariah who by the order of Joash, was stoned in the courtyard of the Lord's house. The others surmise that this was Zechariah — the father of John the Baptist.

The Parable about the Reckless Rich Man.

(Luke 12:13-21).

Seeing the Lord's great influence, a certain person turned to Him with the request to order his brother to share the inheritance with him. The Lord refused him, because He didn't come to earth to sort out the petty conflicts based on human passions. Apart from that, He preached the renouncement of earthly possessions. With that, any kind of His decision could raise dissatisfaction with one or the other side of the conflict, and even a clash and judicial lawsuit — something the Lord did not wish to happen. At the same time, that was not the reason why human interests in general were strange to the Lord, but in that His task was not to determine the exterior measures of order, but to re-educate the hearts and minds of the people. This is the example for all the preachers of the Gospel and servants of the Church.

In relation to the request addressed to Him, the Lord told a parable, warning against the sickness of "*covetousness*", i.e. the passion of acquiring possessions for the purpose of enjoying the earthly blessings. "*One's life*", i.e. his well being or happiness, "*does not consist in the abundance of the things he possess*". One individual had the abundant harvest in his fields. Without any thought for his life thereafter, all he thinks about is how to utilize his

wealth for the earthly pleasures. He has no thoughts of God, of spiritual life, but only about the animalistic, carnal pleasures: “*eat, drink and be merry.*” He had no inkling that his last day on earth would arrive and he would be unable to enjoy his gained treasures. “*Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?*” — “you will not receive any benefit from the treasures you gained, and who will end up with those treasures, will be of no importance to you”. Instead of accumulating earthly treasures for oneself, one must grow rich in God, i.e. be concerned about obtaining eternal, incorruptible treasures or virtues, which can be acquired by expending earthly riches not on the low, carnal pleasures but on *good deeds* of various types.

The Parable about the Servants, Awaiting the Return of their Master.

(Mat. 24:42-51 and Luke 12:35-48).

One has to be ready at all times, because it’s unknown when Christ’s Second Coming or death will arrive — which has the same meaning for a person. In both instances, a person will be obliged to give an account to God on how he lived his earthly life. “*Let your waist be girded*” — the image taken from the Eastern loose clothing: whenever anything had to be done, such loose and long attire was girded around the waist with a belt, so that it would not get in the way. Consequently, this expression means — to be ready. “*Your lamps burning*” expresses the same thought: the servants should be ready to meet their master with the lighted lamps when he returns home at night. Just as alert servants have to be ready to meet their master at any hour of the night, whenever he returns home — “*come in the second watch, or come in the third watch*” — so should the true followers of Lord Jesus Christ be morally ready to meet His Second Coming. The Lord promises blessedness for this spiritual vigilance — “*blessed are those servants*”. This blessedness is figuratively presented in that the master will “*gird himself*” and begin to serve his servants, as if making them his guests — a tremendous honor that can only be bestowed to the servants according to the Eastern customs.

The Parable about the Wise House-Steward.

(Mat. 24:45-51; Luke 12:42-48)

The Lord does not give a direct answer to Peter’s question as to whether that parabolic speech is addressed to the Apostles only, or to everybody. But it can be seen from the further dialogue that the Lord’s exhortation about the spiritual vigilance applies to all the followers of Christ. In this second parable, the Lord praises the faithful and wise house-steward, “*whom his Master made ruler over His household*”, for the proper fulfillment of the entrusted to him duty — “*to give them food in due season*”. He also predicts the sad fate of that house-steward who, not expecting the early return of his master, begins to neglect his responsibilities through the improper behavior: he “*begins to beat his fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards.*” Such a type of servant will be subject to great tortures: “*cut him in two*” — the punishment applied in the East to the worst criminals. Evangelist Luke adds that the punishment for such derelict servants will not be identical: the one who knew the master’s will, will bear the heavier punishment than the one who didn’t, although, the latter will be punished for not concerning to learn his masters will. The one, who was given more opportunity to fulfill that will, will be punished greater for neglecting to fulfill it.

About the Divisions among the People.

(Luke 12:49-53).

“*I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled*” — the Holy Fathers understand the word “fire” to mean spiritual zealotness, which the Lord came to implant in the human hearts, and which will inevitably spawn the division and hostility among people, because some will accept Christ’s teachings ardently, with all their hearts, while the others will oppose it. Because that flame of zealotness had to inflame with espe-

cial potency only after Christ's cruciferous sufferings, His Resurrection, Ascension and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles, the Lord expresses His desire to be speedily "baptized" with that baptism that He "had to be baptized with", i.e. to undergo the sufferings, waiting for Him, for humanity's salvation, which will result in the fire of zealotry being inflamed. As the result of Christ's redeeming act, among the people there will exist no longer that evil world, which united the people on the grounds of a crime and distanced them from God, but the saving division will arrive: the followers of Christ's teaching would separate from His enemies. The hostility, arising on those grounds, even among close relatives, could be seen especially during the persecution of Christians by the heathens. However, it is inevitable as the evil hates goodness and strives to destroy it.

The Fall of the Siloam Tower.

(Luke 13:1-5)

Returning from Jerusalem, the people told the Lord about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. The Jews often staged uprisings against the Roman rule. In all probability, this was one of these uprisings that occurred within the temple during a major feast-day, when the armed Roman soldiers were safeguarding the peace. Judging by this narration, Pilate ordered the rebellious Galileans to be put to death in the temple. This was at the same time as the sacrifices were being offered, and as a consequence, the blood of the dead mingled with the blood of the sacrificial animals. Jesus Christ explained, that such a violent death in such a holy place cannot be explained in that those Galileans were more sinful than the others: therefore, one shouldn't think that those who perished were less righteous than those who were unharmed — those, who the Lord did not punish in such a severe manner. The Lord is only forbearing, waiting for their repentance.

The meaning of the Lord's words is such: you are the similar sinners as they are and will also perish likewise if you don't repent. The Lord's judgment had already passed for them, while for you, it will arrive this way or another, "unless you repent". It is possible that here the Lord is hinting at God's judgment, held over the Jewish people when Titus Flavius destroyed Jerusalem and the great number of Jews died inside the temple, similarly to those Galileans killed by Pilate. With this, the Lord Himself recalls another occurrence, when a tower of Siloam collapsed, crushing 18 people — were they more sinful than the other inhabitants of Jerusalem? — Who knows. Both the accidents the Lord offers to be understood differently: this is only the warning to the living: "unless you repent you will all likewise perish!" — I.e. death will overtake you when you are not ready, burdened with sin. Developing this thought, the Lord tells the parable about the fruitless fig tree.

The Parable about the Fruitless Fig Tree.

(Luke 13:6-9)

The owner of the vineyard in this parable is understood to be Lord God, Who is waiting for the Jewish people's repentance (they are represented in the parable as the fruitless fig tree). To plant a fig tree in the vineyard is unusual, however, this also bears an important thought — that the Jewish people occupied the special position as the chosen people, standing alone among the other nations of the world, just as the fig tree stood alone in the vineyard. The vineyard owner is to be understood like the Lord Jesus Christ, having come to the God-chosen Jewish people, spending 3 years of the public ministry and doing everything possible to convert the Jewish people towards the saving faith in Him, as in the Messiah, and expecting from the Jews the fruits of His labor. "After that you can cut it down" — this is the grim forecast of God's punishment that reached the Jewish people, for still not turning to God, not bringing any expected fruits, who on the fourth year of the Lord Jesus Christ's ministry, delivered Him to death on the cross. For that, it was rejected by God and punished by the Roman invasion and terrible destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. The Son of God

(the vineyard owner in the parable) is presented as the Interceder for the people, begging God the Father about mercy towards them.

The Healing of the Deformed Woman.

(Luke 13:10-17)

During His stay in Galilee, while teaching in the synagogue, the Lord performed a miracle by curing a woman that was deformed for eighteen years and could not straighten up. The head of the synagogue became indignant, because the healing took place on a Saturday, which according to the law prohibited any type of activity. Turning to the people, he expressed this indignation aloud. For that, the Lord called him a hypocrite (as He usually called the Pharisees), indicating that his indignation was aroused not by the imaginary violation of the Sabbath, but through plain jealousy towards the Lord-Healer. With that, the Lord explained that the performance of good deeds is not prohibited on the Sabbath, if it is permitted to do the essential earthly matters, like care about the farm animals. *“So ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound — think of it — for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath?”*, i.e. it is precisely on the Sabbath that it is possible to do benefactions to those in need. *“Daughter of Abraham”*, i.e. the cured woman was a native Judean, and the head of the synagogue, on whom rested the responsibility of caring for his flock’s well-being, should have been happy for Christ Savior’s benefaction, yet he was indignant.

The words *“Satan has bound”* have differing interpretations: some surmise that the woman’s sickness was the result of the action of an evil spirit, to which the Lord permitted to deform her body, just like he allowed, for example, righteous Job to be afflicted with leprosy: the others assume that the woman’s illness was the result of her iniquitous life. Saint Gregory the Dialogist considers that as the fruitless fig tree, so the deformed woman, are two examples of one and the same state of corruptness of the human race. After hearing the Lord, those opposing to Him became ashamed, because they, of course, could not deny the fairness of His words. The rest of the people — the common people — rejoiced for all the glorious deeds, coming from Him.

The Narrow Path towards the Heavenly Kingdom.

(Luke 13:22-30).

As the Lord traveled from Galilee to Jerusalem, someone posed Him a question: *“Lord, are there few who are saved?”* Apparently, the inquiring individual posed this question while bearing in mind some of Christ the Savior’s strict demands for those who wished to enter the Kingdom of the Messiah. The Lord responds to this question sternly and tersely, not only to him personally, but to everybody there: *“Strive to enter through the narrow gate...”* — the image often used by Him. Kingdom of the Messiah or Christ’s Church, is presented here in the image of a house, which apart from its grand entrance doors, also has another narrow, tight door through which the entry was permitted occasionally. Many would seek the entry through this narrow door, but would not be successful — because they are much corrupted morally and have all types of preconceptions regarding the Messiah’s Kingdom. The meaning of this image is that to the Jews of that time the entrance through repentance and selflessness into the Messiah’s Kingdom did appear tight, for it was through repentance and self-denial, of which, owing to the spread by the Pharisees prejudices, they were incapable. *“When once the Master of the house has risen”* — God is presented as the Master of the house, sitting and waiting for His friends for the supper; then getting up and locking the doors of His house, and not permitting the others to enter.

This is the depiction of the time of the Lord’s judgment over every human being, and over everybody after the Second Coming of Christ. Everybody will be judged outside the place, where the supper of the Lord with His friends is taking place — as those unworthy of the blessed communion with God, even though they acknowledge their sins and will be trying

to enter there. However, it will be too late. After death there is no repentance. Being rejected, they will start saying: *“We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets”*, i.e. those unworthy of entering for the supper will remind the Master that they are known to Him, that outwardly they were followers of Christ’s teaching. However, they were not the genuine Christians, and that is why they will be rejected. *“We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets”* -- these words are particularly fitting the Jews, in the literal sense, especially as they rejected their Messiah and as a consequence, were forfeited their right for the entry into the Messiah’s Kingdom. They will realize their error with His Second Coming, but then it will be too late, and they will receive the answer: *“I tell you I do not know you...Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity”*. The heathens that have believed in Christ *“from the east and the west, from the north and the south”*, i.e. from all the corners of the universe, will enter the Messiah’s Kingdom instead of the rejected Jews. *“And indeed there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last,”* — the Jews regarded themselves as being “the first.” But because they rejected the Messiah, they will end up being “the last”; “the first” to enter the Messiah’s Kingdom will be the heathens, whom they regarded as being “the last.” The same will happen to all those that regarded themselves as “the first,” but in reality did not fulfill Christ’s commandments as they should have done that. They will all appear at the Dread Judgment as “the last,” while those, whom they despised, will be “the first.”

Herod’s Threats.

(Luke 13:31-35 and Mat. 23:37-39).

Under the guise of friendship and concerned involvement, the Pharisees advise the Lord to leave Herod Antipas’ precincts. From the fact that the Lord called Herod a fox in response, it can be assumed that those Pharisees were sent by Herod, with the aim of frightening the Lord and driving Him out of Galilee. Evidently, because the Lord was continually surrounded by the crowds of people, Herod feared to cause a public riot. Not wanting to deal with the Lord himself, he therefore decided to remove Him in such a way. Through this action, Herod revealed traces of cunningness and slyness of a fox. However, the Lord said: *“Despite any threats, I shall continue with My work up to the given time”*. This were the Lord’s final days in Galilee, as He was already journeying toward Jerusalem (Luke 13:22), where death on the cross awaited Him — deeply-sad, hallowed irony, because indeed, as the history shows, most of the enforced deaths of the Prophets took place in Jerusalem.

This evokes the deepest sadness in the Lord about this holy city: as Saint John Chrysostom notes, “Voice, grace, compassion and great love. Here we have a prophecy about God’s dreadful judgment that befell on Jerusalem in the year 70, when the Romans devastated it. *“You shall not see Me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’*” — This is said about Christ’s Second Coming, when the disbelievers will involuntarily worship the Lord.

The Healing of the Man with Dropsy.

(Luke 14:1-6).

One Saturday, while the Lord was in the house of one of the “rulers of Pharisees”, i.e. apparently one of the Jewish leaders belonging to the Pharisee sect, or one of its prominent members, a man suffering with incurable dropsy, which was supposed to be incurable, appeared before Him. Before curing the afflicted person, the Lord asked the Pharisees: *“Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”*, because they “watched Him closely,” i.e. were waiting for the opportunity to accuse Him of something. They decided not to answer negatively, because the law did not forbid this, but only the contrived “tradition of the elders” did. The Lord then healed him with one touch, and made edification for the Pharisees about a donkey or an ox that had fallen into a pit, demonstrating clearly that good deeds could be performed on the Sabbath. It was so convincing that *“they could not answer Him regarding these things”*.

The Parable about Those that Love to be First.

(Luke 14:7-15).

When the supper began, the Pharisees hurried to occupy the best places. Candidly and boldly, the Lord began to chastise their ambitiousness and in addition, narrated a “parable”. Actually, it was not a parable in the strict sense of the word but edification, taken from the parabolic form of a wedding feast, often used by the Lord, applied because it is the largest and jubilant of all feasts. *“When you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast”*...By saying these words, the Lord did not mean just to show the sensible etiquette rule: here, the dialogue is about the inner disposition of the heart. That’s why the Lord concluded His parable with the words: *“For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted”*. Those words were said to the guests, while the Lord gave especial edification to the host.

Having observed that he invited only his friends, relatives and wealthy neighbors, the Lord suggested to him that it was wrong to invite only those who will give him his due for that hospitality. Instead, he should invite the poor, maimed, lame and blind, who are incapable of giving him his due for the invitation; it’s wrong to loathe the poor as the Pharisees did, but one should look upon the feast as at the deed that can have the moral worth, as a good deed. For this, there will be the recompense from God in the next world — *“the resurrection of the righteous.”* The general meaning of this edification is similar to that of the Sermon on the Mount: *“But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?”* (Luke 6:32). Hearing that, someone among the guests exclaimed: *“Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the Kingdom of God.”*

“Apparently, this individual was not spiritually inclined for to understand this properly, i.e. he was led by human comprehension”, — supposes Blessed Theophylactus. — In other words, he expressed the sensate idea that prevailed among the Pharisees, about the Messiah’s kingdom. However, it could be that he, applying the figurative narrative commenced by the Lord, simply wanted to state how blessed are those, who will be the participants in the Messiah’s Kingdom”.

The Parable about the Invitees to the Supper.

(Luke 14:16-24).

The Lord responded to the exclamation of one of the participants of the supper with a parable, in which “great supper” was meant to be the Messiah’s Kingdom, or Christ’s Church. The organizer of that supper, the Lord God, by means of the law and the Prophets, as through His servants, invited all the Jewish people to enter the Kingdom. When that Kingdom drew near, He again invited them, but that time through Very Messiah-Christ. In some prophesies, like in those of Isaiah 52:13, the Messiah was called as the “Lord’s Servant,” who appeared as a human.

Initially, the Messiah appeared only to the “chosen” — to the Jews, with the news that “The Kingdom of God has come near”: because everything was ready. But among those Jews, to whom the initial call was made, like the experts of the Old Testament Law — the Scribes and Pharisees and other leaders of God’s chosen people, began to refuse the invitation — as though being in collusion among themselves. Their earthly, sensate motives served as the pretext for that denial, through which they became deaf for the Divine calling, and thereby rejected the Messiah-Christ that came to them. The Lord then directed the Messiah to call the tax-collectors and sinners, as there were still many seats left after that call, the Lord then summoned the heathens into His Kingdom. Everyone that responded to the Gospel’s sermon, entered the Messiah’s Kingdom — God’s Kingdom, while those who spurned the call, the Scribes and Pharisees, found themselves excluded.

About the True Followers of Christ.

(Luke 14:25-33).

“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother” ... “cannot be My disciple” — “Watch that you are not tempted by this statement”, warns Blessed Theophylactus, “because the Lover of Men doesn’t teach inhumanity, neither He instills suicide, but wants His faithful disciple to ‘hate’ his relatives only when they prevent him from honoring God, and when he, in relation to them, finds difficulties in doing good”. If physical attachments present themselves the definitive obstacles in following Christ, then it is necessary to hate them for Christ’s sake, and to break the connection with them completely. Hatred ceases to be an immoral feeling when it is directed at that, what diverts a person from his higher calling — his soul salvation.

The Lord strengthens His instructions on selflessness, which is essential to every Christian, with the parables about building a tower, about the war between two monarchs and about salt (34-35). The meaning of the parable about the tower is such: having decided with all selflessness to become a follower of Christ, a person must evaluate his strength beforehand and prepare himself properly to the forthcoming exploit, so as not to become the source of laughter for the people later. The second parable has the same meaning — a person wishing to become a follower of Christ, must first gain the spiritual means for this, the first of which is selflessness; otherwise he will be unable to fulfill his good intention, and could even be subjected to the dangers of defeat, cause by the spiritual enemies. *“Asks conditions of peace”* — this of course, is applied to make the parable visually expressive, and doesn’t mean that one has to conclude peace with the spiritual enemies. In the parables, not all the features have the explanation in the spiritual sense: some are utilized to give more life to the narrative, without any inner meaning. The followers of Christ are likened to salt that dissolves with whatever it is mixed. However, Christ’s disciples that don’t have moral selflessness are good for nothing, just like salt that has lost its strength.

The Parable about the Prodigal Son.

(Luke 15:11-32).

This parable, which is narrated only by Evangelist Luke, is prefixed by the two short parables about the lost sheep (15:1-7) and the lost coin (15:8-10). The Pharisees condemned Jesus Christ because He *“receives sinners and eats with them.”* In response, the Lord told them those parables, which depicted the great joy that occurred in the heavens when a sinner, that appeared to be destroyed and lost to the Kingdom of Heaven, repented. The interpreters of the Gospel regard the 99 sheep as either God’s Angels or the righteous — living and those that have already departed and deserved the bliss; that have no need of repentance. Drachma is a small silver coin, worth about 25 kopeks. In these parables, the Lord utilizes the natural attribute of the human heart, which rejoices over the lost, but found item, even though its value is far less than of those, which hadn’t been lost.

Further on, in the parable about the prodigal son, the Lord likens God’s joy about the repentance of a sinner to that of the loving father, to whom returned the prodigal son (11-32).

A man had two sons: the man represents God; the two sons — the sinners and pseudo-righteous individuals — the Scribes and Pharisees. The youngest, apparently having come of age, but of course being inexperienced and thoughtless, requests, in accordance with the Law of Moses, his portion of the father’s property (Deut. 21:17) — one third of all, while the eldest son normally received the remaining two thirds. Having received his inheritance, the young son decided to live freely according to his will. With that, he went to the faraway land where he squandered his possessions, leading the prodigal life. Likewise the person, endowed by God with spiritual and physical gifts, having felt an attraction toward sin, begins to feel burdened by God’s law, rejects to live according to God’s will, submits to iniquity and through physical and spiritual dissoluteness, squanders all those gifts with which he was endowed by God. *“There arose a severe famine”* — so God often sends to the sinner that is en-

trenched in his sinful life, the outward misfortunes so as to force him to come to his senses. These outer tribulations are God's simultaneous punishment and call for repentance, at the same time.

"To feed swine" — this is the most humiliating form of activity, because the Jewish law detested swine as unclean animals. Likewise a sinner when he gets attached to some item, through which he satisfies his sinful passion, often sinks to the lowest demeaning position. *"And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods the swine ate"* — these pods were used to feed swine and were the fruit of a certain tree, that grow in Syria and Asia Minor. This indicates the desperate state of the sinner. Then he *"came to himself"* — this is the extraordinarily expressive phrase. Just like an ill person that is in the state of recovering after a serious illness, accompanied with the loss of memory, suddenly regains it, so can a sinner that is filled with sin, be likened to such a sick person, that lost his senses, because he is not aware of the demands of God's law, it is as though his conscience dies away.

Finally, the grave consequences of sin together with the outward misfortunes, force him to come to his senses: it is as though he awakens, comes out of his previously unconscious condition, and returns to his sober senses: he begins to see and understand his miserable state, and seeks means to escape from it. *"I will arise and go to my father"* — is the sinner's decision to abandon his sinful ways and repent. *"I have sinned against Heaven,"* i.e. before the holy place where God and the pure, sinless spirits dwell, *"and before you"*, through neglecting the loving father, *"am no longer worthy to be called your son"* — this is the expression of deep humility and realization of the own unworthiness, which always accompanies the sincere repentance of the sinner. *"Make me like one of your hired servants"* — is the expression of deep love for his father's house, and agreement with even the most difficult conditions in order to enter his father's house. All the following illustrations carry the purpose of underlining God's limitless love towards the repentant sinner, God's all-pardoning and that joy, which occurs, according to the Lord's words: *"there will be more joy in Heaven over one sinner who repents"* (Luke 14:7).

The elderly father, having seen his returning son from afar, without knowing anything about his inner feelings, runs towards him, embraces and kisses him without giving him a chance to finish his words of repentance. He orders him to be clothed instead of the rags in the finest attire, and then holds a feast to celebrate his return., All these are the anthropomorphic features of how, through His love for a contrite sinner, the Lord receives his repentance and generously endows him with new spiritual blessings and gifts, to substitute those that were lost through his sin. *"Was dead and is alive again"* — the sinner, estranged from God is like being dead, because a person's true life depends only on the source of life — God; that's why the sinner's return to God is akin to the resurrection from the dead. The elder brother, angry with his father for his mercy towards his younger brother, is a living image of the Scribes and Pharisees, proud with their outward precise and exact fulfillment of the law, but cold and heartless in their souls towards their brothers; boasting with their fulfillment of God's will, but unwilling to associate with the repenting tax collectors and sinners. Just as the older brother *"was angry and would not go in"*, so did the Pharisees, the false precise fulfillers of the law, getting angry with the Lord Jesus Christ, because he entered into the close association with the repenting sinners. Instead of showing compassion for his brother and father, the elder brother begins to flaunt his achievements, refuses to call his younger brother as a "brother," contemptuously saying: "this son of yours." The father's response: *"You are always with me, and all that I have is yours"* — this indicates that the Pharisees, in whose hands the law rested, could always have access to God and His spiritual gifts. However, they were unable to earn the Heavenly Father's benevolence while being in such a distorted and bitter, spiritual-moral disposition.

The Parable about the Unjust House-Steward.

(Luke 16:1-17).

This parable completely unnecessarily confuses many people. Bishop Theophan the Recluse explains this excellently: “Every parable has a hidden meaning and explains the essence of some subject figuratively, although it is not analogous in all respects to the subject, which it is trying to explain. That’s why it is unnecessary to explain every part of the parable in minute detail.” Only the basic thought of a parable is important. Concerning this parable, many are confused that the owner of the estate — which undoubtedly is understood to be God — praised his house-steward, who had been stood down from running the estate, for his fraud, having falsified his masters receipts in collusion with his debtors, so that they “*may receive him into their houses*”, i.e. to regain their support after losing his position. But the master didn’t praise his servant for his swindle as such, but for his resourcefulness that he had shown when finding himself in a disastrous situation. The meaning of the parable is that we are only the temporary masters of the earthly gifts, which are under our control purely because God entrusted them to us during our terrestrial life. Consequently, we must utilize these earthly blessings so that with their help to secure ourselves in the forthcoming eternal life. We, however, often fail to do this — we do not display the wisdom, shown by the unjust house-steward. That’s why the Lord stated that “*the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light.*” Besides, like the house-steward, we must “*make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that... they may receive you into an everlasting home.*”

Wealth is called “the unjust mammon” because it is often secured unjustly, is often applied unjustly, often makes a person unjust towards others, and never justifies the concerns about it and the hopes for it. Consequently, the only wise usage of wealth is to use it to help the needy, to use it for all types of the benevolent works, so as to make them the means of gaining the Heavenly Kingdom for ourselves. After all, we are going to lose the wealth one way or another — we shall not be able to take it with us — while the good deeds that we accomplished with its help, will always remain with us and will serve as our justification at God’s Dread Judgment.

In conclusion, the Lord states: “*He who is faithful in what is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in what is another man’s, who will give you what is your own?*”, i.e. if you were untrustworthy with the earthly wealth, were unable to manage it as you should have to, for the benefit of your soul, then how can you be entrusted the spiritual wealth, of blessed gifts?

In response, the covetous Pharisees began to laugh at the Lord, as it seems, unwilling to admit that passion for the earthly wealth can be an obstacle for the acquisition of the spiritual gifts. To expose them, the Lord narrated the whole parable on the misuse of the wealth — about the rich man and Lazarus.

The Parable about the Rich Man and Lazarus.

(Luke 16:19-31).

The fundamental thought of this parable, is that the incorrect application of wealth deprives a person of the Kingdom of Heaven, and leads him down into hell for eternal tortures. Some wealthy man, used to dress in the purple mantle and byssin attire. The purple mantle was an outer Syrian garment of the expensive reddish fabric, while the white byssin was a white, soft fabric made of Egyptian fine linen. The rich man lived lavishly, holding great feasts daily, living, consequently, purely for his own pleasures. At the gates of his residence there laid a beggar, named Lazarus. The word “Lazarus,” in the literal sense, means “God’s help” — i.e. a “beggar”, who was abandoned by everyone and who could only rely on God. His suffering further was increased through the dogs licking his scabs, as apparently he was too weak to drive them away. It was indeed in this beggar that the rich man could have

acquired a friend who, according to the preceding parable's idea, would have accepted him, after his death, into the eternal dwellings. However, as it can be seen, the rich man was a heartless person, pitiless towards the beggar — although not stingy, for he had feasts daily. He didn't spare his money, but spent it on his own pleasures.

After his death, the beggar's soul was taken up into Abraham's bosom. It is not said that he was taken "into Heaven," as it was open only with the Lord Jesus Christ's suffering and resurrection. What is expressed here is that being a true son of Abraham, Lazarus shared his after-death fate with Abraham, finding himself in the state, full of consolatory hopes for the future joy, which awaited all the righteous. Without a doubt, Lazarus earned his consolatory state through his great suffering without complaints. "The rich man also died and was buried." Apparently, the burial is mentioned because it was luxurious, while Lazarus's cadaver was simply thrown out to be devoured by wild animals. But the rich man found himself in hell, tortured.

And so, from afar, he sees Abraham and Lazarus in his bosom. Contemplating the joy of the righteous by the sinners increases their suffering in hell, and, perhaps, gives them hope, though it is vain, for some relief. Just as previously Lazarus wished to satisfy his hunger with crumbs, now the impoverished rich man begs for few drops of water to cool his burning tongue. But he is denied even in such small relief: as Lazarus is comforted in proportion to his former sufferings, so the rich man is suffering in proportion to his light-minded and heartless gaiety. Apart from this, Abraham presents another basis of his refusal: God's **immutable** sentence, through which between the place of joy for the righteous and the place of suffering for the sinners, has been established the abyss, which cannot be crossed, in full accord with the moral abyss that separates the ones from the others. Abraham also refuses the rich man's request to send Lazarus to his father's house, to warn his brothers not to follow in the footsteps of his lifestyle. "*They have Moses and the Prophets,*" i.e. the written Old Testament, from which they can learn how to live, so as not to end up in that place of sufferings.

The rich man confesses that like himself, his brothers are deaf to the teaching of God's Law, and that only the extraordinary appearance of the dead can bring them to their senses and thereby, force them to change their lifestyle for the better. Hearing that, Abraham replied that if they have reached such moral downfall that they would not listen to the voice of God, expressed in the Holy Gospel, then all the other persuasions will also be futile. The unbeliever astounded by the extraordinary appearance of the dead, will begin to explain that appearance in the different light, and will again remain the same unbeliever and unchanged. The fact that it happens alike, can be seen from the example, when the stubbornly disbelieving Jews were unconvinced by the countless signs and miracles that the Lord Jesus Christ performed: they did not even believe, seeing the resurrection of Lazarus, and had thoughts of killing Him. The whole thing is that the heart, corrupted by sin, stubbornly refuses to believe in the future sufferings that await the sinner, and one cannot convince it with any miracles.

The Teaching on the Sanctity of Marriage and on Celibacy.

(Mat. 19:3-12; Luke 16:18)

Each time the Pharisees approached Jesus Christ with some kind of question, they did that not to learn but to "tempt" Him, hoping that He might be blamed for saying something contrary to the law. There they too asked Him: "*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?*" This caused arguments among the Pharisees and the public. Some — the followers of the teaching of Rabbi Gillel — were saying that one could divorce for any reason, while the others — the followers of Rabbi Shamai, insisted that one could divorce only on the grounds of adultery. The Pharisees were waiting to see what would say Lord, so that they could raise the losing side against Him.

According to the Law of Moses (Deut. 24:1), it is permissible to give a wife a divorce bill, “if she find no favor in his eyes, because he hath found some unseemly thing in her.” Showing no signs of disagreement with the thoughts expressed by the rabbis, the Lord quotes the Gospel, and points at God’s image of husband and wife, and through this, reveals the true purpose of marriage as the God-established institution, thereby resolving the enticing question. God created one man and one woman: consequently, the Creator’s intention was for the man to have one wife and not leave her. This marital bond is closer and tighter than the blood-ties of a son with his father and mother, whom he leaves for the sake of his wife: two people become one, in thoughts, feelings, aims, actions — they have to be one creature. And if through God’s initial determination, they are united in such a way, *they should not be separated*. There can only be one exception permitting the divorce: “*sexual immorality*”. This is because adultery in itself destroys the matrimonial concept, and the marriage as such ceases to exist.

Moses permitted to divorce because of “*hardness of the hearts*”, which resulted that husbands tormented and maltreated their unloved wives, i.e. he allowed the minor evil, in order to avoid the major one. Christ re-establishes the initial law of marriage, confirming its *inviolability*. Confused by such a demand, the disciples said: “*If such is the case of the man with his wife, it is better not to marry,*” i.e. it’s better not to enter into marriage at all, than having married, to endure a malicious and shrewd wife without an option of sending her away. The Lord corrects His disciple’s flippant conclusion with His answer. He confirms that on the one hand “it is better not to marry,” while on the other, He points out that the state of being unmarried, together with preserving the chastity, is not only easier than being in a married state, but is so difficult and heavy that not everybody can undertake such a feat: “*all cannot accept this*”, i.e. may pick up and carry it, “*but only those to whom it has been given.*”

With these words, the Lord elevates *chastity* to such a high moral level, where the highest and most complete state of spiritual life can be found, for all the best, that any human can possess, He always as a precious gift of the Heavenly Father (for example, see: understanding the mysteries of God’s Kingdom, Mat. 13:11: the faith of Peter 16:17 and many others). At the same time, “*but only those to whom it has been given*” doesn’t mean that this gift of God doesn’t depend on our personal will. Saint John Chrysostom states that it is given to those who seek it. Those entering the exploit of chastity, have the great need in God’s help and receive it, if they seeks conscientiously.

Further on, the Lord compares chastity with the voluntary eunuchs, which of course shouldn’t be understood literally — only in the absolute physical sense — as can be seen from the context. These eunuchs are not physical, but spiritual. The Lord opposes them specifically to the physical eunuchs when He states: “*There are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother’s womb, and there are eunuchs who were made eunuchs by men.*” It cannot be said of them that they had undertaken the exploit of chastity, because by the very physical nature, they are incapable of having married life. To distort oneself, to become an eunuch for the sake of the Heavenly Kingdom, means to cut off the carnal desire, to kill the internal physical lust and decide to lead unmarried life for the sake of the more favorable service to God, and reaching the Kingdom of Heaven, what can be greatly disturbed by the family responsibilities. “*He who is able to accept it, let him accept it*” — no one is forced to take this exploit, but those who feel strong enough to lift it, with God’s help, should do so. As Saint Chrysostom states: “With these words, the Lord showed the complete possibility of achieving this virtue and through that to stimulate the desire in people to achieve it”.

About the Power of Faith.

(Luke 17:5-10).

The Apostles approached the Lord with the request to increase their belief, because they felt that their faith was insufficient to perform that, what they were called to do (compare

with Mat. 17:19-20). The Apostles undoubtedly believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. However, as they had not totally detached themselves from the Pharisees' concepts of the Messiah and His Kingdom, their faith sometimes wavered, and that tormented them. The Lord responded to their request by repeating His previous words on the strength and might of true faith, even though it could be very small — like the “mustard seed.” A huge tree grows from the tiny mustard seed — such great force is contained in this small, insignificantly looking seed: precisely in the same way, if the Apostles had the weakest yet genuine faith, it would grow and strengthen so that it would be able to produce extraordinary, miraculous works. This particular extract doesn't not have any unfavorable undertones for the Apostles, as in Mat 17:20, where the Lord's words sound as a reproach. Here they sound reassuringly for the Apostles and appear to be exhorting, while at the same time evoke faith in them. The following words: “*And which of you, having a servant plowing....*” have such meaning: when your faith grows to such an extent that it will be able to perform great miracles, beware of pride and vain-glory, not to lose the fruits of such faith. This is the gift of God, which has to be used with great humility, and through which this gift kindles. Thus the Lord doesn't answer directly to the Apostles' request to increase their faith, but indirectly indicates the means of strengthening it through humility and warns them against the dangers. This warning was especially needed by the Apostles, because at that time they still were guided by the incomplete concepts: argued about pre-eminence in the Messiah's Kingdom, expected the outward rewards, etc.

As an example, the Lord tells, what occurs between the master and servant: if the servant ploughs the field and grazes the flock, does the master regard this meritorious? No, because the master directs that he should be served first. After he had carried out all his instructions, will he then thank the servant? “*I think not*” — answers the Lord, and then concludes His sermon with the words: “*So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'*”

The meaning of this is not that the Lord will not praise His servants and not give them rest, but that we *ourselves* must look upon our evil deeds as at a debt, and at ourselves — as at the ineffectual servants that cannot bring to the Lord anything more than the debt payment. In other words — *a person cannot have any achievements before God.*

The Cleansing of ten Lepers.

(Luke 17:20-37).

This miracle was performed by the Lord during His last travels from Galilee to Jerusalem, on the last day of the Sabbath holiday, when He was crucified. The group of ten lepers, “*who stood afar off*” because the law banned them from coming close to the healthy people, began to plead in a loud voice for the Lord to have mercy on them. The Lord directed them to go and show themselves to the priests. This meant that through His miraculous power, He cured them of their leprosy, because He was sending them to the priests so that they — according to the law — might testify of their cure from leprosy. This was followed by the sacrificial offering and the permission to live freely in the community. Their submissiveness to the Lord's words — to appear before the priests for to be examined — shows their living faith. And indeed, along the way, they noticed that their leprosy left them. However, as it is often the case, having received their cure they forgot the Source of their joy, and only one of them — the Samaritan — returned to thank the Lord for his cure. This event shows that although the Jews despised the Samaritans, the latter sometimes stood higher than them. Saddened, the Lord inquired with a short rebuke: “*Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine? Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?*” These nine are the living example of human ingratitude to Benevolent God.

Christ's Second Coming.

(Luke 17:20-37).

To the Pharisees' question about when God's Kingdom will arrive, the Lord replies: *"The Kingdom of God does not come with observation, nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the Kingdom of God is within you."* There is no certain place on earth for God's Kingdom, because it is not of material substance: the essence of God's Kingdom is in the inner restoration and sanctification of people. In the term "God's Kingdom" the Pharisees saw the earthly reign of the Messiah, which they expected would rid them of the hated by them Roman yoke. The Lord suggests them that this is the spiritual kingdom, the inner and not the outward, earthly, sensate one, and that it has already arrived. *"Within you"* has a dual meaning: 1) God's Kingdom has already arrived — it is among you, among the Jewish people, even though because of your spiritual blindness you cannot see it; 2) God's Kingdom is invisible to the physical eyes, because it settles in the man's soul. Having said about the coming of God's Kingdom, which will only be like the spiritual leaven, transforming the world inwardly, the Lord turns to the thoughts of misfortunes that await the Jews, who haven't noted the advent of His Kingdom (the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70), and of the clear revelation of His Kingdom, which will arrive with His Second Coming in all the glory. It will be like lightning that flashes in the sky from one end to the other. Just as unexpectedly as the day of the Great Flood in Noah's times and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Lots era, so will be Christ's coming to judge Jerusalem before its destruction — and His Second Coming before the end of the world, to judge the human kind. Then one would have to go towards the Lord, without looking back on the condemned world akin to Lot's wife — because it is then that the final separation between the righteous and sinners will take place, even though that night they shared the same lodge, or were together, busy with the same activity. Stunned by those words, the disciples asked when all this will happen. The Lord answered them with a saying: *"Wherever the body is, there the eagles will be gathered together"* (Habakkuk 1:8), i.e. just like predatory birds gather where there is corpse, God's judgment will appear where the inner life has died away and moral decay started.

The Parable about the Unrighteous Judge.

(Luke 18:1-8).

Hard times will be before the Second Coming of Christ, but there is no need to be desponded because of that but *"always pray"*. The Lord directs how to pray through the figurative presentation of a callous judge in the parable, who refused to respond to the plea of the aggrieved widow to protect her. But eventually, because she was giving him no peace bothering him, he fulfilled her request. The Lord doesn't want to compare God with this unrighteous judge (an extra proof that not all the details in a parable should be interpreted in the spiritual sense), but only as the result from the bad to the complete, makes a conclusion that more so, the Ever-good and righteous God will protect His chosen if they will appeal to Him day and night, even though He may be initially slow in protecting them. *"Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"* — notwithstanding the certain truth of God's speedy protection of His chosen, would He find such faithful that will have such commitment and such persistence in prayer that is required? In other words: there is no need to fear that God will not protect His faithful from imminent misfortunes and troubles, but sooner one should fear that with the Second Coming of Christ, there will be no such faithful.

The Parable about the Publican and the Pharisee.

(Luke 18:9-14).

Through telling the parable, about how two people — a Pharisee and a publican — prayed in the temple, the Lord shows what kind of prayer is required of the faithful Lord's followers so that it can attract His help and protection. The Pharisee prayed with a feeling of

conceit and self-exaltation, showing off his good deeds before God as his merits and humiliating the others. The publican prayed, realizing his sinfulness and unworthiness. As a result, he went home *“justified, rather than the other”*, i.e. the Pharisee. Thus, the Lord expresses the idea of this parable in its last words: *“everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”* Consequently, one must pray with humility, with the sincere repentance about one’s sins. The publican’s prayer: *“God, be merciful to me a sinner!”* has become a specimen for the universal usage.

The Blessing of the Children.

(Mat. 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16 and Luke 18:15-17).

Of the three Evangelists that inform of this event, Saint Mark’s narration is the most detailed, which states that the Lord was *“greatly displeased”* with His disciples for not allowing the children to approach Him. This showed that the Lord’s love for children was that great that even possessing enormous humility and patience to tolerate people’s injustice; He became displeased with His disciples. The Lord explains His love for children by pointing to their merits, and for all who wish to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, these merits He places as the example for imitation, saying *“whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God as a little child, will by no means enter it”*, i.e. the Kingdom of God must be accepted into the heart with the same unspoiled, innocent and pure disposition of the spirit, which is present in the young, not yet morally spoilt children. *“Let the children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for such is the Kingdom of God”* — the conclusion here is that those parents and educators that do not bring children to Christ, don’t teach them the Christian faith, are committing the enormous sin. And an even greater sin is the burden of those, who intentionally make children turn away from the path of faith.

The Rich Young Man.

(Mat. 19:16-26; Mark 10:17-27 and Luke 18:18-27).

The first three Evangelists narrate about the young man (“the ruler”, as St. Luke calls him), who inquired the Lord Jesus Christ what to do *to inherit eternal life*. This talk, as the following one, took place on the way to Jerusalem, where the Lord was going for His forthcoming sufferings. Turning to the Lord, the youngster called Him: *“Good Teacher”*. The Lord responded: *“Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God”*, i.e. if you are referring to Me only as a to the “Teacher”, that is as to an ordinary person, consequently, you shouldn’t call Me good, because this term is befitting only God. The Lord offered the following answer to his question: *“Keep the commandments”*.

Apparently, the young man assumed that the Lord was speaking of some special commandments unknown to him, and therefore asked: *“Which ones?”* But the Lord told of some of the ordinary commandments from the Decalogue, mentioning only some of them — 6,7,8,9 and 5 — and then the general commandment on the love for one’s neighbor. To this, the young man answered: *“all these things I have kept from my youth”*. It has to be assumed that he had the Pharisee’s understanding of these commandments — otherwise he would not have responded in such a way. Still, it is important to note that he regarded himself as not having completed everything that was required, in order to be saved: evidently, his conscience was prompting him that it was not enough to fulfill the commandments just outwardly. The Lord then revealed to him the mystery of Christian completeness: *“If you want to be perfect, go sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in Heaven; and come, follow Me”*. In response to that call towards the highest completeness, the young man walked away from the Lord, *“sorrowful”*, because he had great possessions. Consequently, the riches that he had were such an idol to him that he was unable to part with them. He preferred that idol to eternal life, which he apparently, genuinely sought.

Bearing in mind that wealth by itself does not enslave the man but passions do, the Lord said: *“Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of*

Heaven.” Evangelist Mark adds that *the disciples were astonished at his words*. And this is understandable, because wealth is something that everybody desires, and according to the law, is God’s blessing to the man. At the same time, the Lord places it as a strong barrier along the path towards God’s Kingdom. In order to calm His disciples and explain to them in what sense that was stated, the Lord says: “*Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the Kingdom of God.*” As Saint Chrysostom explains: “The Lord doesn’t censure riches, but those that are attached to them”, because for the sinful nature of the man, riches present many temptations and obstacles in fulfilling God’s commandments. “*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God!*” — this is the popular saying, which is as well used these days in the East, meaning that the matter is either impossible or extremely difficult to achieve.

Some understood the word “camel” to mean a ship’s hawser that was made out of camel fur. Others thought that “the eye of a needle” meant the low and narrow gates through which a loaded camel found very difficult to pass through. Wealth itself is not dangerous, only when a person relies on it and thinks it to be all his earthly happiness, then it becomes as if an idol to him. However, the agitated Apostles still were amazed: “*Who then can be saved?*” To that, the Lord “*looked at them*”, i.e. calming them with His very look and said: “*With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible*”, i.e. the merciful and saving Divine grace is powerful enough to do that, what a person is incapable of doing with his own strength: God can cure a rich man of his ulcer of avarice that prevents him of his salvation.

The Apostles will Inherit Eternal Life.

(Mat. 19:27-30; Mark 10:28-31 and Luke 18:28-30).

In relation to the Lord’s answer to the rich young man, Saint Apostle Peter — on behalf of all the Apostles — poses a question to the Lord about what reward they will receive for leaving everything behind and following Him. They were poor people that had very little — fishing-nets, hooks, boats and poor dwellings — but that was all they had, what they really left for the sake of following Christ and through that showed real self-denial. Perhaps the Apostles doubted that with their poor background, they would be able to achieve perfection. The Lord calmed them saying that not only they, but anyone that would leave everything that is close to his heart for His sake and the Gospel’s, will receive a great reward, not only in the future life, but in this earthly life. The one, leaving his house and his close ones, will receive 100 times more homes and relatives in the form of faithful Christians and their homes.

Indeed, in the first ages of Christianity, all the Christians formed as if one family, everybody was a brother and sister in Christ, and every home was opened to every Christian, was like his own home to replace the one he had left for Christ’s sake. Having renounced his home and family for Christ and the Gospel, one entered every Christian’s house as though it was his own, and found in it a new family for himself: new father, mother, brothers, sisters and children. However, the major reward was of course “*in the age to come, eternal life*”. The term “*age to come*” is understood to mean the renovated world, which will be open with the resurrection of the dead, universal judgment and transfiguration of heaven and earth. The Apostles will then take part in glorifying Human-God Jesus Christ, participating in His judgment of the Israelite nation and all the people of the world through their testimony and intercession.

Being God’s chosen people, the Jews regarded themselves as “first” among the others: and they considered that they would be the first in the next life. However, the Lord said that “*many*” of them, for their disbelief in Him as in the Messiah, will find themselves “*the last*”, while the penitent publicans and sinners, as well as heathens, will become “*the first*”.

The Parable about the Workers that Received Equal Payment.

(Mat. 20:1-16).

The aim of this parable is to elucidate how the *“last will be first.”* This mercy will be shown through the Divine grace. God’s Kingdom is presented here as a landowner, hiring workers for his vineyard. Having agreed to pay a *“denarius a day”* to those hired in the morning, he too gave a denarius, when the time for paying came, to the rest of the workers hired later in the day: some in the 3rd hour, some in the 6th, 9th and even 11th hour. The ones that started early in the day began complaining that it was unfair, to what the landlord replied: *“Friend, I am doing no you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?”*

The “denarius” was equal in value to one Greek drachma or 25 kopeks (in those days), and was the normal daily wage in the East. The Jews regarded a day as 12 hours — commencing with sunrise. The meaning of this parable is that the Lord Himself disposes the rewards to those who serve Him: people cannot enter into agreements with Him or determine conditions. The Lord rewards people purely through His goodness. It must be also understood that on the matter of the man’s salvation, the man himself does very little about it that there can be no talk of the due retribution. The Lord rewards not because of some type of dues, but *“through His benevolence”*: therefore, He does it with full freedom and according to His Personal determination. That’s why the one who labored less can receive as much as one who labored much. This is where hope lies for the sinners, who with a solitary repentant sigh, emanating from the bottom of the soul, can attract God’s mercy and grace, cleansing them of their sins. What was the aim of this parable? Peter just asked: *“We have left everything behind to follow You: what reward will we receive for this?”*

The Lord didn’t expose this arrogance of a juvenile mind immediately, but, it seems, on the contrary, promised the Apostles great rewards. At the same time, through the parable, He showed that the recompense is not dependent on the human merit but exclusively on God’s mercy. It could happen that the first in merit will receive the last rewards, while the ones summoned by the Lord in the last moment of their lives, could receive the first rewards. In conclusion of this parable, the Lord said: *“For many are called, few are chosen,”* i.e. although many, in fact everyone, are called towards the eternal joy in the Heavenly Kingdom, only a few are chosen for this bliss. Naturally, as within the other parables, it is unnecessary to seek out the meanings of its every individual feature: the only important thing is its basic idea, its basic thought that a person is not rewarded according to the number of his merits, but solely because of God’s mercy.

About the Forthcoming Sufferings of Christ.

(Mat. 20:17-28; Mark 10:32-45; Luke 18:31-34).

All the three forecasters narrate concordantly that on the way to Jerusalem, the Lord once again began to tell His disciples about His forthcoming sufferings, death and Resurrection. The most detailed and lively account is from Saint Mark, who had undoubtedly heard about that from the mouth of Apostle Peter. He states that the Lord was marching *in front*, apparently towards the impending voluntary sufferings, thirsting to fulfill God’s will (compare to Luke 12:50). His disciples, thinking in earthly terms and only of the Messiah’s earthly glory, *“were amazed. And as they followed they were afraid.”*

Having called His 12 disciples aside as apparently there were many people following them, He privately told them that everything written about Him by the Prophets, would happen in Jerusalem; that He would be subjected to abuse, condemned to death and given over to the heathens, i.e. Romans, who after spitting, beating and abusing Him, would crucify Him, while on the third day, He would Resurrect. Saint Luke adds that the disciples did not understand any of this, because *“this saying was hidden from them”*.

It was then that the mother of the Zebedee brothers, James and John, approached the Lord (and according to Saint Mark, together with both of them), with a request — for one to

sit on His “right hand”, i.e. occupy the second place after the Lord in the unfolding (as they imagined) earthly kingdom of the Messiah, and for the other – to sit on the “left hand,” occupying the third place. The Lord responded to that request: “*You do not know what you ask.*” The Apostles at that time truly did not understand that asking to be the first, meant to be in the forefront of self-denial and martyrdom in the Name of Christ; they thought they were asking for only honors, authority and happiness. That’s why the Lord’s question: “*Are you able to drink the cup I drink?*” specifically shows that the nearness to Him in His Kingdom will be determined by the comparison to His sufferings. Sufferings here are presented as a cup, which is to be shared with Christ by those who wish to be close to Him. This image is taken from the custom of the Eastern kings, who used to send a chalice with poison to those condemned to death. The Son of God is presented as the One condemned, to Whom the chalice of death is sent by His Heavenly Father (John 18:11).

“*Be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?*” — conveys the following meaning: enduring sufferings is presented as though a person is immersed and washed in them as though in water. “*We can,*” answered the Apostles, “in the heat of enthusiasm, not realizing what they had said” (Chrysostom) — saying the same thing as all the disciples, promising to follow the Lord, even unto death. “*You will indeed drink My cup*”... “even though the promise had not been thought through,” was as if the Lord’s answer, “but indeed in the future (seeing this with His Divine eyes), you will be akin to Me in patience and exploit”, “*but to sit on My right hand and on My left,*” i.e. in the kingdom of glory, by-passing the Kingdom of God, that has to be fought for in this world, “*is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared*” — this means: “it’s not in My power to grant this to every person that desires this, only to those for whom it has been prepared, those that have earned this through their exploits”. The other Apostles — apparently through jealousy — became displeased, wishing that the brothers would not receive what they were seeking. The Lord makes the suggestion to everyone, persuading them not to seek primacy.

In response to their display of ambition, the Lord teaches them that the fundamental rule of morality for the member’s of His Kingdom that differs from the earthly kingdoms, is humility and self-denial. As an example of such humility and selflessness, the Lord points to the Apostles at Himself: He “*did not come to be served*”; “*but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.*” Instead of “all,” the word “many” is used. All people were spiritually enslaved by the devil and worked for sin. In order to liberate them, a ransom was needed (in Greek “litron”). It was the Lord, who gave that payment, ransom (“apalitrossi”), with the price of His cruciferous sufferings and death.

The Healing of the Jericho Blind.

(Mat. 20:29-34; Mark 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-43).

In those days, Jericho was a large Jewish city, situated some 12 miles northeast of Jerusalem and 4 miles to the west from Jordan, and according to historical records, was an important city. Nearby was where the Jews crossed the river Jordan in their exodus from Egypt (Joshua 3:16). This was the first city, that was miraculously taken by the Jews (Joshua 6:20). Later, it had the schools for prophets (Kings 2:5), and it was there where the Prophet Elisha performed the miracle of sweetening the bitter waters (2 Kings 2:21). Its suburbs were outstanding in its luxurious flora and excellent climate. However, further on the way to Jerusalem, there laid the grim and rocky wilderness, populated by wild beasts and robbers. When the Lord was leaving Jericho, taking the road usually used by the Jews to go from Galilee through the beyond Jordan region Perea, “*a great multitude followed Him*”, who like Him were going to Jerusalem for the feast of Pascha. Sitting by the road and begging for alms, the blind beggars began to cry out: “*Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David!*” Those cries proved their living faith in Jesus Christ as in the Messiah. The people were forcing them to keep silent so as not to disturb Jesus, Who apparently at the time was giving an admonishment to them. The Lord enquired them about what they wanted from Him. Having received

the answer “*Lord, that our eyes may be opened,*” the Lord touched their eyes and cured them of their blindness, after what they followed Him.

While all the three forecasters narrate about this event, only Saint Matthew speaks of two blind men; Saints Mark and Luke speak only of one. As well, Saint Mark narrates about this miracle with great detail, even pointing out the name of one of them — Bartimaeus, which means “the son of Timaeus”. It has to be assumed that one of the blind was well known to everybody, while the other was an unknown and was unseen by many. That’s why the other two forecasters didn’t mention him. There is another difference in the narrations: according to the first two forecasters, the Lord healed them when He was leaving Jericho, while according to Saint Luke, when He was approaching Jericho. Bishop Michael explains that Saint Luke’s use of the Greek word “*angisin*” in fact doesn’t mean entering, but means “to be near something”; consequently, it would have been more correct to state that the miracle was performed by the Lord when He was near Jericho — and while entering or leaving — it is immaterial.

The Visit of Zacchaeus.

(Luke 19:1-10).

The Lord’s visit to the chief publican, Zacchaeus, is narrated only by Evangelist Luke. After healing the blind, the Lord entered Jericho where he was much sought by the very wealthy publican leader, Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus a purely Jewish name meaning “pure” and “just.” Jericho was famous with its production and trade of balsam, and the post of a publican was especially important — as well as beneficial and lucrative. Zacchaeus was not an ordinary publican, but the chief of all the publicans in the area, having authority, apparently, over the publicans of the whole region. The emphasis here is laid on that he was a wealthy man: after all, very few rich individuals followed the poor Galilean Teacher. Being short in stature, Zacchaeus climbed upon a sycamore tree to get a better view of the Lord, Who was surrounded by the crowd of people. Evidently, knowing Zacchaeus’s good moral disposition, how he wanted to see the Lord, and that it wasn’t just senseless curiosity, the Lord honored his house with His visit.

The great joy over the fact that the Lord did not despise him as a sinner, completely awakened Zacchaeus’ conscience and produced the complete moral turnaround in his soul. Accepting that his conscience is sullied by the methods of obtaining his wealth, he loudly gave the solemn promise to erase his sin of covetousness: “*I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore four-fold.*” (in accordance with the law concerning thieves, outlined in the Book Exodus 22:1). The Savior responds to this with: “*Today salvation has come to this house,*” i.e. to the house of Zacchaeus. The Lord’s further words were addressed to those who were displeased, because “*He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner.*” However, Zacchaeus too was a “*son of Abraham*” — not only by flesh, but especially in spirit. Zacchaeus’ repentance is the model of true confession, which is not limited only with the barren regrets of the committed sins, but has the aspiration to erase those sins **with the opposite good deeds**. That’s why the Gospel about Zacchaeus is always read before the first preparatory week, before Great Lent — the week about the Publican and the Pharisee.

The Parable about the Talents.

(Luke 19:11-28 and Mat. 25:14-30).

While in the house of Zacchaeus, the Lord told a parable about the 10 Minas, which contained many similarities to the parable about the talents, narrated by Evangelist Matthew. With all their great similarity, there is the substantial difference between the two; with that, as it can be seen from the Gospel of Matthew, the parable about the talents was told by the Lord significantly later, in relation to His talks about His Second Coming, the end of the world and

the Dread Judgment. Nevertheless, the basic idea of both the parables is one and the same, allowing them to be examined on the parallel basis. In the parable about the Minas, the narration is about the person of high position, who travels to a faraway land to receive his kingdom and then return. Evidently, this example is taken from the situation with the monarchical rule in Judea. The Jewish kings had to travel to Rome to receive their authorization to rule. Archelaus, the son of Herod the Great had to do that, and Herod Antipas, the Tetrarch of Galilee, did the same. In the parable about the talents, the narration is simply about the individual who goes off to a foreign land. In both the parables, the individual is understood to be Christ, from Whom many Jews at the time were waiting the commencement of the glorious kingdom of the Messiah.

In the parable about the Minas, the master gives his ten servants one mina each, ordering them to put this silver into use. Mina was worth 100 Drachmas, or approximately 25 rubles. In the parable about the talents, the master upon leaving, handed over all his possessions to his servants, handling each one such a part, with which he was able to cope. Each talent is equal to 60 Minas. Of course in both the parables, the servants meant the disciples and followers of Christ, who received various gifts from Him, as well as different outward blessings, which they had to utilize and multiply for God's glory, for the benefit of their neighbors and for the salvation of their souls. Further on in the parable about the Minas, we find the circumstance which doesn't exist in the parable about the talents. The citizens started to hate that noble master and sent the messengers after him, saying: "*We don't want him to rule over us.*" This is the trait that reminds us of the recent episode of Archelaus's travel to Rome. The Jews that disliked him, sent a delegation of 50 people to Rome, to ask that he should not be put as their ruler — although in vain.

Concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, the Jews rejected Him as their Messiah. However, this was ineffectual as He remained their, as well as the whole world's King and Judge, Who will demand the account from His servants and punish those who refused to accept His authority. The return of the master in both the parables is to be understood as the Second Coming of Christ, when every person will be obliged to give an account at the Dread Judgment, about how he utilized his God-given talents and the outward welfare. Those who multiplied their Minas and talents, will be worthy of praise and will receive the reward equal to their efforts. Those, who hid their Minas or talents, will be punished as a "*wicked and lazy servant*" for being unwilling to work with God-given gifts of goodness, in which God's grace remained unproductive. The servant's accusation of the master being a cruel person is the sinner's usual self-justification. Having lost the feeling of filial affection for God, he presents God as cruel and unjust. The one, who uses his gifts in a good way, increases them; the negligent and indifferent person will be deprived of even that what he possesses. That's why, "*to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.*" The parable about the Minas is concludes with a threat of the grave punishment to the Jewish people for not accepting the Lord Jesus Christ as the Messiah. Ending His sermon, the Lord traveled further in the direction of Jerusalem.

The Resurrection of Lazarus.

(John 11:1-46).

Only Evangelist John tells of this event. It was during the time of the Lord's stay at Perea that the news of His beloved friend Lazarus's sickness reached Him. Lazarus lived in Bethany with his sisters Martha and Mary. This family was especially close to the Lord and it must be assumed, that whenever He was in Jerusalem, He visited them in order to rest and get away from the noisy crowds that accompanied Him, as well as from the sly cross-examiners, the Scribes and Pharisees. The sisters sent a message to the Lord: "*he, whom You love is sick,*" in hope that the Lord Himself would hurry to them to cure Lazarus. However, the Lord not only didn't hurry, but remained where He was for further "*two more days,*" saying: "*This*

sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” The Lord knew that Lazarus would die, and if He said that his sickness is not unto death, it is because He intended to resurrect him. It was only after two days since Lazarus’s death, when the Lord said to His disciples: *“Let us go to Judea again.”* The Lord doesn’t specify Bethany, but Judea as their trip’s destination, so as to bring out into the open, known to Him and nesting in the hearts of the Apostles thought of the danger awaiting Him in Judea.

Those words were used by the Lord to implant the idea of the necessity, and thereby the inevitability of their Teacher’s sufferings and death. The disciples indeed expressed their fear for Him, reminding Him that it was only recently that the Jews wanted to stone Him in Jerusalem. The Lord responded to the disciples’ worry with the allegorical sermon, based on the situation, in which He was in at that time. Probably, that took place in the early hours of the day, at sunrise: consequently, they had 12 hours of daylight for their trip.

During all that period, it was possible to travel without any difficulties: it would be dangerous if it was necessary to travel after the sunset — at night. However, there was no need for that as it was possible to reach Bethany before the sunset. This means in the spiritual sense that our time on earth is determined by the higher will of God. That’s why, while this time continues, we can go forward on our established path without fear, performing works to which we were called: we are safe because God’s will is protecting us from all dangers, just like the light of the sun protects those who travel in the daytime. There would be dangers if the night overtook us during our works, i.e. if opposite to God’s will, we would decide to continue our activity: then we would stumble. In relation to Jesus Christ, it means that the life and works of the Lord Jesus Christ would not cease earlier than it is established from above, and therefore, the disciples should not fear the dangers that are threatening Him. Following the path in the light of God’s will, Human God cannot be subject to unforeseen dangers. Having explained this, the Lord expresses the aim of their travel to Judea: *“Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up”*.

The Lord called Lazarus’ death sleep, just as He had done in other similar cases (see Mat. 9:24, Mark 5:29). To Lazarus, death was indeed like sleep because of its short duration. The disciples, taking into account His previous words that the sickness was not unto death, didn’t understand that the Lord was speaking about the death of Lazarus: they supposed that the Lord will come and cure him miraculously. *“If he sleeps he will get well”* — was apparently said to dissuade the Lord from traveling to Judea: *“There is no need to go as the illness had taken a turn for the better.”*

Setting aside all the objections of the disciples and wishing to underline the unconditional necessity to go to Judea, the Lord said directly: *“Lazarus is dead.”* To that, the Lord added that He was glad for the Apostles that He wasn’t in Bethany when Lazarus was ill, as the simple healing of Lazarus would not strengthen their faith in Him, as would the impending great miracle of his resurrection from the dead. Decisively ending the conversation, brought about by the disciples’ worries, the Lord declares: *“Let us go to him.”* Although their indecisiveness was conquered, their anxiety did not disappear, and one of them — Thomas, called Didimus — the Twin — expressed that anxiety in a very touching way: *“Let us also go, that we may die with Him,”* i.e. if one cannot divert Him from this journey, surely we will not leave Him. Then let us too go for death with Him.

When they got close to Bethany, it turned out that Lazarus was in his coffin for 4 days. Bethany was situated close to Jerusalem, some 2 miles or 30-minute walk away. This is mentioned in order to explain how so many people were present at the house of Martha and Mary, in the sparsely populated village. Having heard of the Lord’s arrival, Martha, being noted for her lively character, hurried to meet Him without even telling her sister Mary, who was *“sitting in the house”* in great sorrow, receiving condolences from those, who came to console her. With great sadness, not rebuking the Lord, but only expressing regret that this happened, she exclaims: *“Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died.”*

Faith in the Lord establishes in her an assurance, that even at that time all is not lost. Although she doesn't state directly that there still could be a miracle, she declares: *"I know that whatever You ask of God, God will give you."* The Lord responds to this directly: *"Your brother will rise again."* As though checking herself to see if she is not wrong and wishing to induce the Lord to let her understand clearly about which resurrection He is talking — the one He intends to perform now, or about the general resurrection after the end of the world — Martha says: *"I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."* Martha expressed her faith in that God will fulfill every request of Jesus: consequently, she didn't have faith in Jesus Himself, as in the Almighty Son of God. That's why the Lord elevates her towards such faith by concentrating her faith on His own personality, saying: *"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die."* The meaning of these words is: I have the source of revivification and eternal life: consequently, if I want to, I can resurrect your brother before the general resurrection. *"Do you believe this?"* asks the Lord Martha, and receives the affirmative answer that she believes Him to be the Messiah-Christ that has come into the world.

At the Lord's order, Martha went to fetch Mary and bring her to Him. Because Mary was called secretly, the consoling her Jews didn't know where she was heading, and thinking that she was going to the tomb *"to weep there,"* followed her. Weeping, Mary fell to her knees before Jesus, exclaiming the same words that Martha uttered previously. Probably because of their grief, the sisters often said among themselves that if the Lord-Teacher was with them, their brother would not have died. Now, without any prior agreement, they both express their hope for the Lord with the same words. In the face of that sight of sorrow and death, the Lord *"groaned in the spirit and was troubled."* Bishop Michael supposes that the Lord's grief and distress is explained by the presence of the Jews, weeping insincerely while burning with hatred against Him, the One, Who was preparing to perform that great miracle. The Lord wanted to perform that miracle in order to give His enemies the opportunity to change their mind and repent, believe in Him, before His forthcoming sufferings: but instead, they became even more inflamed with hatred toward Him, and pronounced the decisive formal death sentence to Him. Having overcome that groaning of the spirit, the Lord asks: *"Where have you laid him?"* The question was directed to the sisters of the deceased. "Human God knew where Lazarus was buried, but in dealing with people, acted humanly" (Blessed Augustine). The sisters replied: *"Lord, come and see."* *"Jesus wept"* — this, of course, is attributed to His human nature. The Evangelist further on describes the impression those tears made on the present. Some were moved, while the others gloated, saying: *"Could not this Man, who opened the eyes of the blind, also have kept this man from dying?"* They thought that, of course He couldn't, because as He loved Lazarus, He would not have permitted him to die. But as Lazarus died, He obviously was incapable of stopping that and that's why He was crying then. Overcoming the feeling of sorrow over the hatred of the Jews in Himself, the Lord approached the tomb and asked for the stone to be rolled away. The tombs in Jerusalem were arranged in the form of caves, the entrances to them were blocked by stones.

Those entrances were opened only in extreme circumstances, and even then, shortly after internment and not at the time when the corpse had started to decompose. Decomposition of cadavers in the warm climate of Jerusalem began very quickly, and as a consequence, the Jews buried their dead on the same day of their death. On the fourth day, the decomposition must have reached such a stage that even faithful Martha could not refrain from protesting to the Lord: *"Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days."* Reminding Martha about what was said to her previously, the Lord states: *"Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?"* When the stone was rolled away, the Lord raised His eyes to heaven and exclaimed: *"Father, I thank You that You have heard Me."* Knowing that His enemies ascribe His healing powers to the powers of demons, the Lord wanted to show through this prayer, that He performed that miracle through His power

of full unity with God the Father. The soul of Lazarus returned to his body, and in a loud voice, the Lord commanded: "*Lazarus, come forth!*" Here, the loud voice was meant either as an expression of the decisive will, which was certain of absolute submission, or the awakening from the deep sleep. There was another miracle, which came together with that miracle of resurrection: Lazarus having his hands and feet bound with burial bandages, could still by himself come out from the cave, after what the Lord directed that they should be removed. The details of that event testify of the fact that it was described by the eyewitness. As a result of this miracle, there occurred the usual division among the Jews: many believed, but the others went to the Pharisees — the Lord's worst enemies — evidently, with animosity and bad intentions, in order to tell them about what had happened.

The Sanhedrin's Decision to Kill Jesus Christ.

(John 11:47-57)

The news of the miracle disturbed the Lord's enemies so much, that the high priests and Pharisees immediately assembled the high Jewish court of the Sanhedrin. They weren't afraid to speak quite openly among themselves, and therefore directly raised the question about what they had to do, in order to preserve their authority and influence among the people. While acknowledging the Lord's miracles as genuine, they express their worry that that could bring about the civil disorder, which the Romans would take advantage of, in order to eliminate the last vestiges of Jewish independence that they still had.

The fatal lie of such a reason laid in the fact that not recognizing the Lord as the Messiah — because He didn't correspond to their perverted idea of the Messiah — the Jews were expressing their fear that He might become the head of the civil riot, which would inflict a disaster upon their nation. "*And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year*" — this doesn't mean that the archbishops, or the Jewish high priests, were elected to that post only for one year, but shows the frequent change of high priests, which depended on the Roman ruler of Judea — "*said to them, 'You know nothing at all, nor do you consider it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people'*", i.e. it is necessary to prevent the possibility of such a dangerous to the Jews rebel, headed by Christ against the Romans — by killing Him.

Here, Caiaphas puts on the mask of the zealous about the national good and finds the excuse for the planned murder within the considerations of the state-national politics. Evangelist John points at the involuntary prophecy in Caiaphas's words that the Lord Jesus Christ had to "*die for the people*", i.e. suffer for the salvation of mankind. The high priests, as the foretellers of God's will, were like middlemen between God and the man, and being such, they were foretelling involuntarily, what is what happened in this case with such an unworthy high priest as Caiaphas. While Caiaphas spoke only about the Jewish people, Christ died for the salvation and gathering together in His Church, even the heathens, as "*children of God who were scattered abroad.*" As the final sentence, the decision to kill the Lord was approved and the orders — issued for His arrest. Having found out about their sentence, the Lord left Bethany and went to the town of Ephraim, close to the Jericho desert because the time for His sufferings had not arrived. As the true Paschal Lamb, He had to die on the day of Passover in the triumphant manner — not secretly, as apparently the Sanhedrin desired, fearing the people (Mat. 26:4).

The Supper at Lazarus's House.

(John 12:1-11).

That supper was arranged for the Lord six days before Passover and it differed from that supper, which is described by the first two Evangelists and which occurred two days before Passover in the house of Simon the leper. Naturally, the supper took place in the house of resurrected Lazarus. This is clearly indicated by the fact that Martha, Lazarus' sister, was serving there, while Lazarus was the one, "*who sat at the table.*" At that supper, Mary

anointed the feet of the Lord with the expensive oil, just as at the supper, about which narrate the two Evangelists, when a woman anointed the Lord's head with oil. According to the tradition, that particular woman was a sinner (which is reflected in our church service of Great Wednesday, when that anointment is recalled). According to Evangelist John, only Judas made a remark, concerning the value of the oil: while according to the first two Evangelists — the other disciples commented as well. There is nothing extraordinary in that the Lord was anointed twice with oil: Mary did it through her feelings of gratitude for resurrecting her brother, while the woman-sinner — as a sign of her repentance, the feeling that is more disinterested, and that was why she received a promise of a great reward. She was said more than Mary. Apparently Mary "*kept this*" since her brother's burial, as though in the prophetic prediction.

The Last Days of the Lord's Terrestrial Life.

The Lord's Entry into Jerusalem.

(Mat. 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-44; John 12:12-19).

All four Evangelists describe this great event which serves as a threshold to Christ's sufferings, accepted for mankind's sake and its salvation, quite in detail, and Saint John describes it more briefly than those first three.

The Lord Jesus Christ was then going to Jerusalem, so that all the prophecies of the Prophets about Him, as of the Messiah, would be fulfilled. He was going to drink the cup of the redeeming sufferings, give His life to deliver many and then to enter into His glory. Consequently, in complete opposition to the way the Lord conducted Himself previously, He desired that the last entry into Jerusalem should possess the especial triumph. The first three Evangelists convey the details on the preparation that accompanied that triumphant entry. When the Lord and His disciples, surrounded by many people that accompanied Him from Bethany and those they came across along the way, came close to the Mount of Olives, He sent two of His disciples ahead with the order to bring a donkey and her colt. The Mount of Olives was called so because of the multitude of the olive trees, growing on it ("elea" is an olive). It is situated to the west of Jerusalem, and is separated from it by the stream of Cedron, which almost absolutely withered in the summer. On the western slopes of the mount, facing Jerusalem, there was the Gethsemane garden. On the eastern slopes there laid two settlements (mentioned by Saints Mark and Luke — Bethphage and Bethany (Matthew speaks only of the first). The view of all parts of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives was superb.

There were two roads from Bethany to Jerusalem: one came around the Mount from the south, while the other traversed through the very top of the Mount: the latter was the shorter route, although more difficult and exhausting. There were very few horses in Palestine and they were used exclusively for warfare. Donkeys, mules and camels were used for the household needs and traveling. To saddle a horse was the sign of war, while to saddle a donkey or mule — the sign of peace. In times of peace, even kings and civil leaders traveled on these animals.

That way, the Lord Jesus Christ's entry into Jerusalem on a donkey was the symbol of peace: the King of the world travels to His capital on a donkey — it is the emblem of peace. It is remarkable that because of the Lord's words, the owners of the animals gave them up immediately when they were told by the Apostles, for Whom they were taking them. Noting the incredibility of this circumstance, Saint Chrysostom says that the Lord wanted to reveal through that fact that "When the cruel Jews came to seize Him, He could have prevented that

and make them speechless, but He didn't want that". Evangelists Matthew and John point out that it was the fulfillment of Prophet Zechariah's prophecy, quoting it in the short form, which in full reads: *"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: He is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, even upon a colt the foal of an ass"* (Zech. 9:9). This prophecy is very close to that of the Prophet Isaiah, from whom Saint Matthew borrows the first words: *"Say ye to the daughter of Zion, behold, thy salvation cometh; behold, His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him"* (Isaiah 62:11).

Realizing the magnificence of these moments, the Apostle themselves attempt to adorn this procession with the air of solemnity: they cover the donkey and the young colt with their own clothing, which should as if substitute the golden fabric, which adorned the horses of kings. *"After they threw their clothes on him..."* As it is clearly seen from the narratives of Saints Mark, Luke and John, the Lord rode on the colt while, apparently, the donkey walked alongside. Following the example of the disciples, *"a very great multitude spread their clothes on the road"* while *"others"*, being poor and not having the outer garments, *"cut down branches from the trees and spread them on the road"*, to make the path soft and comfortable for the colt, thereby serving and honoring its Rider. Further on, comparing the narratives of all the Evangelists, one can imagine the following scene: *"Then, as He was now drawing near the descent of the Mount of Olives"* (Luke 19:37), i.e. when they approached the edge of the downward slope, from which opened the amazing sight of Jerusalem opened up, *"the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God"* for the salvation of the world, brought by Christ, and especially for all the miracles *"they had seen."* Saint John adds to this: *"A great multitude that had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him"* (John 12:12-13).

Hence, two multitudes of people blended: one was traveling with the Lord from Bethany, while the other moved from Jerusalem to meet Him. The sight of Jerusalem, seen from the mount in all its glory, evoked elation among the masses that burst into joyful and loud exclamations: *"Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! The King of Israel!"* In the literal sense, the word "Hosanna" translated from ancient Jewish, means: *"Save us"*, grant us salvation. This exclamation was used as an expression of joy and reverence, akin to today's *"Long live!"*. *"Hosanna in the Highest"* — is a wish so that in heaven the same joyful exclamation "Hosanna" would also brought as a gift to the King of Israel, the Son of David. *"Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord"* — means: worthy of the blessing or worship is the One, Who comes from Jehovah with His directions, His authority, just as the messengers and leaders arrive from the earthly king in order to substitute him (compare John 5:43). Evangelist Mark attaches to it the following exclamation: *"Blessed is the kingdom of our father David. That comes in the name of the Lord!"*

David's Kingdom had to be re-established by the Messiah, Whose throne was to remain forever and His authority had to spread over all nations. It is in these words that the sons of Israel are glorifying Christ, coming to restore this kingdom of David. Saint Luke conveys another exclamation: *"Peace in Heaven,"* in the sense that all true spiritual blessings and eternal salvation descend from Heaven.

Saint John explains that the Lord's recent resurrection of Lazarus was the cause for such joyous greetings of Him, while Saint Luke's reason is in the Lord's miracles in general. Our Church perceives this event as the special Divine arrangement and the instilling of the Holy Spirit, about which the Synaksarion on the Week of Palms tells: *"This was caused by the Holy Spirit."* From this point of view, the Lord's reply to the sly and full of hatred advice of the Pharisees is understandable: *"Teacher, rebuke Your disciples (because You, like ourselves, understand how all this is indecent and dangerous for Yourself)"* — *"If these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out"* (Luke 19:39-40); i.e. this praise to Christ the Messiah is been set in the hearts and lips of the people by God Himself, and if the people

would oppose this directive, then soulless stones would replace these people in worshipping the Lord. The Church also sees in these words the allegorical reference to the heathens, who formerly had the hearts of a stone, but consequently replaced Israel, which rejected Christ. The same meaning is contained in Apostle Matthew's narration about the Lord's response to the Pharisees, indignant through their hatred and envy about the fact that the children in the temple exclaimed: "*Hosanna to the Son of David!*" — "*Have you never read, 'Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants, You have perfected praise?'*", that is God Himself perfected His praise out of the mouth of babies and sucklings (Psalm 8:3; Mat. 21:15-16).

As Saint Luke relates (19:41-44) looking at the city, the Lord "*wept over it*" because of its soon destruction. Remarkably, when the Romans started their siege of Jerusalem in the year 70, they pitched their camp on the exact place of the Mount of Olives where Christ the Savior was staying at that time. The very siege began not long before Pascha. "*If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.*" — O people of Israel, if only now you comprehended that this is for your salvation; but you stubbornly close your eyes not to see. In rejecting Me, you hasten your own destruction ... "*Because you did not know the time of your visitation*", i.e. that favorable time, when God showed His special mercy and beckoned you towards salvation through the Messiah that was sent to you.

Saint Matthew observes that "*when He had come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved*" — so great the impact from this triumphant meeting was.

Driving the Dealers Out from the Temple.

(Mat. 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48).

The first three Evangelists narrate about this event. Also, the narration of Saint Mark differs to that of Saints Matthew and Luke, in the fact, that according to him, the Lord entered the temple and after having "*looked around at all things, as the hour was already late, He went out to Bethany with the twelve.*" And it was only the following day (after the condemnation of the fig tree), that He entered the temple and drove out the traders. There is no contradiction here: in describing events, the Apostles did not always adhere to a chronological order. The presentation of logical sequence of events was more important to them.

Some accept that there were two cleanings of the temple from trading merchants: once on the day of the Lord's entry in Jerusalem, and the second time on the following day. Three years earlier, when the Lord came to Jerusalem for His first Pascha after His Baptism, He found the yards and porches of the temple transformed into trading areas, so He drove out the merchants. At the Pascha of the following year, the Lord apparently did not find any trading activity within the temple area. On the third Pascha of the Lord's service, He didn't visit Jerusalem. At the fourth Pascha, the Jews were worried about the fact if Jesus would attend this holiday. Realizing that the authorities had pronounced their death sentence to the Lord, the merchants (with the permission of the high priests), packed the temple grounds and side porches with animals, pitched tents that offered a variety of goods, set up tables with money-exchange facilities and benches with doves — which were bred by the high priests in order to increase their income — and began trading. Upon entering Jerusalem the Lord headed directly to the temple and drove out the merchants that were trading there.

The Lord's entry into the temple was quite unexpected for them. After the triumphant greeting by the people with the cries of "**Hosanna**" no one dared to oppose Him when, in His first year of ministry, He "*began to drive out those who bought and sold in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves. And He would not allow anyone to carry wares through the temple,*" i.e. items that had nothing to do with the church services in the temple. Evidently, at that moment, the Divine greatness and might shined in the face of the Lord so that nobody presumed to react against Him. Instead, they involuntarily submitted. The high priests also didn't dare to take measures against the

Lord, seeing “*how all the people were astonished by His teachings*” (Mark 11:18 and Luke 19:48).

Great Monday.

The Curse of the Fruitless Fig Tree.

(Mat. 21:18-22; Mark 11:12-14).

Two Evangelists, Saints Matthew and Mark, tell that after the Lord’s triumphant entry into Jerusalem, He spent the night with His disciples in Bethany, In the morning of the next day, while walking back to Jerusalem, the Lord noticed a fig tree. While wishing to partake of its fruit, He couldn’t find any on it although it was covered with leaves, and said: “*Let no fruit grow on you ever again*” — “*Immediately the fig tree withered away*”, what amazed the disciples greatly. The Evangelists say that the Lord “was hungry” and that’s why He was looking for the fruit. This is not surprising, because the Lord Jesus Christ, possessing human nature, was subjected to all human weaknesses, and was like us in all respects, **except sin**. After all, He wasn’t only God, but Human God. It is characteristic that He never used His Divine almighty powers to satisfy His human needs, but resorted to normal human means, rejecting once and forever the devil’s temptation to turn stones into bread. With this, Saint Mark notes that the fig tree didn’t have any fruit because it **wasn’t the right time**.

Then why did the fig tree was subjected to a curse? — Because it was deceiving and deluding through its appearance. Usually, leaves appear on a fig tree after it had given fruit. However, through its lush greenery, that tree promised fruit to the passerby when in fact it had nothing but leaves. The Church teaches that the fig tree was a symbol of the representatives and leaders of the Jewish Old Testament Church — the high priests, Scribes and Pharisees, who wore the look of fulfillers of God’s Law, but in reality, bore no fruits of faith. As a punishment for their hypocrisy, the Lord doomed them to wither, and as we will see later, predicted that “*the Kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it*” (Mat. 21:43).

The Hellenes’ Desire to See Jesus Christ.

(John 12:20-50).

After the Lord’s triumphant entry into Jerusalem, which apparently was on the following day, some Hellenes approached Apostle Philip and asked him: “*Sir, we wish to see Jesus.*” Hellenes — in reality meant Greeks, but in Judea, all heathens were called like that. Evidently, these were so-called “proselytes,” i.e. the heathens were converted to the Jewish faith. Philip passed on the request to Andrew. Philip and Andrew were the only Lord’s disciples that bore Greek names. There was a number Greeks living in Decapolis, and as Philip was born in Galilean Bethsaida, it is quite possible that the Greeks turned specifically to him, because they knew him. That they addressed him “sir” shows that they regarded the disciple of the very famous Teacher with special respect. Their words: “*We wish to see Jesus*” are not an indication of idle curiosity, because everybody could see Him as He was walking around the temple courtyard, teaching. Evidently, those Hellenes sought to get closer to the Lord, they wanted to speak with Him. Bishop Michael supposes that, knowing the Scribes’ and Pharisees’ hatred towards the Lord, they wanted to propose Him to visit their land with sermon, (just like king Avgar of Edessa did, according to the tradition). In any case, those words expressed the heathens’ desire to join Christ’s Kingdom that was about to be revealed. This was the first sign of conversion to Christ of the whole heathen world — as the result of His cruciferous sufferings and redeeming sacrifice for the sins of all mankind. That’s why the request of the Hellenes forced Christ to immerse His thoughts in the forthcoming sufferings and

the profound meaning of His Cross. This explains why such inspired speech went off from His lips, which is described only by Evangelist John.

“The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified.” What is that hour? In relation to Christ Himself — it is the hour of His sufferings on the cross, death and resurrection; in relation to the prince of the world, the devil, the hour of his banishment; in relation to mankind, the hour of their invitation to Christ, raised on the cross. The Lord calls Himself here *“the Son of Man”* indicating that He will have to bear sufferings and death as a human, in order to enter into His glory as Human God and through this attract the whole human race to Him. Just as in the visible nature, death isn’t always the cause of destruction, but on the contrary, is the beginning of life. Just as a grain of wheat must die in the ground to multiply, so the Lord’s death will become the beginning of the new life, which will multiply the followers of His Kingdom on earth. Likewise, the Lord’s followers shouldn’t be afraid of death (*“love his life”*) but should sacrifice their earthly lives in order to obtain the eternal one. However, the Lord’s human nature is agitated with the thought of the imminent dreadful sufferings: *“Now My soul is troubled.”* This is the beginning of that struggle between the human and Divine natures of Christ, which later attained its utmost tension in the garden of Gethsemane. The physical nature impels to pray: *“Father, save Me from this hour,”* but the Divine nature immediately conquers this confusion, compelling to pray: *“Father, glorify Your name,”* i.e. *“Let the purpose of My coming to earth be fulfilled.”*

In response, God the Father Himself strengthened His Beloved Son for His imminent sufferings, by thundering from heavens: *“I have both glorified it and will glorify it again,”* i.e. *“I have already glorified through many works, signs and miracles, and will again glorify through the imminent cruciferous sufferings, death and resurrection.”* The effect of the heavenly voice was not the same on all the listeners, which is explained by their different spiritual state. Those that didn’t believe in Christ were saying that it was just thunder, while the others said that it was the voice of an Angel speaking to Him. In responding to those erroneous ideas, the Lord explains that the voice was *“for your sake,”* i.e. so that they might believe in Him and be clever at least during His last hours on earth, because the hour of judgment of *“the ruler of this world”* (the devil) and his banishment from the human souls is approaching. As the *“ruler of this world”* the devil, is called to in many parts of the Word of God as that ruling all non-believers and those hostile to Christ. *“And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself”*, i.e. the Lord’s crucifixion and subsequent ascension into Heaven will lead to the conversion to Christ of the whole human race. The people understood that *“lifted up from the earth”* meant that the Lord was speaking of His death, and therefore expressed their bewilderment as to who would rule on earth, as their understanding of the Messiah was that of the earthly ruler, who would reign on earth forever. In response, the Lord exhorted them that while He was still among them, to utilize their time by believing in Him — *the Light to the whole world*. Then, leaving them, He apparently went to the Mount of Olives or Bethany, where He spent the nights — teaching in the temple during the day.

Further on, the Evangelist reflects with sadness about the reasons of the Jews’ disbelief in the Lord, pointing to the fact that it was foretold by the Prophet Isaiah (53:1 and 6:9-10), as about the chosen nation heart-hardness. The cause of hostility towards the Lord is also their preference of human fame to God’s glory. In conclusion, Saint John cites the Lord’s last admonitory words, said to the Jews in the temple, that He came to save the world and His Word will judge people on the final day, because this Word is nothing else than the commandment to mankind from the Heavenly Father Himself.

Great Tuesday.

The Withered Fig Tree.

(Mat. 21:20-22; Mark 11:20-26).

The circumstances surrounding the Lord's curse of the fig tree are explained by Saint Mark in more detail than that by Saint Matthew. He narrates that as the Lord walked with His disciples from Bethany to Jerusalem, apparently along the same road as the day before, the disciples noticed that the fig tree had withered. Answering to the amazement expressed by them about that incident, the Lord instructs them in the power of faith, saying that if they have God's faith and overcome all doubts, they would be able to perform even greater miracles: *"If you say to this mountain 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' it will be done."* Of course, the removal of the mountain is only an example that for faith, free of doubt — nothing is impossible. That's why all prayers of appeal must be uttered with faith in order that they would be answered. In verses 25-26, Saint Mark adds that the condition for the prayer's efficacy lies in forgiving the neighbor. Not to forgive is an insult to God's love, and therefore, without forgiveness there can be no genuine firm faith, and, consequently, no effectual prayer.

The Conversation with the Elders.

(Mat. 21:23-27; Mark 11:27-33 and Luke 20:1-8).

When the Lord again returned to the temple and as usual began to teach, the high priests and elders approached Him with a sly question: *"By what authority are You doing these things? And who gave You this authority?"* i.e. what right He had to take charge in the temple — drive the traders out and instruct them. Clearly, this is not a question of the people wanting to know the truth, but the sly questions of hateful enemies seeking to catch the Lord in His words. However, the Lord does not directly answer their devious question, but Himself catches them in their words. He asks them: *"The baptism of John — where was it from? From Heaven or from men?"* This question about John's baptisms simultaneously raised the question of his worthiness as of a Prophet and his Divine mission. John testified about Jesus as being the Messiah, the Son of God, Who had taken the sins of the world upon Himself. To acknowledge that He was sent by God, would mean that He had to be acknowledged as Jesus the Messiah, and then the question about with what power the Lord performed that, what annoyed the Jews, would be solved automatically.

The curiosity seekers were placed in an obviously difficult position. Being aware that the people revered Saint John as a Prophet, they were afraid that the people would stone them if they decided to answer that John wasn't a prophet. To admit openly that John was a Prophet would mean the acceptance of his testimony about Jesus as being the Son of God. Consequently, they declined to give a definite answer, saying: *"We do not know."* Such Sanhedrin, which was incapable of carrying out a decision on such an important issue that was subjected to its jurisdiction, proved itself to be irresponsible and undeserving the answer from the Lord. That's why the Lord responded with: *"Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."* It would have been superfluous to answer, because they obviously knew perfectly well by what authority the Lord acted, yet consciously continued to oppose that power. All three forecasters describe this event in complete accord.

The Parable about the Two Sons.

(Mat. 21:28-32).

Continuing His conversation with them, the Lord related a parable, wishing that they would bring over the sentence to themselves. *"A man had two sons"* — as it can be seen from the previous examples, the man means God, the first son — publicans and fornicators, i.e. sinners in general, while the second son — the Scribes and Pharisees, i.e. everyone in general that regards himself righteous. *"Go, work today in My vineyard"*: the word "vineyard" means church, while the work in it — the pious deeds, the fulfillment of God's com-

mandments. Sinners respond to God's directive with: "*I will not*" with their very life, but then repent — just as the publicans and fornicators repented hearing John the Baptist's sermons — and begin to fulfill God's will. The Pharisees and the false-righteous respond with "*I go*", i.e. they seem to fulfill God's will in words, but not in deeds, because they don't accept the Lord's sermons about repentance. Not understanding the meaning of the parable and being curious, they responded to the Lord's question, which of the two sons had fulfilled God's will with: "*The first.*" The Lord then revealed the meaning of the parable, targeted at judging them. He pointed out to them that the people, whom they despised as sinners, appeared more worthy than them, to enter the Messiah's Kingdom — Christ's Church.

The Parable about the Wicked Vinedressers.

(Mat. 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12; Luke 20:9-19)

Some landowner, meaning the Lord God, established a "vineyard," which means to be the Church of the Old Testament. Having set a hedge around it, which the analysts interpret as the law of Moses and all institutions in general, elected to safeguard God's chosen people, the Jews, from the heathen's influence; dug a "winepress" in it, a pool or a hole, in which the juice was extracted, and erected a "watchtower" for the guards, to guard the vineyard against robbers and wild animals. The Holy Fathers suppose that the words "winepress" and "watchtower" meant an altar and a church. Having arranged everything for the comfort of the vinedressers, "he leased it" to them — as was the custom — with the plan that after harvest the grapes, all of them or the certain amount, would be brought to the landowner. Under the "vinedressers" are meant the leaders of the Jewish people, primarily the high priests and members of the Sanhedrin. The landowner then left: which meant that the Lord entrusted to them His full authority over the Jewish people, so that later they might present to Him the fruits of their management — show that they raised the people properly, in the spirit of God's law. After a while, the landowner sent his "servants", who are to be meant like Prophets. But the wicked vinedressers "*took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another*" — this is how the Jewish leaders treated God's messengers, the Prophets. They governed the people with no care about their spiritual development, pursuing their own personal avarice and interests, which prompted them to viciously kill God's Prophets, who reminded them of their responsibilities.

The whole history of the Old Testament testifies of this (Jerem. 44:4-6; 2 Chron. 24:20-21; Nehem. 9:26 and others). Finally, the landowner sent "his son" (according to Mark, his only beloved son); the last extraordinary God's messenger to the Jewish people was the One and only Son of God, Jesus Christ Himself. "*This is the heir*" said the evil vinedressers: "*Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.*" The Lord Jesus Christ is called "the heir" in the sense that everything was given to Him by His Father. So as not to lose their authority over the Jewish people, the Jewish high priests and elders decided to kill Him. "*So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him*" — that's how the Jewish high priests, taking the Lord Jesus Christ outside Jerusalem (which was the holy center of the Old Testament Church, its walls) killed Him.

Having finished His parable, the Lord wished that the listeners would pronounce the sentence for themselves, which according to Saint Matthew they did indeed, while according to Saint Mark, the Lord on His part confirmed the fairness of the sentence. While according to Saint Luke, having realized that they pronounced the sentence upon themselves, the high priests and elders exclaimed: "Certainly not," i.e. this will not happen to us. The expression: "When the owner will come" must not be understood as Christ's Second Coming, because further on it says that God Himself will "give the vineyard to others." Consequently, life will continue after the destruction of Jerusalem, the abolition of the high priests' services and the Sanhedrin's power. The cultivation of God's vineyard will be then handed over "to others" — the Apostles and their successors, the pastors of Christ's Church.

Concluding His parable, the Lord applies to Himself the 22-23 verses of the 118th Psalm, calling Himself **the Rock**, which the builders have rejected, i.e. the leaders of the Jewish people, but Which became “**the chief cornerstone**” — the main stone of the grand building of the New Testament Church. From the human point of view, the coming of the Son of God Himself was the “Lord’s doing” and “is marvelous” in the eyes of the people. Calling Himself a rock, the Lord points at the two types of people, who will not believe in Him and who will, for this, be subjected to punishment: the first type will be those, to whom He will be **the Stumbling Block**, i.e. temptation, while the others, remaining unrepentant, that will rise up against the Lord obdurately and begin to struggle against the spread of His Kingdom. The guilt of the latter is greater. Those, who have stumbled over the stone and crashed, can be restored and healed, while the erasure of faith expresses final destruction, which will overtake all those embittered enemies of Christ. As the result of such disobedience of the Jews, who were initially appointed to be God’s chosen people, “*the Kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it,*” i.e. to God’s new nation — all future members of God’s Kingdom or Christ’s Church, which are presented here as one nation, the new Israel. Having realized the total profound meaning of the parable, the high priests and Pharisees “*sought to lay hands on Him, but feared the multitude,*” i.e. the opportunity of public indignation in defense of the Lord, Who was revered as a Prophet.

The Parable about the Invited to a Wedding Banquet.

(Mat. 22:1-14)

By its content and basic thought, this parable is similar to the parable about the guests invited to the banquet, narrated in Luke’s Gospel (chap. 14:16-24). However, these parables undoubtedly were pronounced at different times. The parable about those invited to the banquet was narrated by the Lord on Saturday in the Pharisee’s house, long before His triumphant entry into Jerusalem, whereas this parable was told by the Lord after His entry into Jerusalem, in all probability, on Tuesday. The main thought in the first parable is that because of the earthly cares, many will refuse God’s Kingdom. The parable about the wedding feast of the king’s son is associated with the parable about the wicked vinedressers. Both the parables, following one another, speak of the servants, some of whom were subjected to abuse, while the others killed, and also of the nasty demise of the offenders and killers. Here, as in the first parable, under the invited guests must be understood the Jewish people, while the king’s servants represent the Old Testament Prophets. Under the extermination of the killers and the burning of their town must essentially be understood the ruin of the Jewish people and Jerusalem’s destruction. Inviting all those that are met along the way to the wedding feast, means the calling into God’s Kingdom of all those, which followed, when the Jews rejected the Apostolic sermon (see Acts 13:46). **All** are invited to the wedding — God’s Kingdom: **the good and the wicked**, because to enter it doesn’t require holiness or merit: they are called to God’s kingdom not for their deeds, but on the mercy of the Calling.

The judgment that will establish the difference between the good and wicked, worthy of entering into God’s Kingdom and those unworthy will happen later. Consequently, those that are called should bear themselves worthy of their position — to be clothed in the “**wedding**” **attire**. In ancient times, kings and princes of the East had a custom of giving the special occasion attire to the invited guests, which they had to wear to the feast. Likewise, everybody that is called to God’s Kingdom, is given bright clothing of spiritual purity at the baptism. The one, who had neglected this clothing and joined the spiritual feast in the attire that had been desecrated by sin, deserves condemnation and punishment. According to Saint Chrysostom’s explanation, “to enter in dirty clothing means to have unclean life, to lose the grace. That’s why it is said: “he was speechless”... Not having anything to defend himself, he condemned himself and became subjected to the extreme punishment.” Those who refused to dress in the attire given by the king were driven outside of the brightly-lit pavilion of the king’s feast and into the outside (hellish) darkness, where they ground their teeth because of

grief and cold. Likewise, those unrepentant sinners that had sullied their spiritual attire with their sins will be ejected from the body of those saved in Christ's Church on the Dread Judgment. The common concluding thought of this parable with that of Saint Luke's is: "*Many are called, but few are chosen*" — means that many that responded to the sermon of the Gospel are called into Christ's Kingdom. However, the true members of this Kingdom are not everyone that was called, but only the chosen ones. Thus, all the Jews were called into Christ's Church, but only a few entered It: in exactly the same way as the other nations, although called, presented and will present only few true Christians among them.

Having heard all that and being humiliated by the Lord, the members of the Sanhedrin began consulting among themselves, what measures to take against Him. They planned to send some people who would be able **to catch Him in His words**, so that it would be easier to accuse and hand Him over to justice.

About Paying Taxes to Caesar.

(Mat. 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:20-26).

Among their disciples and the Herodians, the adherents of Herod, to whom not everybody wanted to pay taxes as he was of another tribe, the Pharisees chose the most cunning people and sent them to the Lord with a devious question: "*Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?*" That sneaky question was aimed at catching the Lord. If He answered that they **had to** pay taxes to the heathen emperor, hated by the Jews, He would alienate Himself from the people, and if He told **not to pay** them, He would be immediately accused before the Romans of trying to incite the people. Those posing the question had the following hidden thought behind it: The Jewish people are God's people that recognize only God as their King. Therefore, it could not serve the foreigner, especially the heathen king, as he would then appear as God's enemy; consequently, what had they to do — **pay the taxes to Caesar or maintain their firm loyalty to God?** The Lord wisely answered that they had to do both thing — "*Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to do the things that are God's*", i.e. fulfill your obligations in the relation to God as well as in the relation to the state authority, for the latter doesn't contradict the first.

The Shaming of the Sadducees.

(Mat. 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-40).

After the Pharisees and Herodians were covered with shame, some Sadducees immediately approached the Lord, who represented a sect that didn't believe in the resurrection of souls and eternal life (see Acts 23:8). They constantly argued with the Pharisees, striving to prove that in the books of Moses there were no indications of the immortality of the soul, but they contained some statements that contradicted to the teachings about the resurrection of the dead, like for example the law about the levirate marriage. It was that argument that they presented to the Lord Jesus Christ to be solved. They invented the story about seven brothers who took the same woman as their wife after the death of the previous husband. From their point of view, that determination of Moses' law refuted the teaching about the future life, because "**when they rise, whose wife she will be?**" Saint Chrysostom rightly notes the improbability of such a story, because the Jews, remarkable for their superstition, would never marry a woman, whose husbands kept dying one after another. The Lord gave the Sadducees a wise answer, exposing them for not comprehending the future eternal life, where there will be no physical sensation, and the people will live a different life — spiritual, angelic, "**but are like Angels in Heaven**". If people were totally obliterated after death then God would not have said to Moses, appearing in the burning bush: "*I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*" because "*God is not the God of the dead, but of the living*", i.e. those forefathers that have died are alive to God, because God cannot be God of the non-existent. Saint Luke notes that even the Scribes were pleased with the response and could not

help saying: *“Teacher, You have spoken well.”* The people, seeing the Sadducees shame, marveled at the Lord’s wisdom.

About the Greatest Commandment.

(Mat. 22:34-46; Mark 12:28-37; Luke 20:40-44).

Having heard of the Sadducees’ shame, the Pharisees immediately gathered in the temple and decided to propose to Jesus, the most difficult (in their opinion) of all questions — which was **the greatest** commandment within the law. If we take into account that the Jewish Scribes made distinctions between **the major and minor** commandments in the law, about what they have been constantly quarreling, the guile of the question becomes quite clear. Some regarded the main commandment that of the sacrifice, others — about the Sabbath, still others — that of the circumcision. Generally speaking, they regarded the laws of rites as being the most important ones. The Lord answered that question by quoting the words of Deuteronomy (6:5): *“Love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might,”* and added, that *“the second is like it: ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”* (Lev. 19:18). Saint Mark adds that the Lord’s answer made such a profound impression upon the very lawyer that he exclaimed: *“Well said teacher. You have spoken the truth.”* His sincerity impressed the Lord, and seeing that that sinner could reform, He said to him: *“You are not far from the Kingdom of God.”* After all those unsuccessful attempts to catch the Lord with His words, the Pharisees did not dare to ask Him any further questions about anything. However, in order to show them their lack of knowledge of the Scriptures and how ignorant they were in their false understanding of the Messiah, the Lord posed them a question: *“What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is He?”* Without giving it any thought, they answered: *“David’s”* because naturally thinking, David was promised that the Messiah would emerge from his kin. And in response, the Lord as though answered — so you think that Christ was **just** a man, but Davis himself said with the Holy Spirit: *“The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand... If Messiah-Jesus was a mere descendant of David, then how could He have existed at the time David was writing about Him. Consequently, if He existed then and David called Him his Lord, He was not a mere human as the Pharisees thought, but also God, i.e. Human God. Blinded by the letter of the law and having lost the keys towards the correct understanding of its meaning, the Pharisees could give no reply to the Lord’s question. Thus, the Lord exposed their ignorance, concerning the law, while simultaneously gave them the testimony of His Divine worthiness and eternal existence. Having experienced such a serious defeat, the Pharisees didn’t dare to tempt the Lord with their insidious questions, while the people listened to Him with great enjoyment (Mark 12:37).*

The Exposure of the Scribes and Pharisees.

(Mat. 23:1-39; Mark 12:38-40; Luke 20:45-47)

Having shamed the Pharisees and made them speechless, the Lord in order to warn His disciples and the people against the Pharisee spirit, pronounced a formidable accusatory speech against them, in which He condemned their main delusion, concerning the teaching and life itself. This speech is narrated in full only by Evangelist Matthew, while Saint Mark and Luke present only the excerpts from it. The Lord began that speech with the words: *“The Scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat,”* i.e. they have occupied Moses’ place and appropriated the exclusive right to interpret and teach the people the Law of Moses. *“Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works”* — here the Pharisees are accused of teaching the law while not living according to it themselves. Of course, “whatever” has to be understood with a limitation, because the Savior himself often accused the Scribes and Pharisees in their incorrect understanding and interpretation of the Law commandments. *“They bind heavy burdens, hard to bear...”* — just as heavy loads upon the animals, they “lay them on men’s shoulders,” all the multiple and varied resolutions of the law of Moses (Acts 15:10), strictly demanding from the people their

fulfillment up to the last detail, while themselves do not want to assist them in it. When the Pharisees do fulfill something that they demand from the others, it is not for the sake of pleasing God, but to show off and receive the public praise. *“They make their phylacteries broad”*, i.e. without any need but just to impress people enlarge those leather bags or boxes, which contained the sheets of papyrus or parchment with the phrases from the law: Exodus 13:1-9; Deut. 6:4-10 and 11:13-22, which during the prayer, they were attached with belts — one to the forehead and the other to the left arm.

The custom of carrying these depositories came out from the literary interpretation of the words from Exodus 13:9; *“And it shall be for a sign unto thee upon thine hand, and for a memorial between thine eyes.”* The Jews believed that those depositories protected them against the evil spirits, *“and enlarge the borders of their garments”* — those were the four brushes being sown to the edge of the outer garment, and the ruby-colored threads coming from the brushes along the edges. To make them and to wear was directed by the law, as a reminder of God’s commandments and in order to distinguish the Jews from other nations (Num. 15:37-40). Because of their vanity, the Pharisees made those brushes bigger than normal. *“Love...the best seats in the synagogue, and the best places at feasts”* — in those times, people dined not sitting but reclined on the special long and broad pillows, resting against the table, which resembled the letter U. The privileged places and those of honor were in the centre of the table, and were the seats the Pharisees sought: while in synagogues they demanded to occupy the places closest to the lectern.

“And do not be called teachers”. This means: “Do not seek to be honored as teachers, fathers and instructors, because in the personal sense, the only Father to everyone is God, and the only Instructor and Teacher is Christ. Such forbiddance to be called a teacher, father or instructor, must not be interpreted literally — like the sects do — because as can be seen through the Apostolic Epistles, the very Apostles used those terms in relation to themselves: 1 John 2:13; Ephes. 6:4; Phil. 2:22; Acts 13:1; James 3:1; Romans 2:20, 4:16; 1 Cor. 4:15, 12:28-29, 1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 4:3; Heb. 5:12, 13:7, 17. It’s should not be permitted that the Apostles violated given to them Christ’s commandment by using those names. The correct interpretation is that this commandment related to the Apostles personally, warning them against extolling one before another and suggesting that they all are equal among themselves and anyone wishing to become greater, must become a servant to the rest. One should not render honor that is befitting only God to the man, and it is excessive to revere teachers and instructors as though they are pronouncing their own words and not the Word of God. *“But woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the Kingdom of Heaven against men...”* because you did not believe in the Messiah Christ, and turned others away from that saving faith. *“You devour widows’ houses...”* you deceive widows with your seeming piety and plunder their possessions. *“You travel land and sea...”* you receive the converts from heathens and do not care about instructing them in true faith — and further corrupt them with the bad example of your hypocritical life. *“Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it’* — the Jewish scholars made distinctions between minor and major oaths, and taught that it wasn’t necessary to fulfill the first. They regarded swearing with the church gold or a gift as major, while with the church itself or its altar, as minor. The Lord points out that to swear with any of these items means to swear with God Himself and therefore — one must not break the oath. *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.”* In fulfilling the law regarding tithes (Num. 18:20-24; Deut. 14:22-28), the Pharisees used to pay their tithes even of those herbs that were not mentioned in the law because of their insignificance. The Lord exposed them because while they strictly fulfill the trivial, they ignore the important, such as: justice in court matters, benevolence towards the poor and miserable, faithfulness to God and His law.

“Who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” — this was a proverb in the East: concerned about trifles while neglecting the important things, the Pharisees were akin to those who strain out a gnat that has fallen into a drink, but swallow a whole camel (naturally, in the hyperbolic sense), i.e. permit grave sins. *“You cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence”* — the outward cleanliness of the vessel, which concerned the Pharisees, is compared with the inward content of the vessel — the food, gained through plunder and injustice. First of all, it is necessary to care about this inner cleanliness, so that to acquire the daily bread in the honest way. *“You are like whitewashed tombs”* i.e. whitewashed with lime. Every year, on the 15th day of the month of Adar, the caves that served as burial places had their coffins whitewashed so that they would not be approached and touched by passers-by, as that would — according to the law (Num. 19:16) — cause the unclean state for 7 days. From the outside, those whitewashed coffins looked attractive: just as the Pharisees, who outwardly seemed righteous, but in reality were hypocrites and lawbreakers. Further the Lord exposes the Pharisees for building tombstones to the Prophets and adorning monuments to the righteous, who were slain by their fathers. They seemingly worship the slain righteous, but in reality are worse than their fathers (from whom they originated and feel proud about it), because they are ready to kill the Lord Himself. *“Fill up, then, the measure of your father’s guilt”* — i.e. you will surpass the villainy of your fathers. *“I send you Prophets...”* — means the sending of the Apostles and their colleagues to preach evangelical teaching; here, the Lord predicts how the Jews will pursue and persecute them, resembling their fathers that murdered the Old Testament Prophets. *“That on you may come all the righteous blood”*: being evil, the Pharisees will accept the responsibility for all the righteous, whose blood was shed — not only killed by them but by their ancestors, beginning with the blood of Abel killed by his brother Cain, up to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, murdered between the temple and the altar.

Some surmise that upon the orders of king Jehoash, Zechariah was stoned to death in the yard of the Lord’s house (2 Chron. 24:20). Though that very Zechariah was called the son of Jehoiada, this may be his second name, because it was a Jewish custom to have two names. Some ancient interpreters like Saints Basil the Great, Gregory the Theologian and others, surmised that he was the father of John the Baptist. For all the transgressions committed by the leaders of the Jewish people — the Pharisees and Scribes — the Lord announces the severe sentence to Jerusalem: *“Your house is left to you desolate,”* what happened 36 years later, when in the year 70, Titus Flavius with the Roman troops subjected Jerusalem to total destruction. The Lord speaks about this event with deep sadness, pointing at all His love for the malicious people, akin to a bird’s love for its fledglings. *“You shall see Me no more till you say, “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!”* — This means the time of Christ’s Second Coming, when even the unbelievers will be forced against their will to worship His Divinity.

The Widow’s Mite.

(Mark 12:41-44 and Luke 21:1-4).

About the “widow’s mite” that had become an aphorism, concordantly narrate two Evangelists: Saint Mark and Saint Luke. There was a treasury, or a large collection plate, located in the so-called “women’s section” of the temple where people placed their free-will donations. It was customary to donate generously before the feast day of Pascha: everybody entering the temple placed a donation on the plate, according to his means and zeal. The wealthy donated large sums, while a poor widow gave two mites. A “mite” was the smallest coin — equal to a quarter of one kopeck: two mites equaled the smallest Roman coin, which was called “quadrant”. Quadrant was equal to half a kopeck or the quarter of as, and 10 as was equal to one denary – it is about 20 kopecks. The Lord stated that the poor widow *“has put in more than all”*, i.e. not concerning the sum but in comparison with the others’ means.

All the others gave from a surfeit that would not cause them problems, when she dedicated to God all that she had, putting in the last.

About the Second Coming.

(Mat. 24:1-51; Mark 13:1-37; Luke 21:5-38).

After leaving the temple, the Lord and His disciples headed to the Mount of Olives. Along the road, He predicted the destruction of the temple, which occurred in the year 70, when Jerusalem was taken by the Romans and converted it into ruins. Then shortly after, Emperor Trojan obliterated the last traces of the city. In spite of the Roman commander Titus's wish to save the temple as a miracle of art, God's will was fulfilled: because of the flaming torch thrown accidentally by a Roman soldier the temple burnt down. A magnificent view on the Jerusalem temple opened up from the top of the Mount of Olives, and the disciples continued the conversation, concerning their future with the Lord. Christ's disciples assumed that Jerusalem would stand till the end of time, and consequently posed two questions to Him as one: *"Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"* The Lord responds, apparently not separating the two events, like they supposed that to be. In prophetic visions, distant and imminent events are sometimes seen as though in one perspective, they as if blend into one, especially if the imminent event serves as the representation of the following one.

Here the fact that the destruction of Jerusalem and the horrible events following it, as the representation of those horrors that will occur before the end of the world, and Christ's Second Coming, leaves no doubt. At the same time, the Lord gives a chance to understand clearly that His Second Coming will not happen soon after the destruction of Jerusalem.

The Lord presents the appearance of **false "christs"** as the first sign of the coming of God's judgment day. Joseph Flavius, the historian, testifies that before the fall of Jerusalem, there really appeared many false messiahs-deceivers.

The second symptom will be **the wars**, local and distant ones ("And you will hear of wars"). But even these wars and natural calamities will only be the beginning of the coming agonizing horrors, which by their gravity are compared by the Lord with childbirth pains.

The Lord presents as the third sign the severe **persecutions** of His disciples and their followers, which are described in the Book of Acts and about what the history testifies as for e.g. Nero's persecutions and others. The very word "a Christian" was truly hated by the heathen, which resulted in the emergence of countless martyrs for the sake of Christ. *"Then many will be offended"*, i.e. they will renounce from their faith in Christ and will begin to betray — to hand over their brothers for torture and death — in order to save themselves. Many false prophets will appear. During the Roman siege of Jerusalem, those false prophets promised to the Jews the help from heaven. *"He who endures to the end shall be saved,"* — those who will endure all the calamities without betraying Christ, and succumbing to the false prophets, will earn eternal salvation.

The fourth sign of the God's Judgment coming close will **the preaching of the Gospel throughout the whole world**. The New Testament will be preached "as a witness to all the nations," i.e. the Lord will not come before the Gospel would be preached. This sermon will then become the accusing witness at the judgment against those who after hearing it, did not believe.

"Then the end will come." The closest image is the destruction of Jerusalem, although all these signs will be foretelling the coming of the end of the world and the Dread Judgment. These signs are common for the both of these events. Thus: 1) The Judgment of Jerusalem arrived as the consequence of its iniquities and impoverishment of love within its walls ("love of many will grow cold" for "lawlessness will abound"); likewise, the end of the world will arrive as the result of the iniquities multiplication and diminution of love among the people, who will forget that they are brothers in Christ; 2) Jerusalem fell only after the Lord did eve-

rything to save it: it was resounded with the evangelical sermons: likewise, the end of the world will come only after all its nations will hear the Evangelic sermon, so that at the Dread Judgment — like the Jews — they would stand speechless. The Lord then continues to enumerate the particular signs that concern the very destruction of Jerusalem.

“Abomination of desolation,” about which Prophet Daniel spoke in 9:27, — this is about the Roman soldiers, entering into the half-ruined temple with the banners bearing images of the emperor and eagles, which they worshiped, as idols. *“Flee to the mountains,”* where there were many caves and shelters to hide from the Romans. *“Let him who is on the housetop not go down...”* The rooftops were flat and were used for walking or seclusion: during the calamity, those found on the rooftops should immediately flee and not waste the time to go into the house to take the belongings. Likewise those working in the fields should flee to the mountains without returning home to retrieve their clothing, as they normally worked in the fields without their outer garments.

The historian Eusebius testifies, that the Christians in Jerusalem, having remembered that prediction of the Lord, really ran to Pella and the other beyond-Jordan towns, when the Romans were approaching, and thereby avoided the horrors that fell onto the besieged city. The Lord persuades them to pray so that these calamities do not occur when one cannot flee very far away. On a Sabbath — according to the interpretations of the Scribes, one could not travel more than 1 mile away. *“For then there will be great tribulation...”* i.e. such calamities that everybody would have perished if there had been no *“chosen”* among the Jews (those who believed in Christ), for whose sake those days **“will be shortened.”**

Historian Joseph Flavius testifies that indeed, *“all the calamities that had befallen on the different peoples of the world, are insignificant compared to those that had been inflicted on the Jewish people.”* During the siege of Jerusalem and its outlying areas, more than a million Jews perished within those boundaries. Many perished from starvation, which was so great that one mother killed and ate her own infant. A vast number of Jews were crucified, thereby fulfilling their own curse when they demanded from Pilate the crucifixion of Christ: *“His blood is on us and on our children”* (Mat. 27:25). All those disasters were the fulfillment of the prophecies uttered by Moses (Deut. 28:49-57). Titus, who surrounded Jerusalem, originally wanted to force the Jews to surrender the city by hunger. However, the affairs of the Empire demanded his speedy return to Rome, so he decided to take Jerusalem by storm, thereby shortening the period of suffering for the besieged.

The Lord then proceeds anew with the speech on His Second Coming. *“False christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs...”* — this means the false miracles, which will sometimes mislead even the righteous. According to Ap. Paul (2 Thes. 2:9-10) and Revelation (chap. 13), these signs will be performed by antichrist and his servants. The Son of God’s appearance will be like a flash of lightning, i.e. undeniably evident to everyone. Contrary to the false messiah (who will be hiding in the wilderness or in hidden quarters), the true Messiah, in commencing His judgment over the world, will make it evident and frightening everywhere where will be the spiritually dead sinners — just like eagles gather where there are corpses.

“After the tribulation...” the calamities that had befallen Jerusalem will end and people will become indifferent, which is mentioned further on (Mat. 24:37-39). Saint Luke adds that *“Jerusalem will be trampled by Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled,”* — the long period of time must pass from the destruction of Jerusalem to Christ’s Second Coming, during which (according to Ap. Paul), the great number of heathens will enter Christ’s Church, and will become the new spiritual Israel (Rom. 11:25).

“Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light” — these words are not as definitive as those of Luke’s verse 24 (about Jerusalem being trampled by heathens for a lengthy period), telling about the significance of the period between the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of the world. However, they do let know that before the end of the world, the totally different days, which through their

frightening events will surpass every imagination, will arrive. The Greek text of this particular verse, gives the basis for the following paraphrasing: “Do not think that immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem, My Coming and the end of the world will follow. No, it will be otherwise. For that to happen, there will come the different days. Then the sun will darken and the moon will not give its light etc...” Saint Matthew applies the word “abbeya” (then). However, in the Holy Scripture, it doesn’t normally mean “immediately, straight away, following that” but simply: “unexpectedly, suddenly”, which is like it is translated in the Russian text. Bishop Michael states that sometimes under this ancient Prophetic word “abbeya” many centuries might be meant.

“Powers of the heavens will be shaken,” i.e. the whole structure of earth will be shaken. Saint Luke in chap. 21:25-26 points at the characteristic features of those frightening times: there will be despondency and confusion among the nations of the world: the seas will roar with agitation, people will begin to moan from fear and anticipation of the arrival of calamities, coming over the universe. *“Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven”* — Saint Chrysostom considers that it will be the sign of a Cross, which will appear before the coming of Christ the Savior Himself, just as an earthly king is preceded by his royal heraldic banner. It will be that sign, which will force the unbelieving Jews and denying God, in the late and fruitless burst of repentance, to exclaim involuntarily: *“Blessed is he that comes in the name of the Lord!”* And seeing how they had been deluded, living previously in the darkness of disbelief, all the unbelievers “will mourn.” *“They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”*

On the signal of the mysterious trumpet, all the dead will resurrect and be gathered by the Angels from all the corners of the world. Moses used to call the Jews for gatherings by blowing into silver trumpets: this form of convening became a custom and was used by the Jews thereafter (Lev. 25:9; Num. 10:2; Jud. 3:27). This is why the Savior uses this descriptive form, familiar to all the Jews, to denote the act of God, on Whose order the Angels *“will gather together His elect from the four winds,”* i.e. from all the ends of the earth. The Angels will gather the “elect” for eternal glory, as well as “all the workers of iniquity” for eternal suffering.

“Now learn this parable from the fig tree...” Just as about the coming of Summer it was judged by the branches of the fig tree, so is it necessary to judge about the coming of the end of the world by the signs of the times, which the Lord had enumerated previously. *“This generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place”* — the word “this” is contrasted to “that”, about which it is said further in verse 36. Indeed, the destruction of Jerusalem took place during the Lord’s contemporary generation. However, this expression can be related to the end of the world: then, as Saint Chrysostom interprets, the words “this generation” can be understood as “This is the generation of them that seek him” (Psalm 24:6), the generation of the believed in Christ, which despite all the horrors will endure till the end. *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will by no means pass away”* — this confirms the irrevocability of the said prophesy. Having witnessed the precise fulfillment of the Lord’s prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem, no one can have a doubt that the prophecy about His Second Coming will also be fulfilled with equal accuracy. *“But of that day and hour no one knows,”* and according to Saint Mark, not even **the Son** — naturally, as a human, not as God.

According to Saint Luke, just as before the Great Flood during Noah’s times, people will be living quite care-freely, and the day of Christ’s Second Coming will arrive unexpectedly like a net, snaring all living matter on earth (Luke 17:26-27 and 21:34:35). This comparison of the last days with those of Noah’s times is found in the Gospel of Saint Matthew. *“Then two men will be in the field...”* — these words show how swiftly and decisively the separation between the righteous and the unrighteous will occur, even though at the moment of Christ’s Second Coming they would be very close to one another, involved in the same activity, and even if they slept in the same bed (Luke 17:34).

“Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” — from this naturally comes out the necessity for constant vigilance: the Lord desires that we should not sleep spiritually, should not be indifferent, but be attentive to the signs of the times and always be ready to meet Him by leading virtuous live. Because of its unexpectedness and suddenness, the Lord’s coming is often compared to the appearance of a thief. The ensuing parable about the faithful overseer or servant and the negligent one, is aimed at suggesting the necessity of constant spiritual vigilance. This parable has an especially close relation to the clergy and civil leaders, who consequently must fear to be negligent in fulfilling their responsibilities, remembering that they will have to give an account of their actions.

The Parable about the 10 Virgins.

(Mat. 25:31-46).

In this parable, the Second Coming of Christ is portrayed as the arrival of the bridegroom at the bride’s house. The arrival of the bridegroom, accompanied by “friends of the bridegroom” (John 3:29; Mat. 9:15), was celebrated very triumphantly. He was met by people with lighted lamps in their hands, and as he might be late, they had to have a supply of oil in case the lamps’ oil would run out before his late arrival. Using this example that was well known in the East, the Lord compares the waiting for His Second Coming with that of the bridegroom, who was to be met by 10 virgins with lighted lamps in their hands. Five of them were “wise”, i.e. far-seeing and carried extra oil, while the other five were “foolish”, i.e. not very reasonable, and didn’t take any spare oil with them, so their lamps’ oil started to run out and the light fade. While they were away purchasing more oil, the bridegroom arrived and the doors of the wedding-hall were locked, and they were not allowed by the bridegroom to participate in the wedding feast.

The “wise” virgins represent all the true Christians that are always ready to meet the Lord, and that have with their sincere faith, good works (oil); while the “foolish” virgins represent the Christians by name only, who are indifferent and lack virtues. Such will not attend the wedding feast, i.e. the Heavenly Kingdom, because the Lord said: *“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven”* (Mat. 7:21). The last words of the parable: *“Watch, therefore...”* (Therefore, be alert) again indicate the necessity for constant spiritual vigilance in order to meet the Lord, as the day and hour of His coming is hidden from us.

About the Final Judgment.

(Mat.25:31-46).

The full picture of the Dread Judgment over the whole humanity, , is drawn only by Evangelist Matthew through the words of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, in connection with the Lord’s sermons on the necessity of continuous spiritual vigilance and readiness to meet His Second Coming. The description of the Dread Judgment is preceded by the parable about talents (Mat. 25:14-30), very similar to the parable about the ten *minas*, narrated by Saint Luke (19:11-18). The idea of this parable is that everyone will have to give the answer to God at the Dread Judgment Day how he utilized his God-given abilities — both natural and grace-endowed — and what good he achieved with their help.

The Lord commences His narrative about the Dread Judgment by comparing His Second Coming with the triumphant entrances of earthly kings “in their glory.” *“He will sit on the throne of His glory”* — that means that the Lord will appear as the King and Judge of the universe. He will be accompanied by *“all the holy Angels,”* and will be met by all the people that would alive at the time of His coming, as well as by those, who ever lived on the earth. Before Christ’s coming, there will be the universal resurrection. Moreover, those resurrected will be in the “spiritual” bodies, while those that are alive will change instantly (1 Cor. 15:25-54). *“He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the*

goats,” — the sheep represent the righteous, because they serve as an example of innocence and simplicity (John 10:7-14; Psalm 100:3 and Psalm 74:1), while the goats — the condemned, as they serve as an example of evil moral qualities (Ezek. 34:17) and they produce no fruit — no wool, no milk, no lambs — that what all sheep produce. The sheep will be placed on “His right hand,” because the right side was always regarded as an honored position, appointed only to the very close people, while the “goats” will be placed on the left less honored side, in this instance, being the place for the condemned. “*Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world*” — those Christians that have been worthy of receiving God the Father’s blessing, often are called in the New Testament as the inheritors of the promised blessings, the true children of God, to whom belong the blessings that have been prepared for them by God (Rom. 8:17; Gal. 4:6-7; Heb. 1:14). God at the very beginning had foreseen the works that will be done. That is why at the very beginning, He had determined the appropriate recompense for those works: for the good works — the Kingdom of Heaven, while for the evil works — tortures. As we can see from this portrayal of the Dread Judgment, the righteous will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven for their works of love and mercy to their neighbors.

Faith is not mentioned because it is supposed to exist by the actual acts of love themselves, which are the fruits of love (John 13:35; 1 Cor. 13:1). Likewise, prayer and other deeds of faith are not mentioned, because without them, there is no true love for one’s neighbor or the sincere, non-hypocritical works of mercy. There are mentioned only the works of mercy, because they attest to true faith and piety of a Christian (see James 2:14-26; 1 John 3:15-18, 4:20-21). The reply from the righteous testifies of their humility and realization of their unworthiness. This is the law of moral self-improvement: the more a person improves, the more he realizes the insignificance of his achievements.

The Lord calls His followers “My brothers,” as close and related to Him in spirit, in disposition, in suffering; He calls them “the least,” because they are humbled, because they are poor, outcasts. “*Depart from Me, you cursed*” — cursed, meaning deprived of blessings. They are condemned “*into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels*” — here, the fire represents the highest degree of tortures, as the death by burning with the fire is the cruelest form of punishment.

This example is taken from the fire in the valley of Genomes, to the southwest of Jerusalem, where during the Jews’ digression from the true faith, were brought the sacrifices to Moloch. Later, it was used to dump waste and corpses of the executed, and in order to purify the area, there was a constant fire burning. This is how the area got its name as the valley of fire, which began to serve as an example of eternal tortures for the sinner. The eternal tortures were specifically allotted to the rebelling against God spirits. However, as the sinners become the participants in that evil, which the devil and his angels sow, they too are sentenced for the tortures. “*And these will go away into everlasting punishment*” — the tortures for the sinners, which contrary to the teachings of some false prophets, will have no end as they voluntarily rejected God’s love. As many surmise, these tortures will consist of the terrible pangs of conscience, which will remain fruitless. Some of its traces are already experienced in this life, such is, for example, the state of perpetual melancholy. So great will be the bliss of the righteous, beginning sometimes here on the earth.

Great Wednesday.

The High Priests’ Decision to Kill Christ.

(Mat. 26:1-16; Mark 14:1-11; Luke 22:1-6)

Having finished the above sermons to His disciples, the Lord predicted the fast approach of the hour of His sufferings on the cross through the words narrated only by Evange-

list Matthew: *“You know that after two days is the Passover, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified.”* The feast of the Passover began on the evening of the 14th of Nisan, which fell on a Friday that year (see John 19:14): we can conclude from this, that those words were pronounced either on a Tuesday night or on Wednesday.

Passover was the greatest and most triumphant feast among the Jews. It was celebrated in the memory of the liberation of Jews from the Egyptian bondage. The word “Pascha” itself is a derivative from the Jewish “peisah,” which means: “a passage”, “mercy” in memory of that moment, when after killing the Egyptian first-born, the Angel seeing the blood of a sacrificial lamb upon the door jambs and cross-beams of the Jewish houses passed by, thereby sparing the Jewish first-born (Exod. Chap. 12). Together with the feast day of “Unleavened Bread” which began on the second day of the Passover, the Passover itself was celebrated for 8 days — from the evening of the 14th up to the 21st of the month of Nisan, which corresponds to the end of our March and the beginning of April. On the 10th day of Nisan, the heads of families had to select a one-year-old lamb, free of any defects. Then on the 14th day, it was prepared according to established practice, sacrificed in the courtyard of the sanctuary and baked. During the Passover celebrations, in the memory of the original smearing of door-jambs and crossbeams with blood, the sacrificial table was sprinkled with the blood of the slaughtered lamb. That’s why the lamb was sacrificed near the tabernacle, and then within the temple. The baked lamb was eaten in its entirety, without leaving the bones or veins — with the unleavened bread and bitter greens. The eating commenced precisely at the sunset, on the 14th of Nisan. Before anything else, everybody approached the chalice filled with watered-down wine: after praising God, the head of the family drank from it, followed in turn by everybody that was present. This was called **the first cup**. Everybody then washed their hands and thanked God. They then commenced to taste the Pascal lamb, together with the unleavened bread, bitter greens and thick sauce, made of dates, figs, grapes and vinegar. At the same time they pronounced the words of praise, after what the serving plates were taken away and another chalice of watered-down wine was brought in. The serving plates were removed in order to arouse interest among the children, prompting them to ask questions that would receive a detailed narrative about the feast day history (Exod. 12:26-27).

The head of the family told the story of the Jewish bondage in Egypt, their liberation and the establishment of the feast day — the Passover — to commemorate that event. When the serving dishes were brought in again, he would pronounce: *“This — Pascha, is eaten in memory of the Lord sparing our homes in Egypt”*; raising the bread and the bitter greens, he explained that the first remind them of the haste of their flight from Egypt, while the second — the bitterness of their Egyptian bondage. Following that, they sang the first part of the so-called **Hallelujah**, namely Psalms 110-114, said the short prayers and once again drank wine from the chalice, which was called **the second chalice**. They again washed their hands and ate the lamb, bitter greens and bread. The lamb had to be totally consumed before the next day. Then they again washed their hands and drank from **the third chalice** — called **the chalice of benediction**, because drinking from it, the head of the family uttered a special prayer of praise to God for His exceptional grace. In conclusion, **the fourth chalice**, called **“gallel”**, was drunk because following that, the second part of Hallelujah (Psalms 115-118) was sung. The common belief among the liturgists is that this paschal supper laid the foundation for our Christian Eucharist — the mystery of Communion.

The words: *“after two days is the Passover, and the Son of Man will be delivered up to be crucified,”* shows the Divine prevision of the Lord. He knew the day of His death, despite His enemies stating: *“not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people.”*

Later, all the three forecasters relate about the meeting of the high priests and Jewish elders about the destruction of Jesus. Fearing to agitate the people who might intervene for the Lord, they decided to take Him cunningly and quietly away from the people, after the feast day. Possessed by frenzied rage and finding the betrayer, they decided not to wait for the end of the feast period. Saint Matthew narrates that this meeting took place in the house

of the high priest Caiaphas, in his courtyard. The courtyards in the East were found inside of the building and often served as the meeting places. The first name of Caiaphas was Joseph, while Caiaphas was his nick-name of the family name. He was the son-in-law of the former high priest Anna or Annanas, who was replaced by the order of the Roman pro-consul.

Further, the first two Evangelists, Saints Matthew and Mark, narrate about the anointment of the Lord by a certain woman in the house of Simon the leper. The Church tradition differentiates this anointment to that performed by Mary, the sister of resurrected Lazarus, occurred 6 days before the Passover and before the Lord's entry to Jerusalem. Simon was called the leper, because apparently the Lord had healed him of leprosy. According to the Church tradition (represented in a very moving way in the church service following Great Wednesday), the woman that approached the Lord with the intention of anointing Him with expensive oil, was a repenting sinner. She brought **the myrrh** in an alabaster container. The myrrh was the aromatic liquid, made of oil and scented additives — usually, the oil was the finest olive oil, combined with fragrant resins like nard or Commiphora gum and various flowers. Alabaster is the type of marble, known for its lightness, transparency and beauty. Vases, urns, perfuming-pans and containers for preserving the aromatic substances were made from this marble. In the East, the anointment with oil was used not only in the highest sense, like anointing the kings and high priests, but within the ordinary life by the people of wealth and fame for delight. The myrrh was applied to the head, forehead, face, beard, clothing (Psalm 23:5; 133:2; Eccl. 9:8 and others), and as a sign of exceptional respect — to the feet.

“But there were some who were indignant among themselves, and said, “Why was this fragrant oil wasted?” — not knowing the thoughts and profound feelings of reverence in the woman-sinner, and being aware of the Lord's intolerance towards extravagance, who put mercy and benefaction above all else, the disciples condemned her act. However, in that case they were mistaken. The Lord justified her actions as coming from warm faith and sincere contrition. *“For you have the poor with you always”* and you can always show benevolence towards them: *“But Me you do not have always”* — this was the concealed indication about His death. Apart, the Lord gives a special symbolic meaning to this action: *“She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial”* — as this was an ancient practice to anoint the bodies of the dead with aromatics. As a reward for her action, the Lord foretells the perpetual commemoration of her deed among the Christians. And we see this — the narration about it is not only recorded in the Gospel, but also included in our Church Service: following Great Wednesday, our Church glorifies this woman's action, drawing the parallel between that and Judas' betrayal, which occurred later on the same day, soon after that case.

“Then one of the twelve called Judas Iscariot went to the chief priests and said, ‘What are you willing to give me if I deliver Him to you?’ — “Then” — this expresses not only the consequential events, but also the inner, logical connection. Judas expected earthly gifts, worldly riches and dominion from Jesus Christ: his avarice was losing patience in seeing the Teacher's total non-covetousness. According to Evangelist John (John 12:6), he began to reward himself from the treasury box, secretly appropriating the put into the box donations. The incident in the house of Simon the leper finally made him understand that it was futile to expect enrichment from the Teacher of voluntary poverty and self-abasement. The annoyance with the Lord, Who as he thought, deceived his expectations and a desire to utilize any situation for personal gain, made him a betrayer.

Knowing of the Sanhedrin's decision to seize the Lord, he approached the high priests in order to offer his services for money — to betray the Lord in an isolated place, away from people. *“What are you willing to give me?”* — These words indicate his annoyance and rancor towards his Teacher, whom he decided to betray without arguing about the price. That's why they nominated a paltry sum — the price of a white slave — *“thirty pieces of silver”*, i.e. 30 silver coins, so-called *“blessed shekels”*, the approximate value of each being 80 kopecks, making in totality 24 silver rubles. Apparently, this sum was offered to show their con-

tempt to the Lord Jesus Christ, taking into account the stinginess and greed of the betrayer that would not start bargaining. And indeed, Judas was very compliant, not demanding more, and “*from that time he sought opportunity to betray him*”, thee opportunity when the Lord was alone, without many people that usually surrounded Him. The nominated sum fulfilled Zachariah’s prophecy (11:12-13) about the 30 silver pieces, with which the ungrateful people evaluated the fatherly care of Jehovah about them.

Great Thursday.

The Mystical Supper.

(Mat. 26:17-29, Mark 14:12-25; Luke 22:7-38 and John 13-17)

All the four Evangelists narrate about the Lord’s Mystical Supper with His disciples — on the eve of His cruciferous sufferings, but not all report the circumstances of this supper with equal detail. Apart from that, the expressions used by the first three Evangelists about the day, when the Mystical Supper happened, appear somewhat contradict to those applied by the fourth Evangelist, Saint John. The only thing of absolute certainty is that the Last Supper took place on the fifth day of the week, i.e. according to our calendar, **Thursday**. Likewise it is clear that the Lord was condemned and crucified on the sixth day of the week — **Friday**, remained in the tomb on the seventh day of the week — **Saturday**, and resurrected from the dead on **the first day** of the week. However, what brings out the difference in opinion is the relation of the Last Supper to the celebrated then Jewish Passover, i.e. was the Last Supper on the 14th of Nisan in the evening of the Jewish Passover, or was it on the 13th of Nisan, i.e. on the eve of the Passover celebration? These confusions regarding the Last Supper day, are born from the following indications of the Evangelists:

Mat. 26:17 “*Now on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread...*”

Mark 14:12 “*Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they killed the Passover lamb...*”

Luke 22:7 “*Then came the Day of Unleavened Bread...*”

John 13:1 “*Now before the Feast of the Passover...*”

The Passover began on the evening of the 14th Nisan and consequently, if to take to the strict, biblical word usage, “the first Day of the Unleavened Bread feast” can only be the day after it, i.e. the 15th of Nisan. Apparently, the first three Evangelists didn’t take to the strict, biblical phraseology, but to the everyday, conversational one. That’s why it was possible to call “the first Day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread,” not the 15th of Nisan, which falls on the day after the partaking of the Pascha, not even the 14th (when the Pascha is eaten), but the 13th — the day before the Passover — as it is clearly indicated by Evangelist John, stating that the Last Supper was “**before the Feast of the Passover**”. Moreover, Saint John has other testimonies that the Jewish Passover began only on Friday evening, when the Lord was crucified: John 18:28, — those leading Jesus to Pilate didn’t enter the Praetorium, “*lest they should be defiled, but that they may eat the Passover,*” and John 19:31 — the Jews hurried to break the knees of those crucified, so as not to leave the bodies on the crosses on Saturday, “*for that Sabbath was a great day,*” i.e. Saturday coincided with the first day of the Passover and consequently, the Pascha was eaten on the eve, on Friday, after the Lord was crucified.

There appears a question— why did Christ perform the Jewish Passover one day earlier than it was required, (which He undoubtedly performed on the day at the Mystical Supper), even though the Apostles do not describe it in detail, because their main attention was

focused on establishing the New Testament Pascha, the Holy Communion of Christ's Flesh and Blood. The basic assumption is that because the evening of the 14th of Nisan that year was the beginning of the Sabbath's rest (Saturday was approaching), so the Passover lamb was slain on the evening of the 13th. This coincides with Saint Mark's denotation: "*When they killed the Passover lamb*" and with Saint Luke's: "*When the Passover must be killed*". Besides, it was known that after the Babylonian bondage, the Jews — especially the Galileans — began to celebrate even those days, preceding the approaching of the feast day and in particular, for the Galileans that arrived at Jerusalem, the lamb was always slain one day earlier, i.e. on the 13th instead of the 14th. This was the great relief to the temple workers, to whom slaughtering 256,000 lambs in one day of the 14th of Nisan would have been too burdensome.

Finally, it is assumed that the Lord performed the Passover one day earlier (as He knew that the following day He would fall into the hands of the Jews and be crucified), so that the Sacrifice on the Cross — symbolized by the Paschal lambs — would be brought the same day and hour when the Passover lambs were slain. In any case, we know that the aim of Saint John was to complete the narratives of the first three Evangelists. Therefore, we must accept his indisputable indication that the Last Supper took place before the Passover feast came, i.e. not on the 14th but on the 13th of Nisan.

The actual preparation for the Last Supper was quite miraculous. The Lord sent two disciples from Bethany to Jerusalem, telling them that they would meet the person carrying a water urn. They were to follow him into whatever house he entered, and tell its owner: "*The Teacher says, 'My time is at hand.'*" I cannot postpone the celebration of the Passover, and today "*will keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.*" According to Saint Luke, Peter and John, the disciples went forth and everything happened just as the Lord said. The owner of the house gave them a large, prepared chamber where they prepared the Pascha. The Lord's all-knowing power became evident in all these events. With that, in the view of the time coming close when the great and final events of His earthly life had to take place, the Lord's words indicate the sense of haste. Saint John begins his narrative about the Supper in a moving way: "*Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end*" — here, the Divinity and humanity of Christ are being united: as God, He knows of the nearness of His hour and approaches it Himself; as a human, He humanly grieves over His forthcoming physical separation from His disciples, and this creates the surplus of love towards them. And this love of His "till the end" the Lord revealed in everything that was said and done during the Mystical Supper.

Saint Luke states that the Lord began the supper with the following words: "*With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the Kingdom of Heaven.*" This was the last Paschal supper that the Lord could celebrate with His disciples in His earthly life; instead of that legally sanctioned Passover, He then intended to establish the genuine Pascha — the Mystical Supper of His Flesh and Blood, the mystery of the Eucharist. That was the last Old Testament Passover for all His followers: from that moment on, they would have Holy Communion of His Flesh and Blood until they enter into the closest and most sincere communion with Him in the next blessed life — "*in the day without night of His kingdom*", as it is sung in one of the Troparions of the Paschal canon. The closeness of communion of all the true Christians with Christ in that future life can be partly compared to that closeness which the Lord had with His disciples at the Mystical Supper. Consequently, the meaning of the above mentioned words of the Lord is: "Such Passover as we are performing today will not be repeated again until in the next life, in the triumphant Church, it will be performed in its complete and final measure". According to Saint Luke, immediately after and following the Old Testament ritual, the Lord gave His disciples a chalice with wine to drink, saying: "*I will not drink the fruit of the vine until the Kingdom of God comes*" and according to Saint Mark, "*when I drink it*

new in the Kingdom of God.” The Church teaches us about what new wine is that when it sings on the day of Christ’s Resurrection: “*Come to the birth of the new wine and join in the Divine joy of Christ’s Kingdom.*” Hence, as wine is the symbol of joy and happiness, the new grape harvest, the new wine, is the Divine joy of Christ’s kingdom.

It must be assumed that after those words of Christ, the Passover viands were consumed with the usual prayers and rituals, which the Evangelists regarded as superfluous to speak of. Their task was to denote the completely new Christian Passover established by the Lord — the Mystery of the Eucharist. This New Testament supper began with washing the feet.

The Washing of the Feet.

(John 13:2-20).

There was a custom to have the feet washed before the supper, and that was done by a servant. However this custom was not always carried out (Luke 7:44); evidently, this was not fulfilled in Christ’s small community, because the Lord Himself meant to show His disciples the example of humility and selfless love. Saint Luke tells that during the supper, an argument between the disciples about who among them was the senior, took place. Apparently that argument became the cause to show the disciples the visual example of humility and mutual love, by washing their feet. This washing of the feet is described in detail by Evangelist John alone — who usually completes the narratives of the other Evangelists. “*Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God,*” — the meaning of these words is such: Human God was allowed by Father God to utilize all means that He might find useful in order to save people — that’s the reason why now He performs such an unusual task, which does not coincide with the human notions. The Lord stands up, removes His outer garment so that it won’t be in the way, only with His tunic left. Then He ties a towel around His waist like a servant, He fills a wash basin with water and commences to wash the feet of His disciples, drying them with the towel, with which He was tied around. This was a silent yet demonstrative behest of the departing Teacher to His disciples — the behest of **humility and mutual service**, without any superiority of one before another. What a powerful refutation of the false Roman-catholic teaching about the supremacy of Saint Apostle Peter above all the other Apostles, and built on that false dogma about the Pope’s primacy in the Church.

“Then He came to Simon Peter...” it can be seen from this phrase that Simon was not the first one that He approached, and that evidently he was reclining away from the Lord (comp. verse 24). Peter was astounded by the Lord’s actions and found them incompatible with His high merit; that was why for the second time in his life, he contradicted Christ (Mat 16:22): “*You shall never wash my feet!*” Because of this declaration, he heard the frightening threat — if he persisted in being disobedient up to the end and placing his mind instead of Christ’s, then he will have no “part” with Christ, i.e. he will be excommunicated from Christ’s company. Scared of that threat and inflamed with love for his Divine Teacher, Peter offers: “wash not my feet only, but also my hands and my head,” i.e. expresses as though readiness to obey His Lord even more than others, who only have their feet washed.

“How in this personal feature in characterized Simon Peter”, says Bishop Michael, “who decides to go to the Lord on the waves and then cries out — I sink, who strikes the servant of the high priests with his sword and then runs away, who penetrates into the courtyard where the Lord was judged, there repudiates Him and leaves with bitter tears”. In His answer to Peter, the Lord reveals the high purpose of His actions and at the same time as though consoles him after the threat, expressed to him. “*You are not all clean*” — is the distinct hint about traitor Judas. Having finished washing their feet, the Lord explained His intention to His disciples, instructing them that they too should serve one another with love, not regarding any effort as being demeaning and not boasting one in front of another.

The Lord Announces of the Betrayer.

(Mat. 26:21-25; Mark 14:18-21; Luke 22:21-23 and John 13:21-30).

Being the closest to the Lord at the Last Supper, having rested his head On Christ's bosom as narrated by him, Saint John gives the most detailed description of the Lord's exposure of His betrayer. Having washed the feet of His disciples and given them the edification about it, the Lord was "**troubled in spirit**" from the knowledge that in those solemn hours, when He was preparing to establish the great mystery of Communion of His Flesh and Blood and give the disciples His last directives, His betrayer was in their midst. Of course, maybe in order to arouse repentance within Judas about that planned by him terrible crime when the Lord exclaimed: "*Most assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me*". Quite understandably, those words provoked uproar among the disciples: it produced the feeling of profound sorrow because their Beloved Teacher would find betrayal among them. According to Saint Mark, "*they began to be sorrowful*", while according to Saint Matthew, "they were exceedingly sorrowful." Clearly realizing the profound decline of human nature, they all, as though having no reliance upon themselves, ask: "*Lord, is it I?*" and exchange glances, according to Saint John, perplexed about whom the Lord meant. According to Saint Matthew, Judas as well asked "*Rabbi, is it I?*" and the Lord quietly answered him: "*You have said it*", trying for the last time to arouse repentance in him, even though it was fruitless. "*Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved*" – so narrates the beloved disciple of Christ, John the Theologian, not naming himself because of his humility. Customarily, the face and chest of those reclining at the refectory faced the table, the left elbow rested on a pillow while the right arm was free to reach out towards the food. The legs were lying at an angle, away from the table so that the next person would be not at the feet of the first person, but close to his chest.

It was precisely that way that John had his head close to Christ's chest — in other words, his head was resting on Christ's chest. Taking advantage of this, Saint Peter made a sign to Saint John to ask the Lord about the betrayer. That shows that Peter wasn't that close to the Lord and in the terms of the contemporary to them customs, didn't occupy the place next to the Lord — contrary to the Roman-catholic false teaching about Peter's primacy). With especial temerity, with which could dare to speak only the beloved disciple John, he drew very near to the Lord's chest and softly asked: "*Lord, who is it?*" And the Lord answered: "*It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped it....He gave it to Judas Iscariot.*" At the Passover supper, the bread was usually dipped in a sauce of dates and figs. Sometimes, the head of the family distributed such pieces of bread as a sign of his special affection. And of course through this act the Lord once again wanted to awaken the feeling of repentance in Judas.

This was evident only to John. As the first three Evangelists narrate, the Lord told the other Apostles about the betrayer only in general terms: "*The hand of My betrayer is with Me on the table.*" "*Woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed*" — here, the Lord focuses attention on the miserable lot of the betrayer, and not on the hideousness of the act, and expresses grief about him. "However, some will say," says Saint Chrysostom: "If it is written that Christ will suffer like this, then why Judas is condemned? He only fulfilled what was written. However, he didn't do that with that thought but through malice. If one doesn't look at the intention, then the devil can be released from blame. But no, no. The one and the other deserve countless tortures, even though the whole world would be saved. Because it wasn't Judas's betrayal that gave us salvation, but Christ's wisdom and His great plan that converted the evil acts of others to our benefit. Then what, one might ask, if Judas didn't betray Christ, wouldn't He be betrayed by someone else? If everyone was righteous, then there would be no fulfillment in the formation of our salvation — let it not be so — because the Wise One Himself knew how to arrange our salvation, even if there was no betrayal. His Wisdom is great and incomprehensible. That's why Jesus calls him a wretched man". In giving Judas a piece

of bread, the Lord wanted to arouse repentance in Iscariot, but with his gloomy soul happened the absolutely opposite thing: *“Now after the piece of bread, satan entered him.”*

Despite the Lord’s gesture and words of warning, calling him towards repentance, Judas — as it happens with the souls that are deeply polluted with evil — became more embittered against the Lord. Reading the hearts, the Lord saw what was happening in Judas’s soul. Not wanting to expose that openly before all the disciples — in case they might decide to take forceful measures against Judas — and not to raise any useless thoughts of impeding the Divine predetermination, the Lord uttered the words to Judas, which he alone would understand: *“What you do, do quickly”* — *“Whatever you have decided upon, do it quickly”* — is the Lord’s authoritative order, eager to realize God’s will as soon as possible and to fulfill His act as the Atoner of mankind. At the same time, the plausible excuse would liberate the group of disciples from the presence of Judas; establish the great mystery of the Eucharist **without** his unworthy participation, and give the disciples final, parting edification.

Saint John confirms that no one understood those words, including John himself, not suspecting the betrayal to occur that very night. Everyone thought that the Lord was giving instructions to Judas about purchasing all that was necessary for the feast-day. This is the fresh proof that the feast-day had not yet arrived and consequently, the Last Supper was performed on the eve of the Jewish Passover, 13th of Nisan. It would have been impossible to purchase anything on the evening of the feast-day itself, and it would not have been possible to find beggars to help them, because that night, everyone — the rich and poor — did not come out of their homes, celebrating the Passover according to the law. Blessed Theophylactus as if supposes that with the words *“And it was night”* the Evangelist might have had in mind the mental night, that spiritual gloom that finally covered the gloomed with covetousness soul of Judas-betrayer.

Further on, Saint John begins to narrate the Lord’s farewell conversation with His disciples, beginning with the words: *“Now the Son of Man is glorified,”* which is heard in the evening during our Church service on Great Thursday, while reading the first Gospel of the Holy Passions. However, it is imperative to assume that with Judas’s exit, the Lord first established the mystery of the Eucharist, about which narrate the first 3 Evangelists, while John does not. It was only after that, when He addressed to the disciples with those words, which Saint John tells of in detail, adding it to that which was not mentioned by the first three Evangelists.

The Establishment of the Eucharist Mystery.

(Mat. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25 and Luke 22:19-20).

All the three forecasters narrate about this event in nearly the same detail. The Lord **“took”** the bread, blessed it and in distributing it among the disciples, said: *“Take, eat; this is My Body.”* The word “bread” here is **“artos”** in Greek, which means “the leavened bread”, that one made with yeast, which is different to “aksimon”, the bread that is unleavened, which was eaten by the Jews in the Passover. It must be assumed that such leavened bread was especially prepared on the Lord’s instructions, in order to establish the new Mystery. The significance of such bread lies in that it is seemingly alive, symbolizing life, as opposed to unleavened bread, which is lifeless. **“Blessed”**, **“gave thanks”** indicate the verbal expression of gratitude to God the Father, as it happened before, for instance, at the moment of Lazarus’s resurrection: the requested was fulfilled at the very moment of appealing. That’s why at that moment it too became the object of gratitude.

It is extremely important to note that the Lord said: *“This is My Body”*: He didn’t say **“this bread”** but specifically **“this”** because at that moment, the bread ceased to be bread and became the genuine Body of Christ, retaining the appearance of bread. The Lord didn’t say: “Here is the image of My Body, but “this is My Body” (Saint Chrysostom and Blessed Theophylactus). As a result of the Lord’s Prayer, the bread took on the nature of flesh while preserving its outward appearance of bread. “Because we are weak,” says Blessed

Theophylactus, “and would not dare to eat raw meat, especially human flesh, we are offered bread, though **in reality it is flesh.**” “Why did the disciples,” asks Saint Chrysostom, “not become agitated when hearing this? Because prior to this, the Lord said many important things to them about that Mystery” (recall His sermon about the bread descending from heavens, John chap. 6). The term “Body of Christ” means all the physical nature of Human God, inseparably connected with His soul and Divinity. This same nature of Human God is given in the form of wine, not as a separate identity but only for the fullness of its visible form. That’s why the expression “Partake the Holy Communion in its two forms” is an absolutely precise expression — meaning: partake the Holy Communion **of one and the same essence.**

However, this doesn’t mean that the Flesh can replace the Blood and that it is sufficient to have Communion of the Flesh alone. If this was so, the Lord would not have established the Communion **under the two forms.** As all the three forecasters narrate, having communed His disciples with the Flesh, the Lord picked up the chalice and again **gave thanks**, i.e. appealed to the Holy Spirit in a prayer that changed the wine into the genuine Blood of Christ, and said: “*Drink from it, all of you. For this is My Blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.*” It is not by chance that the words “**all of you**” were included. The wine could not be divided like the bread, which the Lord Himself divided and distributed among the disciples. As there was **one** chalice, it had to be passed from hand to hand. So that nobody would be missed and would not let the chalice to pass by, the Lord resolutely declares: “*Drink from it, all of you.*” Here one cannot but see the accusation of the Roman-Catholics, who deprived their laymen of Christ’s chalice. As Blessed Theophylactus explains: “As not everyone can take in the firm food, but only those of the perfect age, everybody can drink. It is for this reason that the Lord said: “all of you”. Again, the Lord declares: “***This is My Blood***” — not only its image, not symbolic blood, but genuine, real blood.

What does “**of the New Testament**” mean? As Saint Chrysostom explains: “Just as the Old Testament had sheep and lambs, so the New Testament has the Lord’s Blood.” With that the Lord shows that He endured death. That’s why He mentions the New and the Old Testament, for it too was renewed with blood. By its initial meaning, the word “**testament**” is identical to the word “will”. The testament holds within itself promises, together with the conditions for obtaining them; in this instance, it is the observance of God’s commandments. From this point of view, the word **testament** may be explained as the “agreement” between God and people.

An agreement is always confirmed and signed. And the Lord wants to say that the Old Testament between God and the people is replaced by the New agreement, signed with **His Blood.** “*Shed for many for the remission of sins*” — means, that the sufferings of the One and only Son of God served as **the relenting sacrifice** for the sins of the whole human race (**many** is said instead of **all**), which are forgiven to all those, who believe in Christ and partake of His Ever-Pure Flesh and Blood. In the 11th chapter of the first Epistle to Corinthians, both Saints Luke and Paul state that the Lord added to that: “*Do this in remembrance of Me*”. Therefore, the Eucharist cannot be taken as just a plain “remembrance” of the Last Supper — as the sectarians do. This was said because the Lord would not be with His disciples and followers in the visible manner, and that they will be entering into a mysterious communion with Him through the partaking of His Flesh and Blood, remembering His former bodily presence among them. In the Book of the Acts of the Holy Apostles, in Apostle Paul’s Epistles and in the Christian literature, we find many proves that every Christian prayer gatherings of those days was accompanied by the partaking of Christ’s Flesh and Blood, in the form of bread and wine. In the initial centuries, all Christians (excluding those banned and excommunicated) that came to the church on Sundays and feast days, invariably partook of the Holy Gifts.

The Argument about the Superiority.

(Luke 22:24-30)

Saint Luke narrates that after that, the argument about who was superior among them arose between the disciples. By washing the feet of the Apostles, the Lord taught them to humbly serve one another. However, this did not eradicate the very idea of superiority or authority, and having suggested the general uniform equality in His Church, like washing the feet, He didn't lose His merit of **the Lord and Teacher**. In enlightening His disciples, the Lord stated that even **the powerful** must serve to the others. If we were to take the point of view of the Roman-Catholics that Apostle Peter was the head of all the Apostles, then that argument among the Apostles would make no sense, and the Lord would have stopped the argument by confirming Peter to be the superior one among them. Meanwhile, we hear something totally different from the Lord: just as before, in the similar cases, the Lord suggests to the Apostles that they shouldn't strive for primacy but think about the mutual service among them. For their faithfulness to Him, they are promised the inheritance of the Heavenly Kingdom, and that they will **anyway** all sit on thrones **to judge the 12 tribes of Israel**, i.e. they will receive the especial honor in the next world.

The Final Conversation.

(John 13:31-38 and chaps. 14-16 Mat. 26:30-35; Mark 14:26-31; Luke 22:31-38)

Only Evangelist John tells of this wonderful and moving conversation of the Lord with His disciples, in full. Saint Luke presents only a small segment, while the first two Evangelists only relate about the Lord's predictions of Peter's renunciation and the meeting in Galilee after the Resurrection. The whole conversation is quite extensive and covers a number of chapters. Together with the following so-called Lord's "Pontifical prayer," it is read in its entirety during the church service on Great Thursday, as the first reading of the Gospel about the Holy Passions.

According to Saint John, as soon as Judas left, the Lord Jesus Christ began His dialogue with the words: "*Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in Him...*" However, it has to be assumed that the Lord began his speech not only after Judas's departure, but also after He had established the Mystery of the Eucharist, because Saint John does not mention about it — like the one, completing the narratives of the first three Evangelists.

Having given His Flesh and Blood to the disciples and seeing the mystery of redemption as though being fulfilled — as if He had already been brought as a sacrifice, conquering the hostile forces — the Lord exclaims those triumphant words: "*Now the Son of Man is glorified...*" "Now", meaning at that mysterious and frightening night, the glorification of the Son of Man happened, which simultaneously was the glorification of God the Father, Who had deigned to give His Begotten Son as a sacrifice for mankind's salvation. This earthly glorification of His Son was the beginning of His future heavenly glorification as the destroyer of death and hell. Wishing to lead His disciples out of their depressing mood, in which they found themselves, under the influence of the thought that one of them was a betrayer, the Lord turned their thoughts to His Divine glory, which would be revealed in both His forthcoming sufferings and in His Resurrection and Ascension into Heaven. "*Glorify Him immediately*" means that His humiliation will not continue for very long and soon, His visible glorification will commence. "*Little children, I shall be with you a little while longer*" — this extraordinarily tender address by the Lord to His disciples cannot be seen anywhere else in the Gospel: it stemmed from the deep feeling of the imminent farewell under such difficult and tempting for their faith circumstances. Just as I have said to the Jews before, so am I telling you, that I am leaving you, using the path upon which you cannot follow Me now.

I am leaving you in this world for the continuation of My works, “*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, as I have loved you...*” Because of My love for the people, I give My life for them, and you must continue to imitate Me in this. The command of love for the neighbors had already been given in the law of Moses, but Christ gave it a new character unknown before — about love even for the own enemies, to the point of self-sacrifice **in the Name of Christ**. Such pure, selfless and self-denying love is the sign of genuine Christianity. Saint Paul then poses a question full of sorrow and fear: “*Lord, where are You going?*” The Lord confirms that now he is unable to follow Him, but Peter forecasts that in the future he shall follow the same path of martyrdom. Then follows the prediction of the renunciation to Peter, about which narrate all the 4 Evangelists. Warning Peter against self-confidence, when he started to assert that he will lay his life down for the Lord, Saint Luke writes that the Lord said to him: “*Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat...*”

It is characteristic that the Lord calls him here **Simon** and **not Peter**, because having renounced the Lord, Peter showed that he had ceased to be a “rock.” Such “sowing” means the satan’s temptations, to which the Apostles were indeed submitted in the hours of their Teacher’s sufferings — when their faith in Him was ready to waver. This request of the satan reminds us of his similar request concerning the Long-suffering Job, who was submitted to such a painful temptation because the Lord permitted it. The Lord’s almighty prayers protected His disciples — in particular Peter — from the total downfall. The Lord permitted Peter to fall temporarily, so that through this, he would become stronger and fortify his fellow disciples. “*I have prayed for you*” — although the danger from the side of the satan was threatening everyone, the Lord especially prayed for Peter because being more passionate and determined, he was threatened with more danger. “*And when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brothers*” — this indicates that after Peter’s repentance, concerning his denial of Christ, he would appear to be a model of true confession and an example of resoluteness. To this (as recorded by all the 4 Evangelists), Peter commences to assure the Lord of his unwavering loyalty to Him, in his readiness to follow Him to the dungeon and death. Then how was Peter’s renunciation possible, if the Lord prayed for him so that his faith would not diminish? However, Peter’s faith didn’t diminish: he renounced Christ in the fit of faint-hearted fear, and instantly indulged in the most profound contrition. All the Evangelists describe the episode about Christ foretelling Peter that in the coming night, he would renounce Him thrice, before the rooster had crowed three times — twice, according to Mark.

This absolute preciseness of Apostle Mark is explained by the fact that he was writing his Gospel under the direction of Apostle Peter himself. The first crowing of roosters usually occurs in the middle of the night, the second — before the morning; consequently, the meaning of this is in that before the morning comes, Peter would thrice deny his Teacher and Lord. As it can be seen, the Lord twice predicted to Peter his forthcoming renunciation: the first time was at the Last Supper, as narrated by Saints Luke and John, while the second time was when they left the Last Supper, on the way to Gethsemane, as narrated by Saints Matthew and Mark.

To the prediction of the renunciation (according to Saint Luke), the Lord also adds the prediction about the deprivation and struggle that await His disciples. “*When I sent you without money bag, knapsack and sandals, did you lack anything?*” — so as before the Apostles had no need to worry about anything because everywhere they found food and everything necessary while they traveled and preached throughout Judea and Samaria during Christ’s time, the same way different times arrive, when the hatred of people against their Teacher is spreading onto them. The rest of the Lord’s speech about taking a knapsack and moneybag and buying a knife (or a sword), must obviously not be interpreted literally but symbolically. The Lord is simply warning them of the extremely difficult approaching period in their lives, and that they should prepare for it themselves — that what awaits them are hunger, thirst, misfortunes and the animosity of people; if their Teacher Himself would be assigned to vil-

lains in the eyes of the people, then what good can they expect for themselves? Through their naivety, the Apostles accepted the Lord's words literally and said: "*Lord, here are two swords.*" Realizing that He is being misunderstood, the Lord ended the conversation with the words: "enough."

"*Let not your heart be troubled*" — the thought of the Lord's soon departure from them shouldn't trouble the disciples, because it is only a means of bringing them into the constant, eternal communion with Him: the Lord promises them that when that time comes, He will take them into the eternal realm of His Heavenly Father. Still deceived by the former false images of the Messiah's earthly kingdom, the disciples don't understand the Lord's words, so Thomas utters: "*Lord, we do not know where You are going...*" In reply, the Lord explains that He is that path along which they must go to reach the Father, in order to settle into the eternal dwellings. "*No one comes to the Father except through Me*" — as Christ is the Redeemer, and salvation can only be achieved through faith in the fulfilled by Him matter of mankind atonement. "*If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also,*" because in Christ there is the complete revelation of God, just as He had previously said to the Jews: "*I and My Father are one*" (John 10:30). And the Lord's disciples, knowing Christ, must know the Father. Although it is true that they didn't know Christ very well, they were gradually approaching to that knowledge, which the Lord had given them — especially through the washing of their feet at the Last Supper, partaking of His Flesh and Blood and His edifying conversations. Similar in character to Thomas and like him, remarkable for his sobriety, Philip said to the Lord: "*Show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us*" meaning his wish to see the vision, like some of the Prophets appeared to be worthy to see.

The Lord expresses something like regret about Philip's incomprehension and shows him the lack of necessity in his request, for in Him — through His works, through His teaching and the very Human God's nature — they should have long ago recognized the Father. The Lord continues to comfort His disciples further by promising to endow them with power to work wonders, fulfilling everything that they would ask through the prayer: the prayers in the name of the Lord-Redeemer will work wonders. On the condition that the disciples, loving the Lord would observe His commandments, He promises to send them **the Consoler**, Which will be with them always, **the Spirit of Truth**, Which will as if replace Christ for them, and because of Which, they will have continuous mysterious communion with Christ.

"The world" as a union of those that do not believe in the Lord and those that are hostile towards Him, that is alien and opposed to the Spirit — Consoler, is unable to accept Him — while He abode in the Apostles owing to the disciples communion with the Lord during His terrestrial life, and will continue be with them eternally, when He descends upon them at the Pentecost. "*I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you,*" in the visible sense, after the Resurrection and through the spiritual communication in the mystery of Communion, by means of the Holy Spirit. "*You will live also*" in the union with Me, as with the source of eternal life, while at the same time, the spiritually dead world will not see the Lord. "*At that day,*" i.e. the day of the Pentecost, "*You will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you,*" and you will understand the essence of the spiritual communication with God in Christ. The only condition for this Divine communication is to love the Lord and follow His commandments. Judas (not Iscariot), called Lebbaeus or Thaddaeus, who apparently had not left the favorite thought of the Jews about the sensuous Kingdom of the Messiah, took the Lord's words literally that He would appear in a sensuous-physical form to those who love Him and follow His commandments. Consequently, he expresses his bewilderment about the fact, why the Lord wanted to appear only to them and not to the whole world, as the founder of the glorious worldwide kingdom of the Messiah. The Lord explains that He speaks of His mysterious spiritual appearance to His followers, repeating His previous thought about the necessity of loving Him and fulfilling His commandments. While the world, not loving Him and not fulfilling His commandments, is incapable of having such spiritual communication with Him. At the same time, Christ's commandments appear as the commandments of the

Father. Perhaps at that time, this was not clear to the disciples, but when the Consoler, the Holy Spirit would come— He would be sent by the Father in the name of Christ — He will instruct the Apostles. He will teach them everything and will recall them of everything that Christ had taught: open to them the mystery of the spiritual life, the life in Christ. Usually, finishing the Passover supper, the head of the family said to those present: “Peace be to you,” and the supper ended with the singing of Psalms. The Lord, intending to leave the Pascal room, and meaning that he would soon depart from His disciples, following the tradition, offers them peace, but the higher **peace** compared to the one offered by the world laying in the evil: “*Peace I leave with you*” — this is the peace that gives complete stability to all the powers of the human spirit, brings full harmony to the internal disposition of a person, calms all turmoil and anxieties — it is that very peace about which the Angels sang on the night of the Nativity. Consequently, the Apostles should not be confused with anything or get scared.

The supper was finished. It was high time they left the Zion chamber where it was held. Outside, there was the gloom of uncertainty, the fear of parting with Christ and helplessness in the hostile world. That’s why the Lord again comforts His disciples with a promise to come to them, saying that they had to rejoice over the fact that He was going to His Father, “*for My Father is greater than I*” — greater of course as the Primary Source (the Son is born of the Father and borrows from Him His existence), and greater that God in comparison with Christ as Human God. Everything has to pass according to what was written, just as the Lord pre-warned the disciples. Through the realization of predictions, the disciples will be convinced in the genuineness of Christ’s words “*I will no longer talk much with you*” — there were just a few hours left before Judas and the soldiers would seize Christ. The Lord sees the approach of His enemy with His spiritual eyes, “the prince of this world” — the satan in the image of Judas with a spire (a detachment of troops) in the Gethsemane garden. This is where the devil previously attacked the Lord, tempting Him with the fear of tortures and the hour of death — his final attempt to prevent the Savior from completing His redeeming act for the salvation of mankind. With this, the Lord states that the devil “doesn’t have anything” in Him, i.e. because of Christ’s sinless nature, the satan cannot find anything what he could take power of.

This proves the Lord’s total moral freedom, with which He, only through His love and for the fulfillment of His Father’s will, gives His life to save the world. “Rise, let us be going” — let us go and meet the approaching enemy, the prince of the world in the face of Judas-betrayer.

Many interpreters incline to the idea that after these words, it is necessary to read the words of Evangelist Matthew, which correspond with Evangelist Mark’s words: “*And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*” That is, in accordance with the Jewish custom, the Lord and disciples sang the Psalms from the second part of “Hallelujah” (115-118), and went towards the Mount of Olives, and further conversation was held along the way. However, Saint Theophan the Recluse considers that the conversation still continued in the room, and that it was left only after the end of the conversation and the high priest’s prayer of Christ. The first hypothesis has the proof in the fact that the Lord further says about Himself as of the grapevine. On the way to the Mount of Olives and on its slopes there were many grapevines, looking at which the Lord made use of such a demonstrative and lively example.

The Continuation of the Farewell Conversation.

(Chapters 15 and 16 from John)

As surmised, while walking through the vineyard and pointing at the grapes, the Lord borrows from the grapevine an example of the spiritual relationship between Him and those that believe in Him: “*I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.*” As the owner of the vineyard, the Father vinedresser cultivates it Himself and through others; He sent His Son to the earth and planted Him, like the fruit-bearing Grapevine, so that the wild and unproduc-

tive branches of humanity would graft with this Grapevine, obtain new sap from It and become productive as well. The branches that are unproductive are being cut off: those who do not prove their faith through deeds, are ejected from the community of the faithful — sometimes in this life, and definitely on the Judgment Day. The faithful that bear fruits are cleansed by the power of the Holy Spirit, the temptations of various types and sufferings, in order to improve more in their moral life. Listening to the Lord's teachings, Christ's Apostles had already cleaned themselves. But in order to bring to life and sustain this purity, they have to be continually concerned of being in unity with Christ.

Only the one, who is in continuous spiritual communication with Christ, can bring the fruits of the Christian perfection: "*Without Me you can do nothing.*" The branches that do not have fruit, "they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned." When the Lord was making this statement, it was the time for cleaning the grapevine yards. Perhaps, in front of the eyes of the Lord and His disciples was the fire of burning the dry grapevines. This was an expressive image of the spiritually dried up individuals, for whom the fiery Gehenna was prepared in the next world. Further on, the Lord promises to the disciples that if they abide in the constant spiritual communication with Him, each of their prayers will be answered — naturally, if it coincides with God's will. In order to realize this, it is necessary that they constantly dwell in Christ's love and fulfill His commandments.

As the expression of dwelling in Christ's love serves their mutual love for each other, which should extend up to the willingness to sacrifice own life for a neighbor. "*You are My friends if you do whatever I command you*" — their mutual love among themselves makes them friends, and as the union of this mutual love is in Christ, Who has the same love for them, then becoming friends with one another, they become Christ's friends. Because of this love, the Lord revealed to them the complete will of God: this is the proof that they are not the slaves, but the friends of Christ. Having fully portrayed His love towards the Apostles, which was manifested in the fact that He chose them for the great service, the Lord concludes this part of His speech (verses 12-17) with a new exhortation: "*These things I command you, that you love one another.*"

Further on (in verses 12-17 and 1-3 of the 16th chap.) the Lord extensively warns the disciples of those persecutions that await them from the side of the world that is hostile to Christ. They should not be disturbed by this hatred of the world, knowing that their Divine Teacher was the first to be subjected to that hatred. This hatred is understandable, because the Lord separated the disciples from the world that loves only that, which belongs to it, which corresponds with its spirit of every type of sin, malice and slyness. In the persecutions from the world, the disciples should console themselves with the thought that they are not greater than their Lord and Teacher. However, the sin of the world is unpardonable, for the Son of God Himself came into it with the sermon of repentance and the world, seeing His glorious works, did not repent but also began to hate Him: to hate the Son is to hate the Father. Supporting the disciples in their forthcoming sorrows, the Lord once again reminds them of the forthcoming ascension of **the Consoler, the Spirit of Truth, Who proceeds from the Father**, Who will testify about Christ to the world through the Apostles. The Lord Jesus Christ will send the Consoler, on the right of His redeeming deeds — but **not from Himself, but from the Father**, because the eternal origin of the Holy Spirit is not in the Son, but comes from the Father: "*Who proceeds from the Father*" (verse 26). This verse completely rejects the false teaching of the Roman-Catholics that the Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father, but also from the Son. Further, the Lord foretells that the Apostles would testify about Him in the world as those, who saw His glory and who were the first to receive His grace and truth.

All this "*I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble*", i.e. so that your faith would not waver in the forthcoming persecutions awaiting you. These persecutions will reach the point that you will be excommunicated from the synagogues and that they will regard killing you as a God-pleasing act. Indeed, the Jewish fanaticism did reach such a stage

of blindness. The Jews were convinced that “who sheds blood of the unholy, is doing the same as bringing a sacrifice.” Saint First-Martyr Stephan became a victim of such fanaticism. The persecutor Saul, who later became Apostle Paul, also thought that by participating in the killing of the Christians, he was pleasing God (Acts 8:1; 22:20; 26:9-11; Gal. 1:13-14). Evidently, these words of Christ plunged the disciples into such deep sorrow, that comforting them, the Lord started to explain to them, how much His departure is important for them and the whole world, because only in that case **the Consoler**, Who “*will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment*” will come to them. “**Will convict**” was used to mean: will bring to the outside, let know of injustice, crime and sin (John 3:20; 8:89; 8:46; 1 Cor. 12-24; Titus 1:9; Mat. 18:15; Luke 3:19). This exposure is the same as the moral judgment over the world. The consequence of such a judgment can only be one of the two: either converting to Christ through repentance, or complete spiritual blindness and bitterness. (Acts 24:25; Rom. 11:7).

The exposure of the world by the Holy Spirit should be realized through the sermons of the Apostles and their successors, and all the faithful in general that have accepted the Holy Spirit, becoming His organs.

The first object of this exposure is the sin of disbelief in the Lord being the Messiah. This is the most substantial and grave sin, because it rejects the Redeemer and Savior of mankind. The second object — “About the truth that I go to My Father — is about Christ being truly the Son of God, Whose righteousness is completely distinct from that of the Pharisees, being attested by God with that he sat Him at His right hand (Ephesians 2:6). The third object — the judgment over the prince of this world — the devil, the same judgment and condemnation, to which will be subjected all the unrepentant and hard-hearted, like the devil. Thus the Apostles, with the help of the Holy Spirit, will be able to win the great moral victory over this world that lies in the evil, even though it will pursue and persecute them. This prediction of the Lord came true when the formerly timid and fearful disciples, who ran in all directions when the Lord was captured and then hid in a locked room “from the fear of Jews”, began to preach Christ fearlessly, after the Holy Spirit descended upon them, to the large crowds of people, testified of Him in the whole world without any fear, even when they were “brought” before kings and leaders of the world (Mat. 10:18).

“*I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now*” — the Lord is saying that before they are enlightened by the Grace of the Holy Spirit, they are incapable of properly understanding and assimilating that which He has to say to them. But when the Holy Spirit comes, “He will guide into all truth”, i.e. He will guide them in hard to understand at that moment realm of the Christian truth. All these revelations of the Holy Spirit will be drawn from the same source of God’s wisdom, like the teaching of Jesus Christ: Like Christ, He will speak “just as the Father had told Him” (John 3:32; 5:30; 12:49-50), as from the Primary Source of the Divine truth.

Christ will be **glorified** through these actions of the Holy Spirit, because the Spirit will be teaching the same thing that Christ taught, and that way seemingly vindicate Christ’s mission in the world. “He will take of Mine,” because the Father and Son are the One, and everything that the Spirit will be saying, belongs equally to the Father as to the Son. “*A little while, and you will not see Me*” — the Lord goes anew to the thoughts of His leaving the disciples, but immediately consoles them with hope for a new meeting with Him, apparently as with the Lord’s appearance upon the Resurrection and through the mysterious spiritual communication with Him. To some of the disciples those words seemed mystical — again revealing the immaturity of their spiritual understanding. The following course of the conversation was devoted to explaining those words of Christ. Once again, the basis of the disciples’ bafflement lays in their same prejudice about the Messiah’s earthly kingdom. If the Lord wants to establish His kingdom on earth, then why is He leaving? And if he doesn’t want to establish this kingdom, why is He promising to come back again?

The Lord responds: *“A little while, and you will not see Me.”* This means: *“You will weep and lament,”* because the world will fulfill its murderous plans — this is the concealed indication of His impending sufferings and death. *“Again a little while, and you will see Me”* means: *“your sorrow will be turned into joy,”* just as the sorrow of a woman giving birth turns to joy. The joy here is that of the disciples, which they experienced upon seeing resurrected Christ — the joy that never left them for the rest of their lives: *“And your joy no one will take from you. And in that day...”* — in the day when the Holy Spirit descends upon them, they will enter into the constant spiritual communication with Christ, and all the Divine mysteries will become clear to them, and every prayer of them will be answered, in completing the fullness of their joy.

“I go to the Father” means *“I came forth from the Father and have come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father.”* Thus, for the Lord to go to the Father, means to return to that state, in which He was before the incarnation, as the Hypostatic Word. The clarity of these words stunned the disciples. They noted with special satisfaction that the Lord was speaking to them directly, without the concealed parables, and they expressed their fervent faith in Him as in the true Messiah. It was genuine and deep faith, but the Lord saw its deficiency, for their faith was not yet enlightened by the Holy Spirit. *“Do you now believe?”* — He asks: no, your current faith is not perfect yet. It will not stand the first test, which you soon (in some hours) will be subjected to, when *“you will be scattered, each to his own, and will leave Me alone.”* *“These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace,”* — so that you don’t let your spirit fall in the hour of the forthcoming trials, recalling that I have warned you beforehand. You will find essential tranquility of the spirit in the spiritual communication with Me.

“In the world” that is hostile to Me and My work, in the company of people you will be unhappy. But do not lose your courage, remembering that *“I have overcome the world”* — conquered it through the fulfillment of the great work of redeeming humanity through My death, overcame the dominating in the world spirit of pride and hatred with My humility and self-abasement even unto death, and established the commencement of the conversion of this world from the satan’s dominion into God’s Kingdom.

The Archpriest Prayer.

(John chap. 17)

According to some interpreters’ supposition, immediately after the end of the parting conversation, and on the way to Gethsemane, the Lord and His disciples came to the stream of Hebron, and before crossing it, the Lord read out loud before His disciples the triumphant prayer to God the Father. This prayer is usually called **the Archpriest Prayer**, because the Lord prays in it to God the Father as the Great Archpriest, bringing Himself as a sacrifice that has a great inexplicable meaning to the whole world.

“Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You” — it is with these solemn words that the Lord commences His prayer. The hour of My sufferings has arrived: allow Me to demonstrate all My love for You and for the world created by You in this hour, so that through My forthcoming exploit of mankind atonement, Your glory would be revealed. *“As You have given Him authority over all flesh...”* God entrusted the whole human race to His Son, so that He might arrange its salvation and grant eternal life to humanity. The Lord defines eternal life as the knowledge of God and the Redeemer of the world that was sent by Him. In God’s eyes, all His work appears as accomplished. That’s why He says: *“I have glorified You on the earth...”* Now, it follows to enter into the Divine glory in human terms, of what He prays: *“And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.”* This is the first part of the Lord’s Prayer about Himself (verses 1-5).

Having finished the prayer about Himself, the Lord prays further about His disciples (verses 6-19), about those, to whom He was entrusting the mission of spreading and affirming

His Kingdom on earth. The Lord as though gives the account to God the Father on what He had achieved: He revealed to His disciples the full and correct understanding of God, and they became God's special elects, having received the Divine teaching, brought to them from the Father by His Son. They also comprehended the Divine mystery of building God's Church. The Lord further prays for His disciples, so that the Heavenly Father would take them under His special protection in this world, hostile towards them, where they remain alone, after the Lord's departure; that He would preserve them pure and holy in the spiritual accord of faith and love among themselves, in the unity that is akin to the unity between God the Father and God the Son. The Lord states further that He, being in the world, protected them from downfall, and "*none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled*" (Judas the betrayer), i.e. according to the prophesy of Psalm 40:10. Praying to His Father about the preservation of His disciples from all the evil in this world that hates them, the Lord asks for their enlightenment with **the Word of Divine truth**, i.e. to report them the special blissful gifts for their successful service of spreading the truth throughout the whole world. The Lord states further that He **dedicates Himself for them**, — bringing Himself as a sacrifice, so that they might follow His steps and become His witnesses and the sacrifice for the truth.

The third part of the Lord's Prayer — for the faithful — begins from the 20th verse. The Lord prays for them: "*That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me*" — the union of the faithful in Christ must be similar to the union of God the Father with God the Son. Naturally, this means the moral union. Such a union of all Christians in love and faith would assist to bring the whole world to the believing in Christ as in the Messiah. We can see this in the first centuries of the Christianity, where the Jews and heathens were captured by the elevated beauty of Christ's teaching, becoming Christians themselves — except those that were completely spiritually blinded and hard-hearted. The Lord determines this union of all the faithful as being the unity in the glory of God and Christ. In the following verses (22-24), the Lord as if contemplates about His Church in the Heavenly glory and in the union with God in the Messiah's Kingdom and says that this glory will bring even the hostile world — against its will — to realization that the Lord Jesus is the true Messiah. The words: "*Father, I desire that they also whom you gave Me may be with Me where I am*" are akin to the last will of the Dying, which should undoubtedly be carried out, especially when the Son of God's will is inseparable with that of God the Father: here giving His life for the world's salvation, the Son of God is appealing to God the Father, asking for those Heavenly habitats about which He told His Apostles at the beginning of His farewell conversation at the Last Supper, for all the faithful (John 14:2).

Verses 25 and 26 represent the conclusion of the Archpriest prayer, where the Lord addresses God the Father as the All-righteous Due-Giver. The Lord points at the superiority of the faithful over the rest of the world in that they "**have known the God**" and consequently are capable of receiving the gifts of Divine love. He asks so that God the Father could distinguish them in front of the world with His generosity, and make them the participants in the matter of the love that He has for His Son: "*That the love with which You loved Me may be in them.*" For this, the Lord Jesus Himself promises to "be in them," so that the love of the Father that continuously dwelled in the Son, might extend from and for the sake of the Son, over those, in whom the Son abides. Thus, the all-enveloping love will be all fulfilling in the eternal glory of the Kingdom of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Appeal about the Cup.

(Mat. 26:36-46; Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:39-46; John 18:1).

As narrated by Saint Evangelist John, having finished His Archpriest prayer, "*He went out with His disciples over the Brook Kedron, where there was a garden, which He and His disciples entered*". The brook of Kedron (meaning "black") was an insignificant brook,

which filled up with water only after heavy rains. At other times it remained dry, or nearly so. It flowed through the Jehoshaphat valley and separated Jerusalem from Eleon. Saint John writes that behind that valley, there was a garden that the Lord entered with His disciples. However, he doesn't name the garden and doesn't say what happened there before the arrival of Judas and the soldiers. Evangelists Matthew and Mark call it Gethsemane, while Luke indicates its location at the Mount of Olives. All the three narrate about the Lord's prayer in this Gethsemane garden. Gethsemane means a press for squeezing oil. Apparently, in the garden grew olives and olive oil was prepared there. It can be assumed that the garden's owner was favorably inclined towards the Lord, because according to Saint John (18:2), He often gathered there with His disciples. That's why after the Last Supper, Judas led the soldiers there, being firmly assured of finding Him at that place, and he wasn't wrong.

Having entered the garden, the Lord stopped His disciples, saying: "*Sit here while I go and pray,*" and taking Peter, James and John, according to Saint Luke, withdrew from them "*about a stone's throw*" — at a distance, which reaches the thrown stone, and began "*to be troubled and deeply distressed.*" "*My soul is exceedingly sorrowful,*" said the Lord to His most closest and trusted disciples. "*Stay here and watch with Me.*" According to both Saints Matthew and Mark, having walked "*a little farther,*" kneeling, He fell on His face and prayed: "*O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.*" The prayer was so intense that according to Saint Luke, "*His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.*" It is said that sometimes extreme moral sufferings, can truly produce perspiration of blood. Saint Luke states, that "*an Angel appeared to Him from Heaven, strengthening Him.*" God the Father as if left His Son temporarily (see Mat. 27:46). That's why He is being comforted and strengthened by an Angel.

What was the reason for the incarnate Son of God to grieve and suffer so extremely in the Gethsemane garden?

Who among us, the sinful souls, would dare to state that he truly knows everything that was going on in the holy soul of Human God at that moment, when the decisive hour of giving Him over for the death on the cross for the sake of mankind salvation approached? Currently, just as before, they tried to explain the causes of the Lord's moral tortures, endured by Him in the Gethsemane garden, in those pre-death hours. The most natural hypothesis is that it was **His human nature** that was grieving and afraid of death. As Blessed Theophylactus says: "Death entered mankind not through its nature. That's why human nature is afraid of it and flees from it." Death is the consequence of sin (Rom. 5:12, 15), and that's why the sinless nature of Human God should not have been exposed to death. To it, the matter of death was **unnatural**: that's why the pure, sinless nature of the Lord is rebelling against death, lamenting and experiencing melancholy at its sight. These moral sufferings of Christ are the proof of existence of two natures within Him: the Divine and human, which denied the heretics-Monophysites, and also that He had two wills, which denied the Monophysites.

Undoubtedly, together with this, the moral sufferings took place because of the fact that the Lord had accepted all the sins of the world upon Himself — and was going to die for them: **the fact that he had to suffer for the whole world's sins was concentrated only on Him**. It is also quite possible that the devil, having departed from Him temporarily (Luke 4:13), had then approached Him with his temptations, attempting (even though unsuccessfully) to distract the Lord from His forthcoming sufferings on the cross. The Lord's sorrow were also caused by the realization of the human embittered state and ingratitude to God..

The first two Evangelists say that having finished His prayer, the Lord twice approaches the three disciples that stayed nearby. However, instead of finding comfort in their attentiveness and faithfulness to Him, their readiness to be vigilant with Him, He finds them sleeping. Chastising them meekly, the Lord adds: "*Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.*" How could it happen that the disciples fell asleep at such a moment? Saint Luke explains that they fell asleep **because of sorrow**. Life testifies that sometimes intense sufferings indeed produce strong over-exhaustion of the

nervous system, so that the person is incapable of staying awake. The Lord specifically directs His reproach to Peter, because he had sworn in his faithfulness to the Lord just before that event. Great temptations and trial of faith awaited the disciples that are why the Lord convinces them to pray and be vigilant to overcome this temptation. “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” means: your soul is willing to fight with these temptations and is capable of overcoming them, however, human nature is weak and, with weak vigilance and prayer, is capable of a tremendous downfall.

The Lord prayed for three times. The first time, He prayed so that the cup of suffering would pass Him by, the second time He expressed His the outright subordination to God’s will, and an Angel was sent to Him to finally strengthen Him in this choice, after what He exclaimed with full determination: “*Your will be done.*” Having prayed the third time, He came to the disciples to warn them of the betrayer’s approach: “*Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners,*” indicating that He has no need of their assistance. (When the Lord was ready to be betrayed, He said: now you are sleeping; or pronounced that to shame them, as though saying: now that the betrayer has approached, if it is convenient to you and the time allows sleeping, then sleep, — Blessed Theophylactus). “Into the hands of sinners,” — according to Saint Chrysostom, the Lord is saying this to encourage the disciples’ spirit, showing that what is happening to Him is an act of the malice of the sinners, and not of His fault in any sin.” “Rise, let us be going,” i.e. let us go and meet the betrayer, so that what was to happen according to the Scripture, would be fulfilled.

The Lord’s Arrest.

(Mat. 26:47-56; Mark 14:43-52; Luke 22:47-53 and John 18:2-12)

All the four Evangelists tell of the betrayal of Christ in full accordance. Moreover, each one only brings his own details that complete the whole scene. According to Saint John, Judas brought the whole **spire**, the part of a legion of soldiers, called a cohort, and consisting of 1000 people, commanded by a centurion. This is especially mentioned in verse 12, as well as the servants of the high priests and Pharisees. Although there was a full moon, the crowd arrived with lamps and torches supposing that the Lord might hide in the concealed parts of the garden. The soldiers were armed with swords while the servants — with staves. Evidently, they expected the possibility of serious resistance. The betrayal is characteristic with kissing. Fearing of the public uprising, the high priests ordered Judas to use caution in arresting Christ. Apparently, it was not told to the detachment of troops, Whom they had to seize: they were told to take the One, at Whom would point Judas. And Judas, keeping his mission secret, limited himself with only one indication: “*Whomever I kiss, He is the One; for Whom we came, seize Him and lead Him away safely*” (Mark 14:44). It can be assumed, that Judas, separating himself from the detachment, intended to approach the Lord with the usual greeting, kiss Him and withdraw to the Apostles, thereby concealing his betrayal. However, he was unable to achieve this. When he came up to Jesus and uttered in confusion: “*Rabbi, Rabbi..,*” Jesus gently asked him: “*Friend, why have you come?*” Not knowing how to respond to this question, Judas in his confusion exclaimed: “*Greetings Rabbi*” and kissed Him.” In order to show Judas that he could not conceal his betrayal, the Lord said: “*Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?*”

At the same time, the detachment came near and, as Saint John narrates (complementing the first three Evangelists), the Lord asked: “*Whom are you seeking?*” Naturally, there were Jewish elders with the detachment, aware of Whom the soldiers had to seize, and they were the ones that replied: “*Jesus of Nazareth.*” “*I am He*” the Lord responded loudly. The arrived were instructed that they would have to take Jesus cunningly, carefully, because He had adherents that might stand out for Him. And He suddenly and openly — as though not fearing anything — declares: “*I am He!*” Those words of Christ contained the incredible force for His enemies. The unexpectedness of such an answer and the power of the spirit revealed,

produced extraordinary impression: they stepped back and fell to the ground. When they somewhat recovered from that shock, the Lord repeated His question: “Whom are you seeking?” and again they replied: “*Jesus of Nazareth.*” The Lord then said: “*I have told you that I am He. Therefore, if you seek Me, let these go their way.*” The Lord’s concern for His disciples is quite touching. Saint John explains, concerning this, that the Lord’s words of His Archpriest prayer had to be fulfilled: “Of those whom You gave Me I have lost none.” Indeed, the guards left the Apostles alone and approached Jesus to take Him.

It was at that moment when the Apostles decided to intervene for Him. Not waiting for a response to the question posed by one of them: “Lord, shall we strike with the sword?”, impatient Peter drew his sword and struck one of the high priest’s servants, Malch, nearly cut off his ear, but not fully, so that with one touch the Lord healed him (Luke 22:51). “Put your sword in its place” said the Lord to Peter, “for all who take the sword will perish by the sword” — of course, this is not a prophesy but merely the law of God’s truth, of the general nature: the one, who attacks another with the intention of killing or wounding him, deserves that himself. This is the same thought that is contained in the commandment given after the Flood: “*Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed*” (Gen. 9:6). “*Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of Angels?*” The Romans called a legion a division, made up of 12 cohorts and 10,000 soldiers. All the Angelic World would have taken up arms in defense of the Son of God, if He had not committed Himself to the sufferings voluntarily. The Lord as if contrasts 12 legions with His 12 disciples. “*How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?*” (Mat. 26:54) — this means that everything happening is the fulfillment of the prophesies. Luke narrates that among those that had come to seize Christ, there were the high priests and church leaders themselves. The Lord addressed them with exposure: “*Have you come out, as against a robber, with swords and clubs to take Me?*” The meaning of this exposure is that they evidently were ready to commit the unrighteous act, for they didn’t want to accuse the Lord openly, in front of all the people and then seize Him as a violator of the law — in the middle of the day, in the presence of the people. Instead, they used that clandestine method to seize the Lord at night: “*But this is your hour, and the power of darkness. Then all the disciples forsook Him and fled.*” — so the Lord’s prophesy, pronounced just before, came true (Mat. 26:31). Evangelist Mark was the only one to add that a youth, covered with just a cloth, followed the detachment that had seized Jesus. Thinking that this suspicious, they grabbed the youth, but he managed to escape naked, leaving the cloth in their hands.

The ancient tradition recognizes this youth to be Evangelist Mark. Living nearby, he was awakened by the noise, and not dressing but just wrapping himself in a blanket, hurried to have a look at what’s happening. However, not all the Apostles abandoned the Lord completely. Peter and John watched distantly the detachment of troops that took Jesus. They followed Him at a distance, and thereby reached Jerusalem, seeing where their Teacher was brought. The fact, where to the rest of the disciples fled, is unknown. But apparently they were so shocked and frightened with everything that happened that they hid behind the locked doors — as we know from John, 20:19.

The Trial over the Lord, Held by the High Priests.

(John 18:12-23; Mat. 26:57-68; Mark 14:53-65; Luke 22:54-, 63-65).

Having taken the Lord Jesus, the enemies led Him bound (Saint John) to the house of the high priests. In complementing the first three Evangelists testimonies, Saint John is the only one to mention that the Lord was brought first to Annas, who conducted a preliminary interrogation, and then sent Him to Caiaphas. Saint John also explains why the Lord was first brought to Annas and not to Caiaphas — who was the ruling high priest that year — as Annas

(or, Annanas as he was called to by Joseph Flavius) “*was the father-in-law of Caiaphas.*” The Lord’s captors thought that by doing that, they would show special attention and honor to the famous relative of the ruling high priest. Besides, sly old Annas had special respect among his public. However, it must be assumed that after he was replaced from the post of the ruling high priest, Annas continued to live in the high priests dwelling, especially as the new high priest Caiaphas was his close relative. Although both lived in the same residence and shared a common courtyard, they each had separate quarters in the large high priests’ house.

Completing the narration of the first Evangelists, Saint John narrates that Jesus was followed not only by Peter, about whose renouncement tell all the four Evangelists, but “*so did another*” — undoubtedly it was Saint John himself, as he was known to the high priest, even though it is unknown to whom exactly and why: according to the tradition — through his fishing. That’s why he entered inside the high priest’s courtyard, and then told the doorkeeper to let Peter. According to Saint John, here happened the first renouncement of Peter, when, during the Lord’s interrogation by Annas, he was standing close to the open fire and warmed himself up.

Cunning Annas did not accuse the Lord of anything, but just asked Him what He preached and who His disciples were. With this, he intentionally set the ominous tone of the further proceedings, having cast suspicion upon Jesus as at some kind of the leader of a hidden conspiracy, with the secret teaching and clandestine aims. However, the Lord revealed his cunningness with His answer: “*I spoke openly to the world. I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where the Jews always meet, and in secret I have said nothing*”. To prove this, the Lord offered to interrogate the witnesses that had heard Him preaching. Notwithstanding that there was nothing offensive for the high priest in this reply, one of the servants, apparently wishing to please the high priest, hit the Lord on the cheek with the palm of his hand, saying: “*Do You answer the high priest like that?*” If Jesus endured this silently, it could have been taken that He accepted that blow as just, and the pride of the over-zealous servant would have increased through the silent acceptance of his action. Therefore, in order to stop the evil in its initial stage and put sense into the servant, the Lord objected: “*If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?*” — i.e. if you can prove that I was teaching the people something bad, then reveal it, prove it, but don’t hit Me without any reason.

Saint John states further that Annas sent bound Jesus to high priest Caiaphas (verse 24). Apparently, the Lord was led only through the internal courtyard of the same house, where there was set the fire, close to which Peter (who had once already renounced Christ) was standing and warming himself. Both Saints Matthew and Mark give detailed narrations about what happened at Caiaphas’. At place happened the gathering of all the high priests, elders and Scribes — in a word, nearly all the Sanhedrin. Despite the late hour of the night, they all hurried to gather evidence against Jesus, so that they would have everything necessary for the other, official morning meeting of the Sanhedrin, where they could officially announce death sentence to Him. For that, they began to seek false witnesses, which could accuse Jesus of some criminal act, but “they found none.” Finally, two false witnesses came forth — as the law required that there should be no less than two, in order to sentence the accused (Num. 35:30; Deut. 17:6 and others). They remembered of the words said by the Lord in Jerusalem, when He first drove out the traders from the temple, modifying them with an evil intention and assigned them a different meaning. At the time, the Lord said: “*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*” (John 2:19). He didn’t say: “I could destroy it; and “in three days I will raise it up” — in Church-Slavonic “erect”, in Greek “egero,” but He didn’t say “create,” which is a completely different word in Greek: “ikodomiso”. The Lord was speaking of the temple of His Body, while the false witnesses presented those words as some sort of boasting, in which, essentially, there wasn’t anything criminal. That’s why Saint Mark states: “*But not even then did their testimony agree*” (Mark 14:59).

Throughout this, the Lord remained silent, because there was no need to respond to such absurd and moreover confused accusations (according to Saint Mark, another witness testified somewhat differently). This was annoying Caiaphas, so he decided to compel the Lord to make such confession, that would a reason to announce Him the death sentence as to a blasphemer. According to the judicial customs of those days, he addressed the Lord with a resolute question: *“I put You under oath by the living God: tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God?”*

“I put You under oath” — was the usual formula of the oath, calling upon God to be the witness. This was applied when the court demanded the accused to answer the question put to him by the accusers and to do it truthfully. The Lord could not ignore answering to such a direct question, particularly as it was asked under the oath, especially as He had no more need to hide His Messianic Divine worthiness. On the contrary, He had to testify about it triumphantly. And He answers: *“It is as you said,”* i.e. *“Yes, it is true — I am Christ,”* and further adds to this: *“Hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.”* This of course, refers to the words of Psalm 109:1, in which the Messiah is depicted as sitting to the right of God, and also — to Daniel’s prophecies in 7:13-14 of the Messiah as the “Son of Man,” coming on the clouds of heaven. What the Lord tried to say is that all those impious judges would soon see the manifestation of His Divine power, as of the Son of God, through many signs and miracles. *“Then the high priest tore his clothes, saying, “He has spoken blasphemy!”* — to the Jews, the tearing of clothing was the usual expression of sorrow and lamentation.

Although it was forbidden for a high priest to tear his clothing (Lev. 10:6; 21:10), in doing so, Caiaphas wanted to express his especial grief, which even forced him to forget that forbiddance. Of course, this was just a hypocritical act on his part, so that he could declare the Lord’s acknowledgment of Himself as being the Messiah — a blasphemy. *“What do you think?”* — What is your opinion on this matter? — asks Caiaphas of those present, and receives the desired response: *“He is deserving of death.”* They then started to swear and mock at Christ just like with the already convicted criminal: they spat in His face, as a sign of extreme loathing and denigration, hit His ears, beat Him on the head, His cheeks, taunting and asking: *“Prophecy to us Christ! Who is the one who struck You?”* i.e. if You are the all-knowing Messiah, then name the person who hits you, without knowing or seeing him. This last act shows that the whole judgment was a rough spectacle, which concealed bloodthirsty and savage hatred. Those were not judges but animals, unable to conceal their rage.

Peter’s Renouncement.

(Mat. 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:55-62; John 18:16-18, 25-27).

All four Evangelists narrate about Peter’s renouncement, although some differences in their narrations are obvious. At any rate, these differences do not concern the matter’s essence: the Evangelists only complete and interpret one another, so that through the comparison of their testimonies, the precise and full history of this event can be built.

During the trial over the Lord, first at Annas’ and then at Caiaphas’, Peter stayed in one and the same inner courtyard of the high priests’ house, where the doorkeeper at the request of Saint John, who was known to the high priest brought him. The fact that it was one and the same courtyard of the high priests’ house, where Annas and Caiaphas resided in the separate sectors, effaces the seeming contradiction between the narratives of, Evangelist John, on the one hand, and of the first three Evangelists on the other. Saint John presents Peter’s renouncement as beginning and finishing in Annas’s courtyard, while the other three Evangelists, not even mentioning Christ’s interrogation by Annas, narrate as though the whole three renouncements took place in Caiapha’s courtyard. It is obvious that it was the common courtyard. When through Saint John’s help (who knew the high priest), Peter came into the courtyard, the servant girl, that let him come in, told him: “You are not also one of

His disciples, are you?” “*I am not*” replied Peter, and stood closer to the fire that was set because of the cold and bad weather.

However, the servant girl didn’t leave him alone. According to Saint Mark (14:67), staring at his face, illuminated by the fire, she affirmatively declared: “*You also were with Jesus of Nazareth,*” and also said to the bystanders: “*This man was also with Him*” (Luke 22:36). Peter continued his renouncement, saying: “*Woman, I do not know Him*” (Luke 22:57), “*I neither know nor understand what you are saying*” (Mark 14:68 and Mat. 26:70). This is how **the first** renouncement happened, beginning at the gate and finishing by the fire. As Saint Mark narrates, Peter, wishing to get rid of the persistent servant girl, walked away from the fire to the front of the court-yard, at the threshold of the gates so that if needed he could run away. Much time passed. Noticing him again, the same servant girl (Mark 14:69) began to tell those standing next to him: “*This is one of them.*” She was joined by another servant girl (Mat. 26:71), also saying: “*This fellow also was with Jesus of Nazareth.*” Yet another addressed Peter with: “*You also are of them*” (Luke 22:58). Once again, Peter changed his position and drew closer to the fire, but here as well some (John 18:25) started saying: “*You are not also one of His disciples, are you?*” He denied it, saying “No!” This was **the second** renouncement, and on the basis of John’s verses 24 and 25, chapter 18, one can assume that it occurred at the same time when Jesus was being led from Annas to Caiaphas. After the second renouncement, a period of one hour passed (Luke 22:59).

The sunrise was close, and with it the “*crowing of the rooster*” (Mark 13:35). The trial over the Lord, carried out by high priest Caiaphas, was about to be finished. One of the servants (a relative of Malchus, whose ear was cut off by Peter) said to Peter: “*Did I not see you in the garden with Him?*” (John 18:26), while another added: “*Surely this fellow also was with Him, for he is a Galilean*” (Luke 22:59). This was followed by many saying: “*Surely you are one of them; for you are a Galilean, and your speech shows it*” (Mark 14:70), “*For your speech betrays you*” (Mat.26:73). Fear overcame Peter and “*he began to curse and swear, ‘I do not know this Man of whom you speak. A second time a rooster crowed,*” as Saint Mark testifies, undoubtedly quoting the words of Peter himself (Mark 14:71-72).

According to Saint Mark’s testimony, when the rooster crowed the first time after the first renouncement (verse 68), “*And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, ‘Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.’ So Peter went out and wept bitterly.*” The third renouncement occurred under the similar circumstances, and evidently coincided with the moment when the Lord — already condemned and subjected to humiliation and beating — was led into the courtyard out of Caiaphas’ house. Here, being guarded, the Lord had to wait for the dawn (Luke 63-65) and the new, official assembly of the Sanhedrin, which would hand down the formal sentence. A rooster’s crow and the Lord’s glance, cast at him, evoked burning and bitter remorse in Peter’s soul: he ran away from the place of his downfall, and weeps bitterly over it.

Great Friday.

The Sanhedrin’s Sentence.

(Mat. 27:1; Mark 15:1 and Luke 22:66-71)

This second, already official gathering of the Sanhedrin is mentioned briefly, only in one verse, by Evangelists Matthew and Mark: the narrative of Saint Luke is more detailed. This gathering was called to observe the formality of the outward justice of the death sentence, announced to Jesus at the previous night session. The Talmud — the collection of all the ancient Jewish laws — states that in the criminal matters, the final sentence must not be announced before the next day after the trial starts. However, neither Caiaphas, nor the Sanhedrin wanted to postpone the final sentence till the time after the feast of the Passover.

That's why they hastened to observe at least the formality of the secondary trial. That time, the Sanhedrin gathered at dawn in the greater number (to them joined the Scribes — as it is said by Saint Luke 22:66), and not at Caiaphas's house but in the Sanhedrin hall. After spending all the time till the dawn in the courtyard of the high priest, being humiliated by the high priest guards and servants, the Lord was brought there.

They led Him into the hall of the Sanhedrin assembly and asked: "If You are the Christ tell us." They did that, partly because there were the new members that were not present at the night session, and partly because they were hoping to hear something new from the Lord. Before giving them a direct answer the Lord exposes them, showing that being the All-Seeing, He knows their thoughts. The trial was formed purely for the sake of formalism: the Lord's fate had already been determined, irrespective what He said. That's why the Lord replied: "*If I tell you, you will by no means believe. And if I also ask you, you will by no means answer Me or let Me go,*" i.e. it is pointless for Me to talk: if I asked you about that, what could lead to the clarification of My Messianic worthiness and the end of your blindness, you all the same would not answer Me. You would not give Me the opportunity to justify Myself before you and to be set free: but know this — after all that has to happen because of your malice, you will see me no other way, but in the glory of My Father: "*Hereafter the Son of Man will sit on the right hand of the power of God.*"

"*Are You then the Son of God?*" — they again asked persistently, and the Lord formally confirmed that with: "*You rightly say that I am!*" According to the Jewish judicial protocols, such an answer meant a firm and decisive "Yes! I am the Son of God." Pleased that the Lord had openly declared Himself the Son of God, and thereby gave them the right to accuse Him of blasphemy, the members of the Sanhedrin announced that there was no need for the further examination and announced Him the death sentence. In reality, they had no right to commit anyone to death. That's why, in order to get the death sentence confirmed, they needed to receive the Roman governor Pontius Pilate's agreement.

The Death of Judas.

(Mat. 27:3-10).

Only Evangelist Matthew tells us about the further fate of Judas the betrayer. "Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders" — it is of course possible, that Judas didn't expect Jesus to be sentenced to death, or in general, being blinded by avarice, didn't think of the consequences of his betrayal. When his Teacher was condemned and his greed satiated with the possession of the silver coins, his conscience suddenly awoke: the whole horror of his mindless act appeared before him. He repented, but unfortunately that repentance was mixed with despair within him and not with the hope for God's all-forgiving mercy. This type of repentance is just the unbearable agony of the conscience, without any hope for change. That's why it is fruitless and useless, and that's why it led Judas towards a suicide. "And brought back the thirty pieces of silver" — that, what a short time before seemed so tempting, at that time, when he began to feel the pangs of conscience, seemed to him quite repugnant. Such is any sin in general. It's not silver coins that he should have thrown down before the high priests, but himself — before the Lord Jesus Christ, pleading for forgiveness of his sin, and of course, he would have then been forgiven then. However, he is considering without the help from above but only with his forces to change what he had done: returning the money, he testifies: "*I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.*" According to Saint John Chrysostom, this testimony increases the guilt of both Judas and the high priests: "His — because he didn't repent, or when he did, it was too late, and he condemned himself, because he confessed that he betrayed the Lord uselessly; their guilt is increased, because when they had the opportunity to repent and change their mind, they didn't repent." They treated Judas heartlessly, coldly and mockingly. "*What is that to us? You see to it!*" This indicates their extreme moral coarseness. "Then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and

went and hanged himself”. He threw down the unaccepted coins in the temple, thinking that perhaps this act might calm his pangs of conscience — but in vain: the inner tortures brought him to such a state, that he went and hanged himself. Following this, he apparently fell to the ground, as Apostle Peter states in Acts (1:18): “*and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his entrails gushed out.*”

Even with all their corruption, the high priests found it impossible to utilize that money for the temple — “*put them into the treasury,*” i.e. into the temple treasury, as it was the “*price of blood.*” By the way, they apparently were basing their action on Deut. 23:18, and in this case, their hatred towards the Lord Jesus Christ became apparent, just as it became apparent that they valued His betrayal at 30 pieces of silver. The Pharisees’ tendency to fulfill a minor commandment, while violating an important one — not to condemn the innocent — characterizes them very definitely. There was a field belonging to a known potter, which was useless because it was used for excavating clay, firing clay pots and “*bury strangers in*” — the Jews and proselytes that died among the huge numbers, which gathered in Jerusalem for the Passover and other significant feast-days. Thus, the Prophet Jeremiah’s prophesy was fulfilled: “*And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the value of Him who was priced, Whom they of the children of Israel priced*”: “*And gave them for the potter’s field.*” However, nothing resembling these words can be found by the Prophet Jeremiah: the only part in 32:7, speaks in general terms of the purchase of the potter’s field. Perhaps it was a later transcriber’s insertion.

We find the similar statements, made by the Prophet Zechariah 11:12-13. In Jeremiah chaps. 18-19 the potter is also mentioned of, and it is possible that Zechariah took his image from there. Besides, in ancient times it was a common thing to abbreviate the personal names, and it’s possible that the transcriber might by mistake put Jeremiah’s abbreviated name (Jriah) instead of Zachariah’s (Zriah). The meaning of this section of the Book of Zechariah is this: God had placed the Prophet as the representative of the High Shepherd God, to graze the sheep of the house of Israel. The Jews didn’t listen to the Prophet i.e. they didn’t listen to God Himself. In order to demonstrate to the Jews, how little they value the care of the Prophet and consequently of God Himself, God directs to the Prophet to ask them: what sum would they give him for his pastoral efforts? They gave him the price of a slave — 30 pieces of silver, i.e. they valued the Prophet’s labors, and consequently of God Himself, as trivial, like those of a slave. God then said to the Prophet: put this great sum (it is irony, of course), at which they valued Me, into the temple treasury. And I took it (said the Prophet), and threw it unto the potter, in the house of the Lord (Zech. 11:11-12). This prophecy was fulfilled with the betrayal of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Jews evaluated their Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ at 30 pieces of silver — the price of a slave — and with that money purchased the land from the potter.

At the Trial of Pilate.

(Mat. 27:1-2, 11-32; Mark 15:1-19; Luke 23:1-25 and John 18:28-19:16)

“*And they bound Jesus, led Him away, and delivered Him to Pilate*” — Since the times of Israel’s subordination to the Romans, the right to pronounce death sentences had been taken away from the Sanhedrin, as can be seen from John 18:31. The stoning of Stephen was a willful act. According to the law, the accused of blasphemy were punished by stoning. However, the Jews unconsciously fulfilled God’s will by wanting to sentence the Lord Jesus Christ to a more denigrating death — crucifixion on the cross — and with this aim, after the Sanhedrin pronounced the death sentence, they brought Him to the governor Pontius Pilate, i.e. the ruler.

Pontius, named Pilate, was the fifth procurator or ruler of Judea. He received that post in the year 26 AD from the Roman Emperor Tiberius. He was a proud, arrogant and cruel per-

son, and at the same time indecisive and cowardly. He hated the Jews and in turn was hated by them. Soon after Christ's crucifixion, he was summoned to Rome, tried and imprisoned in northern Gaul, where he committed suicide. Procurators usually resided in Caesarea. However, on the feast-day of the Passover, they moved to Jerusalem, where they could keep an eye on the order. Saint Evangelist John has the most detail on Pilate's trial. He narrates that the Jews led Jesus to the Praetorium, the Roman governor's court of justice. In all probability, it was situated to the northwest of the temple, near or inside Antonius's fortress where the Roman garrison was placed. They didn't enter it because to touch anything heathen was counted as desecration, and might have prevented them from partaking of Pascha. This is the clear indication that the Passover was approaching that night, and that Christ partook of the Pascha on the eve of the feast-day, and He brought Himself as a sacrifice, as the true Paschal Lamb, at the day of the Old Testament Passover, which was the symbol of His suffering. Pilate, in this instance, made a concession to the Jewish customs (it is well known that the Romans attempted to spare the customs and traditions of the conquered nations, so as not to rise them too much against themselves), by walking out to them to the rostrum — an open, elevated area in front of the Procurator's quarters — and inquired: *"What accusation do you bring against this Man?"* The first two Evangelists begin their narrative about Pilate's trial with the interrogation of the Lord, the third — with His accusations by those who brought Him, while Saint John — with a question from Pilate to those who brought the Lord: thus, from the very opening and further, concerning the subsequent narratives, Saint John adheres to the more detailed and sequential order of the judicial procedure, thereby completing the first three Evangelists.

"Why, what evil has He done? I have found no reason for death in Him" — the Jews didn't want a new examination of Christ's case: they were hoping that Pilate would be the executioner of their sentence. Pilate knew too well the type of people he was dealing with. He therefore immediately placed the accusers in their place, in relation to himself, as to the representative of the Roman authority: I cannot make a judgment, without first hearing the details, so therefore *"You take Him and judge Him according to your law."* Indeed, the Sanhedrin was empowered to judge and carry out the punishment for certain transgressions without the Roman sanction: the only exception was the death penalty. Pilate invites them to use their right. Changing their proud attitude to one of submissiveness, the Jews acknowledge the limitations of their rights, that they couldn't subject the criminal, who in their opinion is worth of death, to the execution. *"It is not lawful for us to put anyone to death,"* *"that the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled which He spoke, signifying by what death He would die."* Indeed, not once the Lord foretold that He would be betrayed to the heathens (Mat. 20:19), that He would be raised from the ground, i.e. be crucified (Mat. 26:2; John 12:32). After that, the Lord's enemies were obliged to express their accusations against Him, what we find by Saint Luke: *"We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King"* (Luke 23:2) — the sly hypocrites, who themselves hated the Romans, invent that slanderous accusation of purely political nature, so as to make it easier to gain the confirmation of the death sentence for Jesus. As Saint John narrates (18:33), Pilate asked the Lord in privacy, inside of the praetorium, the question, concerning that accusation: *"Are You the King of the Jews?"* — *"Are you speaking for yourself about this, or did others tell you this concerning Me?"*, asked the Lord: it was necessary to know the source of that question — if Pilate himself was asking that, the answer would be negative, because Christ was not a king, in the sense Pilate was; if Pilate's question was a repetition of what the Jews were saying, then the answer would be affirmative, because Christ was indeed the King of Truth.

Christ was not a political king of the Jews, but was the theocratic ruler of the universe. So the Lord made Pilate say in what sense he was applying the word 'king' to Him", i.e. if he personally was accusing Him of appropriating that title, or if he was just repeating the Jews' accusations. Pilate's answer is filled with contempt for the Judaism: *"Am I a Jew? Your own*

nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?” — i.e. he doesn’t admit any royal worthiness in Christ, but just wants to know, why the people and high priests delivered Him, accusing Him of appropriating the title of a king. Jesus answers: *“My Kingdom is not of this world”* — the Lord confirms that He is truly a King, but in the spiritual and not political sense of the word, not the type of king as he imagines. “Pilate therefore said to Him, ‘Are You a King then?’ — having understood that Jesus is not a political pretender for the terrestrial kingdom, Pilate expresses his doubts about the possibility of existence of some other spiritual realm. Then the Lord confirms that He is truly a **King**, the King of the spiritual Kingdom of Truth, and that He came to earth so as to testify of **the Truth** — meaning of course, under the word “truth,” the religious truth of His Divine teaching. His subjects are those who are able to heed this Truth. Being a coarse heathen, Pilate of course couldn’t comprehend those words of the Lord and said disdainfully: *“What is truth?”* But he realized that the Kingdom of Jesus was not political, and was in no way a threat to the Roman rule.

At that time, the heathen Greco-Roman world reached such a level of mental and moral decay, that it lost its faith in the possibility of truth existence in general, and didn’t believe that there was such a thing as truth. Pilate’s historic question *“What is truth?”* serves as the expression of despondent disbelief in truth, the answer to which he even didn’t want to hear, but simply walked out to the Jews and stated that he found no fault in Jesus. That declaration deeply stung the pride of the Sanhedrin members, and they — as the first three Evangelists narrate — began to insistently accuse the Lord of many things, wanting, whatever it took, to achieve His conviction.

Listening to that, the Lord kept silent all the time, *“so that the governor marveled greatly”* (Mat. 27:14). At that point, they mentioned that He was inciting the people, teaching throughout Judea, beginning from Galilee (Luke 23:5). Pilate then inquired *“if the Man were a Galilean?”* and sent Him to King Herod, who at that time — because of the feast days — also resided in Jerusalem. Only Evangelist Luke narrates of Christ’s trial before Herod (23:7-12). Apparently, Pilate was hoping to receive more definite information from Herod on the personality and works of the accused, which to him were not completely clear. From the further remark of Saint Luke — that from that moment Pilate and Herod became friends — it can be concluded that Pilate sent Christ to Herod on purpose and that way stopped the animosity that existed between them. Perhaps he was hoping to receive a favorable response about Christ from Herod, in order to liberate Him from the hands of His persistent accusers. No wonder he later points to the fact, that Herod too didn’t find any fault in Him, which deserved the death sentence. (Luke 23:15).

Herod was very glad to see Jesus. This was the same Herod Antipas that murdered John the Baptist, and hearing of Christ’s works, thought that He was John resurrected from the dead. Herod was hoping to see a miracle from the Lord: not to start believing in Him, but only to satisfy his curiosity, like we watch the shows where magicians seemingly swallow snakes, swords etc. and marvel at that (Blessed Theophylactus). Apparently Herod regarded the Lord as someone like a sorcerer. He posed many questions to Him, hoping to hear something interesting, but to all his questions, the Lord preserved total silence. The high priests and Scribes accused the Lord incessantly, apparently trying to prove that His sermons were as much dangerous for Herod as they were for Caesar. Having mocked at the Lord, Herod dressed Him in the white vestment and sent Him back to Pilate. With Romans, a candidate for an authoritative or honored position (the very word “candidate,” comes from the Latin word “candidus” meaning white, bright), used to wear the white (bright) vestment. By dressing the Lord in that type of attire, Herod wanted to express that he regarded Jesus only as some comical candidate to the royal Jewish throne, and that he did not consider Him as a serious and dangerous criminal. And Pilate understood that.

Referring to that even Herod found nothing that warranted the death sentence, Pilate proposes to the high priests, Scribes and the people, that after punishing the Lord he will re-

lease Him. He thought to satisfy them with some minor punishment. With that, he remembered that there was an old Jewish custom, according to which, before the Passover, they came to the governor with the request to have one of the condemned prisoners released, and himself offered: *“Whom do you want me to release to you? Barrabas, or Jesus who is called Christ?”* (Mat. 27:17). The first two Evangelists add to this: *“For he knew that they had handed Him over because of envy”* (Mat. 27:18). Apparently, Pilate was hoping that he would find a different feeling for Jesus among the common people, and that they would ask exactly Jesus to be released. It was to that multitude of people, which gathered in front of the procurator’s house, that Pilate directed his question: *“Which of the two do you want me to release to you?”* While he was sitting on his judgment seat, situated in the open, elevated judicial place, called in Greek “lifostron,” or in Jewish — “gavvapha,” a messenger appeared before him with the message from his wife: *“Have nothing to do with that Just Man, for I have suffered many things today in a dream because of him.”* Some of the ancient Christian writers mention her name, as **Claudia Proculus**. They presumed that she confessed the Jewish faith, or was at least disposed towards it, while the tradition states that she later became a Christian. Probably she heard much about the Lord Jesus Christ, and was afraid that by condemning Him, her husband would bring upon him God’s punishment. It is unknown what type of dream she had, but it can be supposed that Jesus the Galilean appeared in her dream as a Righteous, being tortured innocently. And in her dream, she suffered because of the thought that her own husband appeared as His executioner. While the messenger was reporting to Pilate his wife’s message, the Jewish leaders began to influence the people, so that they would ask Pilate to release Barabbas — and the people succumbed to their sinful suggestions. When Pilate for the second time asked the question: *“Which of the two do you want me to release to you?”* they replied: *“Barabbas.”* *“What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?”* asked Pilate. They responded with: *“Let Him be crucified!”*; according to Saint Luke, they cried out: *“Crucify Him!”*

Pilate, still wishing to release Jesus, raised his voice, saying: *“Why, what evil has He done?”* *“But they cried out all the more, ‘Crucify Him!’”* Euthymius Zigaben underlines the point: *“They are not saying: Let Him be killed, but let Him be crucified, so that the very type of death would show Him as a villain”*. Like that the prophecy about the very type of Christ’s death for us, had to be fulfilled. Corrupted by their spiritual leaders, the people preferred Barabbas to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Evangelists tell us that Barrabas was a well-known malefactor, who with the band of accomplices, committed murders and made in the city a certain sedition (Mat. 27:16; John 18:40; Luke 23:19 and Mark 15:7).

Hearing the enraged roar of the people, which he apparently didn’t expect, Pilate became completely bewildered. He was afraid that his further persistence in defending the Righteous might provoke a serious disturbance among the people, which would have to be quelled with the armed force, and that the infuriated high priests would then be able to report about that to Caesar, accusing him of causing that disturbance by defending the federal criminal, as they were trying to portray the Lord Jesus. Under the pressure of such feelings, Pilate decided to satisfy the people’s lust for blood by handing over the Innocent for scourging. He probably hoped that by making such a concession to the people’s fury, he would be still able to save Jesus from the death on the cross. *“So then Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him”* (John 19:1). All the Evangelists narrate of the scourging. According to the first two Evangelists, the soldiers led Jesus into the praetorium to have Him scourged (in Slavonic: praetorium --“the judgment place”), i.e. into the courtyard, probably to have more room, because the area in front of the courtyard was congested with people. They then called up the whole regiment, or cohort, against Him. The soldiers removed the top attire from Jesus and began to scourge Him. With the Romans, such a type of scourging was assigned for serious crimes, and mainly for the slaves. The whips were made of ropes or belts, and their ends were embedded with the bone and metal sticks. This torture was so painful, that many died during the scourging. Usually, the condemned individual was tied to a post, in a leaning position. The soldiers then

whipped his bare back, what from the initial blows, caused deep flesh wounds that bled profusely. That was the terrible punishment, to which Pilate inflicted the One, in Whom he found no fault. However, it has to be assumed that it was done to satisfy the crowd's lust for blood and save Him from the cruciferous death.

Having finished the scourging, the cruel soldiers began to mock at the Sufferer: they dressed Him in a "purple robe," i.e. a soldier's red cape, akin to those mantles worn by kings and highest military leaders. Those mantles were without sleeves and worn around the shoulders so that the right arm remained free. That cape was supposed to represent the royal mantle for the King of the Jews. They placed a crown made of sharp thorns on His head, and put a cane in His hands, which supposedly represented a royal scepter. Having done all that for to mock at the Divine Sufferer, the soldiers then began to kneel before Him. Swearing at Him, they began to say, as though greeting Him: "*Hail! King of the Jews.*" Together with that, they slapped Him across the cheeks, spat on Him, grabbed the cane from His hands, and beat Him on the head, so that the thorns of the crown would drive deeper and cause greater wounds.

According to the first two Evangelists, those events happened after Christ had been finally condemned to death. However, Saint John's aim was to expand and explain the narratives of the first three Evangelists, and he pointed at the fact that the scourging and acts of mockery over Christ took place earlier, and presumably, were undertaken by Pilate with the specific aim of liberating Christ from the death sentence at least in such a way. In order to cause the feeling of compassion for Jesus in the Jews, Pilate ordered Him to be brought out, tortured and exhausted. He hoped that the awful sight would cause their hearts give a shudder, and that they would no longer insist on the Lord's death. This is how a heathen, not knowing the true God and His commandments on how to love the neighbor, thought. Alas, however, this was not the way the spiritual leaders and chiefs of God's chosen nation thought, raging in their indefatigable hatred. When the Lord was led out onto the rostrum, Pilate said: "*Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him,*" and pointing to Jesus, added: "*Behold the Man!*"

Pilate was addressing to the trial of their **conscience** with that exclamation: it was as though he was saying — here is the Person, lonely, humiliated, and tortured: is it possible that He looks like a dangerous rebel: by His very appearance, doesn't He evoke more pity than fear? Together with that, apparently unintentionally, Pilate said the truth: even in His humiliated state, the Lord revealed more spiritual greatness and moral beauty of the true Man, which He has according to the Creator's design, than He would have in the state of glory and royal brilliance. The meaning of Pilate's words for the Christians is: here is the model of the Man, which all the Christians should try to reach.

However, nothing touched the high priests and their servants. As they saw exhausted and tortured Christ, they started to clamor: "*Crucify, crucify Him!*" Such persistence of the accusers aroused sadness in Pilate, and forced him to exclaim with abruptness and causticity: "*You take Him and crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him*": If you are so insistent, then you crucify Him at your own responsibility. I, as the representative of justice, cannot participate in such an unworthy act of condemning the Man that is completely innocent. Apart from extreme annoyance and impatience, Pilate's words expressed nothing else. Consequently, the Lord's enemies, in presenting a new accusation, continued to seek Pilate's agreement to the death sentence: "*We have a law, and according to our law He ought to die, because **He made Himself the Son of God.***"

Hearing this, Pilate "*was the more afraid.*" Of course, Pilate could only understand the expression — "*the Son of God*" in the heathen sense, meaning the semi-gods, heroes, that were numerous in the heathen mythology. But this was enough to confuse him, as he recalled of his wife's warning, which saw some mysterious dream about that enigmatic Person. Pilate then leads Jesus into the praetorium and privately asks Him: "*Where are You from?*", i.e.: where did You originate from, are You from heaven or earth? Are You indeed the Son of

God? *“But Jesus gave him no answer.”* — It was useless responding to the question. The Lord attempted to explain to Pilate, Who He is, but His words only provoked a flippant and facetious remark (John 19:9). How could a coarse, heathen-skeptic understand the teaching about the true Son of God?

Conquering his fear, Pilate decided to show his authority as well as to influence Jesus to answer: *“Are You not speaking to me?”* The Lord responds to these vain words with the Divine wisdom: *“You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above”* — it is only due to God’s permission that I am in your hands. Having delivered His people into the slavery of the heathen, Roman rule, God passed the authority over Me to you through it. Nevertheless, you will be guilty of condemning Me, because you do so against your conscience. However, the greater sin will be on them that had not been given authority over Me from above, on those who had done this willfully, through hatred, i.e. on the Sanhedrin, on Caiaphas as its instrument, on Judas Iscariot. Evidently, Pilate liked the Lord’s wise words, and *“from then on Pilate sought to release Him.”* The accusers then decided to resort to extreme measures — to threaten the procurator himself by accusing him of treachery against Caesar’s authority: *“If you let this Man go, you are not Caesar’s friend...”* That frightened Pilate, because the Emperor at the time was the suspicious and extremely cruel Tiberius, who was always willing to listen to the informers.

That threat caused the decision on the whole matter. Settling himself in the judge’s seat on the rostrum, Pilate formally and solemnly concludes the trial. That’s why the Evangelist notes **the day and hour when the Lord was condemned**: *“Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour,”* i.e. it was Friday before the Passover and the sixth hour, being around 12 of the noon by our time. This indication by Saint John would seem to differ with the other Evangelists, especially with Saint Mark, who notes: *“Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him”* (Mark 15:25), while from the sixth to the ninth hour, there was darkness over all the land (Mat. 27:45; Mark 15:33 and Luke 23:44). However, the matter is that the day, like night, was divided into 4 parts of three hours. Consequently, the New Testament mentions only the 1st, 3rd, 6th and 9th hour. Saint John doesn’t say “the hour was the sixth,” but “about the sixth hour,” i.e. “like the sixth hour”: according to our time, this could be the whole period between the 9th hour in the morning till noon. Finally, there is an opinion (of Gladkov) that Saint John is indicating the Roman calculation of time, which corresponds to ours, i.e. it was around 6 o’clock in the morning, as we count now, beginning from the midnight.

“And he said to the Jews, ‘Behold your King!’” — although it’s difficult to say what Pilate tried to express with those words, one can’t help seeing in them the last attempt to free the Lord from death. Apparently, annoyed at being forced to carry out the sentence against his own conscience, he once again severely reproaches the whole Sanhedrin: he is as though saying — you dream of the return of independence, of your some sort of high calling among all the nations of the world: nobody would be capable to fulfill this high task, but this Person, the One who calls himself the spiritual King of Israel. How is it that instead of bowing in front of Him, you demand His death? Do you want me, the hated by you Roman governor, to take away your King who can fulfill all your cherished dreams?

Evidently, the accusers understood those words likewise, because they started to howl with especial fury: *“Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!”* According to Bishop Michael’s words — “this howl came from the wound, inflicted into the most sensitive part” but “before giving in completely, Pilate once more twists the knife in this wound with the words: *“Shall I crucify your King?”* — if Jesus calls Himself your King, then with this declaration, He promises you liberation from the Roman rule: how can you demand that I, the representative of the Roman authority, will commit Him to death? Think again, what are you doing?” — In response to this admonishment, blinded by their hatred towards Jesus, the high priests pronounced the frightening and fatal words that became the sentence for all the future

history of the Jewish people: *“We have no king but Caesar!”* Before, the high priests were saying: *“We have no other King, except God”*: and that time, just for the sake of achieving Christ’s crucifixion, they renounce everything, declaring that they do not have, nor wish to have any other king than Roman Caesar.

Having suffered defeat at his attempts to liberate Christ, Pilate finally decided to give way to the wishes of the Jews and *“delivered Him to them to be crucified.”* Saint Matthew informs that prior to that, Pilate washed his hands (Mat. 27:24): *“When Pilate saw that he could not prevail at all, but rather that a tumult was rising, he took water and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, ‘I am innocent of the blood of this Person. You see to it’.* The Jews had a custom of washing the hands as a proof of being innocent in shedding the blood of another, when someone was found killed (Deut. 21:6-8). Pilate took advantage of that custom, as a sign that he freed himself of the responsibility for the execution of Jesus, Whom he regarded as an innocent and Righteous. *“You see to it”* — you yourselves will answer for the consequences of this unjust murder.

The malicious Jews agreed to everything, not thinking of the consequences, just to get the procurator’s confirmation about the death penalty: *“His Blood be on us and on our children,”* i.e. if this is a crime, then let God’s wrath fall on us and our descendants. *“Such senseless fury”* — comments Saint John Chrysostom — *“such evil passion...even if you had cursed yourselves: but why to incur the curse on your descendants?”* This curse that the Jews incurred upon themselves was soon fulfilled: in the year 70 AD, during the Roman siege of Jerusalem, a vast number of Jews were crucified on crosses. It also came to pass (through the fulfillment of Moses’ prophecy in Deut. 28:49-57, 64-67) in the further history of the Jews, from thereon scattered around the world and being continually subjected to countless “massacres”, which they constantly faced, so that the prophesy of Moses from the Deuteronomy could be fulfilled (chap. 28:49-57; 64-67).

“Then he released Barrabas to them; and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered Him to be crucified,” i.e. having confirmed the Sanhedrin’s death sentence, Pilate supplied them with soldiers to carry out the execution of the Lord Jesus Christ, by crucifixion.

Having washed his hands, Pilate of course couldn’t get rid of his responsibility (as he had wanted) by that act: after all, he was the high judge, knowing that the Accused was completely innocent. Since that time, the expression “to wash the hands” became a proverb. God’s punishment reached Pilate for his faint-heartedness and unjust condemnation of the One, Whom he himself called Righteous. He was sent to exile to Gaul 9town of Viena, where in two years, exhausted by anguish, tortured by conscience and despondency, he committed a suicide.

The Cruciferous Way to Golgotha.

(Mat. 27:31-32; Mark 15:20-21; Luke 23:26-32; John 19:16-17).

All 4 Evangelists narrate about the Lord’s way to Golgotha. The first two — Saints Matthew and Mark — speak of this identically. *“And when they had mocked Him, they took the purple off Him, put His own clothes on Him, and led Him away to be crucified. Now as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name. Him they compelled to bear His cross.”* Saint John narrates about that very briefly, not mentioning anything about Simon of Cyrene. The most detailed narrative is that of Saint Luke. Saint John reports that as it was accepted generally, concerning those who were sentenced to death through the crucifixion, the Lord carried His own cross to the place of execution. However, He was so exhausted after His inner struggle in Gethsemane, and after the sleepless night and terrible tortures, that He did not have the strength to carry the cross to the destination. Moved, of course not by compassion but by the desire to reach the place and accomplish their evil deed sooner, the Lord’s enemies grabbed along the way an individual named Simon. He was an emigrant from Cyrene, a town in Libya, on the northern shore of Africa, to the west of Egypt (where many re-

cently migrated Jews lived), and was returning to the city from the field, when he was forced to carry the Lord's cross. Saint Mark adds that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus, later known in the early Christian Church, mentioned in the Epistle to the Romans by Saint Paul (16:13).

Saint Luke adds that *"a great multitude of the people followed Him, and women who also mourned and lamented Him."* He was followed not only by His enemies, but by His commiserating worshippers. Notwithstanding that the custom prohibited to express sympathy to a condemned man, being led to the execution, many women in the crowd showed their empathy to the Lord through loud sobbing. Their compassion was so deep and genuine, that the Lord found He had to respond and turned to them with the whole homily. Presumably, it occurred at the time when the procession stopped so that the Lord's cross could be transferred to Simon the Cyrenian. *"Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children..."* *"Daughters of Jerusalem"* — is a tender form of addressing, indicating the Lord's kind disposition to those women, who had expressed such moving compassion. The Lord as if forgets of His forthcoming sufferings, He turns His spiritual gaze to the chosen nation's future, to that frightening punishment that will reach them for rejecting the Messiah. *"Weep for yourselves and for your children"* — with these words the Lord warns them of the catastrophes that might reach them and their children.

Here, it is as though the Lord had in mind that frightening oath, which the Jews brought upon themselves so flippantly when they screamed: *"His Blood be on us and on our children"* (Mat. 27:25). *"The days are coming..."* — the days of terrible calamities are approaching, when the highest blessing of childbirth will transform into a curse, and those that had previously been regarded as being under God's wrath as childless, not child-bearing, will be regarded as blessed. *"Then they will begin to say to the mountains, 'Fall on us!' and to the hills, 'Cover us!'"* — that's how great the disasters will be. Undoubtedly, the dialogue is about the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70, by Titus.

"For if they do these things in the green wood, what will be done in the dry?" — evidently, this was a folk saying. Under "the green wood," The Lord means Himself; under "the dry" — the Jewish people. If they didn't show mercy to Him, who's Innocent, then what will they do with the guilty nation? "The fire is heading towards Israel (see Ezek. 20:47); if the fire destroyed green wood, with what ferocity will it destroy the dry?" (Bhp. Michael).

The Crucifixion.

(Mat. 27:33-44; Mark 15:22-32; Luke 23:33-38; John 19:18-24)

In accordance with all the 4 Evangelists, the Lord was brought to the place called **Golgotha**, meaning **"the place of execution"** and was crucified between two robbers. Saint Luke writes that they too were led with the Lord to their death. **Golgotha**, or "place of execution," was a small hill, towards the northwest of Jerusalem and situated outside its walls. It is uncertain as why this hill carried such a name. It is thought that perhaps because it either resembled a skull, or because it was littered with numerous skulls of the people executed there. According to the ancient tradition, the last remains of the father of mankind — Adam — reposed here. In his Epistle to the Jews, Saint Apostle Paul points at the special meaning of the fact that *"Jesus....suffered outside the gate."* When they brought Jesus to Golgotha, they gave Him drink. According to Saint Mark 15:23, it was wine mingled with myrrh, while according to Saint Matthew 27:34, it was vinegar mixed with gall. This drink, which stupefied and dulled the senses, was given to the people condemned to crucifixion, so as to somewhat reduce the painful sufferings. The Romans called him "soporific." According to the Jewish rabbis' testimony that wine was mixed with crushed resin, which dulled the senses of the condemned

and thereby alleviated his sufferings. Myrrh is the type of resin — that is why Saint Mark mentions it. The seasoning of wine with myrrh gave it a tart and bitter taste. That's why Saint Matthew calls it "gall," and the wine "vinegar," which apparently is the wine that had gone sour. *"But when He had tasted it, He would not drink"* — the Lord did not take in that drink, wishing in full consciousness to drink the whole cup of sufferings up to the end.

"Now it was the third hour, and they crucified Him" — like that Saint Mark says (15:25). This as though contradicts to Saint John's testimony, that at six o'clock, the Lord was still at Pilate's trial (John 19:14). However, it must be understood that as with night, that was divided into 4 watches — three hours in each — the same happened with the day that was divided into 4 sections, each one called after the last hour of each watch: **the third** hour, **the sixth** hour and **the ninth** hour. Assuming that that the final sentence was announced by Pilate from the rostrum at the end of the third hour, according to the Jewish system, i.e. in the terms of nowadays time — around 9 am, then Saint John was quite right to say that it was the 6th hour, because the second section of the day, comprised of the 4th, 5th and 6th hours, which the Jews called after the last hour like the 6th hour, began. On the other hand, Saint Mark could state that it was the third hour, because in the sense of the second quarter of the day, the 6th hour was just commencing and only the third hour of the first quarter passed.

"And they crucified Him" — the crosses were of various forms and crucifixions varied. Sometimes, the person was nailed to the cross while it was lying on the ground, and then fixed in the ground vertically; sometimes the cross was first fixed in the ground, and then the condemned man was raised and nailed to it. Sometimes the crucifixion was upside down (as was the case with Apostle Peter, according to his own wish). Sometimes the hands and feet were nailed to the cross, while other times, they were simply tied to it. The arms and legs sometimes were nailed, and sometimes just fixed, tied. The body of the crucified hung helplessly in terrifying convulsions; all the muscles had painful cramps; wounds of the nails, tore under the weight of the body; as the result of nail-wounds and loss of blood, the victim was tormented with unbearable thirst. The sufferings of the crucified were so great and incredibly tormenting, and besides long (sometimes the crucified hung on the cross for three days and longer, without dying), so such a form of execution was applied to only to the greatest criminals and was regarded as the most horrifying and shameful of all the types of execution. So that the nailed hands would not tear prematurely, sometimes a foot-rest/crossbar was nailed at the bottom, on which the condemned could stand. On the top, remaining free end of the cross, horizontally there was nailed a board, with the inscription of the fault of the condemned.

Through the indescribable sufferings, the Lord did not remain completely silent: He spoke **seven times** from the cross. The first time He said a prayer for His crucifiers, the second time He bestowed Heavenly joy to the repentant criminal, the third time — entrusted His Pure Mother to Saint Apostle John, the fourth time was an exclamation: *"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"* His fifth word was — *"I thirst,"* the sixth — *"It is finished,"* the seventh — *"Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit."*

The Lord's first utterance was a prayer for His executioners, which is quoted by Saint Luke (23:24): *"Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."* None of those who were crucifying Jesus was aware that He was the Son of God. *"For had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory"* (1 Cor. 2:8), states Apostle Paul. He even spoke of this to the Hebrews in his second sermon, while healing the lame: *"I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers"* (Acts 3:17). Of course, the Roman soldiers were not aware that they were crucifying the Son of God; being so blinded by their hatred and having sentenced the Lord to death, the Jews really did not think that they were crucifying their Messiah. However, this unawareness doesn't justify their crime, because they **had the opportunity and means to know**. The Lord's Prayer testifies of the greatness of His spirit and serves us as an example, so that we too do not revenge us on our enemies, but pray for them to God.

“Now Pilate wrote a title...” Saint John testifies that on Pilate’s order, according to the tradition, a small wooden plaque with the inscription about the Lord’s guilt was made (John 19:19-22). Wishing to hurt the Sanhedrin once again, Pilate ordered the following to be inscribed: “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Because the members of the Sanhedrin accused the Lord of appropriating that royal honor, Pilate ordered that to be written as His guilt, to shame the Sanhedrin; the Jewish king, Who was crucified on the demand of the representatives of the Jewish people. Contrary to the custom, the plaque was inscribed in three languages: local/national Jewish, Greek and the prevalent Roman — that of the conquerors. The aim of that was to allow every person to read that inscription. Not realizing it, Pilate fulfilled the higher providential purpose: at the moment of His lowest point of humiliation, the Lord Jesus Christ was announced to the entire world as **a King**. The Lord’s accusers took this to be a cruel mockery, and demanded that Pilate should change the inscription, but the proud Roman sharply refused them, letting them feel his power.

“Then they crucified Him, and divided His garments, casting lots...” The Roman law decreed that the clothes of the condemned person belonged to the soldiers that crucified him. According to the testimony of Philon, there were four soldiers that carried out the crucifixion. Saint John — who was narrating about the division of the Lord’s clothes, attests that the outer garments were torn into 4 parts, *“To each soldier a part,”* while the undergarment — the tunic — was not stitched but woven, or knitted (from the top down), starting with the opening for the head. If that tunic was to be torn apart, the parts would have no value. That’s why the soldiers cast lots in order that the winner would get the whole tunic. According to the tradition, the Blessed Mother of God wove that tunic. Doing that, the soldiers unconsciously fulfilled the ancient prophecy about the Messiah from Psalm 21:19, which is quoted by Saint John: *“They divided My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots.”*

Further on, the first three Evangelists narrate on the mockery and blasphemy that the Lord was subjected to by the soldiers, as well as by His enemies among the people, passing Him by, and of course, by the high priests, Scribes, elders and Pharisees. Those blasphemies had the one, mutual basis in the comparison of the past with the present. Recalling everything that the Lord said and did, they pointed at His current helplessness, and sarcastically suggested Him to perform a miracle that was evident and clear to all — **to come down from the cross**, promising hypocritically, of course, that in that case they would believe in Him. According to Saint Matthew’s words, both the robbers, crucified on His right and left side, participated in that blasphemy.

The Repentance of the Wise Robber.

(Luke 23:39-43)

Completing the first two Evangelists’ narration, Saint Luke narrates about the repentance and appeal to the Lord of one of the robbers. One of them, evidently getting more embittered from the tortures and seeking an object upon which he could turn his hatred, began to blaspheme the Lord, imitating the example of His enemies. The other robber, obviously not corrupted to such an extent, having retained some religious feelings, began to admonish his companion. *“Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due rewards of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.”* Evidently, he heard the torment and crying of the Jerusalem women, accompanying the Lord to Golgotha; perhaps the sign on the Lord’s cross produced an impression that made him think over their words: **“saved others,”** or perhaps the most important sermon about Christ for him was the Lord’s prayer for His enemies, the crucifiers.

In one way or another, his conscience spoke up strongly, and he wasn’t afraid to openly defend the Lord among the mockery and blasphemy. Besides, there came such complete and decisive break within his soul that expressing his belief in the crucified Lord as the Messiah, he turned to Him with the repentant words: *“Lord, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom!”* In other words: “remember me, Lord, when You come to rule.” He doesn’t ask

for glory or joy, but for the smallest thing, just like the Canaanite woman wishing to receive a breadcrumb from the Lord's supper. From then on, those words of the wise robber became an example of genuine, deep repentance, and they have even entered into usage in our church services. This remarkable confession brightly testified to the power of faith in the repentant robber. The One in pain, exhausted and dying, he acknowledges as a King, Who will come into His Kingdom that He will establish. This confession was such, that it was even beyond the powers of those closest to the Lord, who were unable to bear the thought of the suffering Messiah. Here undoubtedly was the influence of God's grace that had enlightened the robber, so that he might be the example and edification to all generations and nations. That confession earned him the highest reward that one can imagine: "*Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise*" — said the Lord, i.e. today he will enter Heaven, which will again be opened to the people through the redeeming death of Christ.

The Mother of God at the Cross.

(John 19:25-27)

As an eyewitness and participant of the event, only Evangelist John narrates about how the Lord Jesus Christ entrusted the Ever-Pure Mother of God to his care and concern from the cross. When the malicious enemies started to slowly move away from the cross, the Ever-Holy Theotokos, Her sister Mary Clopas, Mary Magdalene "*and the disciple whom He loved*" (as Saint John often calls himself in the Gospel), who were standing nearby, approached it. With the departure of Christ from this world, His Ever-Pure mother would have remained alone, and there would be no one to look after Her. That's why with the words: "*Woman, behold Your son*" and to His disciple: "*Behold your Mother!*" the Lord entrusts His Ever-Pure Mother to His beloved disciple. "*And from that hour that disciple took Her to his own home*" — as the Church tradition testifies, from that point on until Her death, the Ever-pure mother lived at Saint John's, who cared for Her like a loving son. This is especially significant for the following reason. Not missing the opportunity to blaspheme against the Holy Mother of God, the Protestants and sectarians reject the fact that She was and remained a Virgin. They say that after Jesus She bore other children, born through naturally from Joseph, and that they were those "Lord's brothers" that are mentioned in the Gospel. However, there arises the question: if the Ever-Holy Theotokos had Her own children, who undoubtedly could and should take care of Her as of their own Mother, then why was it necessary to entrust Her to a stranger — Saint John? It has to be assumed that the Ever-Holy Virgin Mary and Saint John the Theologian remained at the cross till the end, because Saint John points out in his Gospel, that he was an eyewitness of the Lord's death himself, and of everything that followed (John 19:35).

The Death of Christ.

(Mat. 27:45-56; Mark 15:33-41; Luke 23:44-49; John 19:28-37).

According to the testimony of the first three Evangelists, the Lord's death on the cross was preceded by the darkness that covered the land: "*Now when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour*", i.e. in our time — from noon till 3 pm. Saint Luke adds that "*the sun was darkened.*" This could not have been a normal eclipse, because the Jewish Passover on the 14th of Nisan, always happens at the full moon, whereas an eclipse occurs only with the new moon — not the full moon. This was a miraculous sign, which testified to the astonishing and extraordinary event — the death of God's beloved Son. The Roman astronomer **Flagonus** observed that darkness, during which even the stars were visible. The Greek historian Phallus also testifies to this extraordinary eclipse of the sun. Saint Dionysius the Areopagite (when he was still a heathen) mentions this in his letters to Apollophanus. However, it's notable, how both Saint Chrysostom and Blessed Theophylactus emphasize, that this "*darkness was over all the earth,*" and not in some part only — as it happens with an ordinary eclipse. Evidently, that darkness followed after the

sneering and mockery at crucified Christ; and it stopped that sneering, causing the mood among the people, as narrated by Saint Luke: “*And the whole crowd who came together to that sight, seeing what had been done, beat their breasts*” (Luke 23:48).

“*And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’*” Saint Mark reports these words as “Eloi” instead of “Ili.” Of course this lamentation was not that of despondency, but only an expression of the profound grief of Human God. In order for the redeeming sacrifice could be accomplished, it was essential that Human God would **drink the chalice of human sufferings to its bottom**. For this was necessary that crucified Jesus **could not feel the joy** of His unity with God the Father. God’s entire wrath, which, owing to the Divine truth, had to be vented on the sinful humanity, at that moment, was as if **concentrated on Christ alone**, and it was as if God had left Him. Amid the most heaviest physical and spiritual sufferings that can be imagined, that separation was the most agonizing, causing that painful cry to come off the lips of Jesus.

In Hebrew, “Eloi” was pronounced as “**Elyahoo**”. That’s why the Lord’s lamentation served as a new cause for mocking at Him: “*Look, He is calling for Elijah!*” The sarcasm of this derision was based on the fact that before the Messiah’s coming, the Jews were expecting the arrival of Elijah. Laughing at the Lord, they were as if saying: even now, crucified and abused, He still imagines that that He is the Messiah and is calling for Elijah to help Him. The first two Evangelists narrate that one of the soldiers immediately ran and took a sponge, filled it with vinegar and having placed it on the end of a reed, gave Him to drink. Evidently, this was sour wine, which was the ordinarily beverage of the Roman soldiers, especially in hot weather. The sponge that was absorbing liquid, was placed on a reed, i.e. the stem of a plant (called as “*hyssop*” by Saint John), because those hanging on the cross were quite high above the ground, making it simply impossible to come up and give them drink. The crucifixion caused extraordinarily strong and torturing thirst in the crucified sufferers, and Saint John narrates that apparently the Lord just before that exclaimed: “*I thirst!*” (19:28-30), adding to this: “*That the Scripture might be fulfilled.*” In depicting the sufferings of the Messiah, the Psalmist in the 69th Psalm, verse 21, truly foretold that: “*And in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.*” According to Saint John, having received the sour wine, the Lord exclaimed: “**It is finished!**”, i.e.: the matter, predetermined at the Divine council, was accomplished — **there happened the redemption of the human race and its reconciliation with God through the death of the Messiah** (John 19:30).

According to Saint Luke, that was followed by the Lord crying out: “*Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit*” (Luke 23:46), “*and bowing His head, He gave up His spirit*” (John 19:30). All first three Evangelists narrate, that at that moment of Christ’s death, “*the veil in the temple was torn in two from top to bottom,*” i.e. the curtain that separated the Sanctuary from the Holiest of Holy, tore in half by itself. As it was that time for the offering of the evening sacrifice — nearly 3 o’clock in the afternoon (by our time) — then apparently a priest, who was there, witnessed that miraculous tearing of the curtain.

This symbolized **the end of the Old Testament** and the beginning of the New Testament, which opened to humans the Kingdom of Heaven that was previously closed for them. “*The earth quaked*” — as a sign of God’s wrath at those who put to death His Beloved Son, a strong earthquake occurred. From that earthquake “*rocks were split*”, i.e. the rocky hills split, revealing the caves, used for burials. As a sign of the Lord’s triumph over death — “*many bodies of the Saints who had fallen asleep were raised*” — on the third day when the Lord resurrected, those bodies that were buried in those caves, resurrected and appeared in Jerusalem to the people that knew them.

All the three Evangelists narrate that those miraculous signs, which accompanied the Lord’s death, had such a profound and jolting effect on the Roman centurion, that (according to the first two Evangelists) he pronounced: “*Truly this was the Son of God!*”, while Saint Luke writes: “*Certainly this was a righteous Man!*” The tradition says that this centurion,

whose name was Longinus, became a Christian and later a martyr for Christ (his memory is on October 16).

According to Saint Luke, all the people that gathered at Golgotha were also bewildered: *“beat their breasts and returned”* — these sharp changes in moods are quite natural of an agitated crowd. All three Evangelists point out that the witnesses of the Lord’s death and the events accompanying it were *“many women who followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him, were there looking on from afar,”* and among them, as enumerated by Saints Matthew and Mark, were: Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James and of Joses, and the mother of the Zebedee sons, Salome.

Only Saint John narrates about the events following the death of Jesus, and as usual, complements the first three Evangelists’ narration, and as he confirms in his narrative, he was a witness of all that. Because it was **Friday** — in Greek **“paraskevi”** meaning “a preparation,” i.e. “the day before Saturday,” and that Saturday was **“a great day”**, as it coincided with the first day of the Passover, so as not to leave the crucified bodies on crosses on such a “great day,” the Jews (the enemies of Christ or the members of the Sanhedrin) asked Pilate *“that their legs may be broken.”* Having killed them this way, “they might be taken away”, i.e. taken down and buried before the night came, when it would be the time to partake of the Passover. In order to quicken their demise, the cruel Roman custom had the legs of the crucified broken, i.e. shattered. Having received Pilate’s permission, the soldiers broke the legs of the two robbers crucified with Christ, who were still alive. *“But when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs. But one of the soldiers pierced His side with his spear, and immediately blood and water came out”* (John 19:33-34; 1 John 5:8).

The negatively disposed critics occupied much time, discussing the question whether it was possible for blood and water to flow from Christ’s wound, proving that it was impossible as blood could not flow from a cold dead body. This is because blood remains in a fluid state in a dead body for a very short time, not more than an hour, and the separation of fluid from blood occurs only with the onset of decomposition, and with certain illnesses like typhoid, ague, etc. All these arguments are unfounded. After all, we don’t know the full details of the Lord’s crucifixion and death, and therefore cannot make an opinion about these details. However, it is the well-known fact that crucified suffers of feverish condition. The very piercing of the rib undoubtedly occurred very soon after the death — and in any case, certainly not after one hour — as the night was approaching and the Jews were hurrying to complete their malicious deed. Apart from that, there is no need to examine the flow of blood and water, as a natural manifestation. Saint John himself underlines this by considering it miraculous in his Gospel (*“And he who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true”* — 19:35). The Purest Body of Human God could not be subjected to the ordinary law of decomposition of the human body. Probably, from the moment of death, It began to enter into a transforming state, which ended with Its resurrection in a new, glorified and spiritualized appearance. The holy Fathers explain that in the symbolic sense, this is a sign of the mysterious unification of the faithful with Christ in the mysteries of baptism and the Eucharist: “we are born through water and nourished by blood and flesh” (Blessed Theophylactus and Saint Chrysostom). Standing at the cross and witnessing all that, Saint John testifies that what he says is true and that he is not being deluded, confirming this — *“and his testimony is true”* (John 19:35).

The flow of blood from Christ’s perforated side signifies that He became our Redeemer, having cleansed us with **water in the Mystery of Baptism, and nourishing us with His Blood in the Mystery of Communion**. That’s why in his first Epistle, the same Apostle John writes: *“This is He who came by water and blood — Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that bears witness, because the Spirit is truth. For there are three that bear witness in Heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one”* (1 John 5:6-8).

“For these things were done,” i.e. not only the piercing of the side, but also that the Lord’s legs were not broken, *“that the Scripture should be fulfilled.”* This was foretold in the Book of Exodus 12:46: the Paschal lamb, that was the image of the Lord Jesus Christ, had to be eaten without any bones being broken and what remained, had to be burned. There is another section of the Bible that prophesies: *“they shall look unto me whom they have pierced”* (Zach. 12:10). In this segment, Jehovah is depicted as the Messiah that had been pierced by His people, and having looked upon the wounded Messiah, the same people present themselves as the confessing to Him with weeping and sobbing. These words were slowly being fulfilled upon the Jews that condemned Christ to death — and will continue to be fulfilled till the end of the world, before which there will be a universal conversion of the Jews to Christ, as foretold by Saint Apostle Paul in his Epistle to the Romans 11:25-26.

The Burial of the Lord Jesus Christ.

(Mat. 27:57-66; Mark 15:42-47; Luke 23:50-56; John 19:38-42).

The Lord’s burial is narrated of harmoniously by all the four Evangelists, at the same time each conveys his own details. The burial took place when the evening came, although before the arrival of Saturday, i.e. it has to be supposed that it must have been one or two hours before the sunset, when Saturday began. This is clearly indicated by all the four Evangelists: Mat. 27:57, Mark 15:42, Luke 23:54 and John 19:42. This is especially emphasized by Saints Mark and Luke. At that time, as Saint Mark testifies, Joseph arrived from the Jewish town of Arimathea near Jerusalem. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, a pious, clandestine follower of Christ, as St. Mark states, and according to Saint John, that was not involved in Christ’s condemnation (Luke 23:51). Approaching Pilate, he asked for Christ’s body to be buried. According to the Roman custom, crucified bodies were left on the crosses as birds’ bag. However, it was possible to obtain the permission from the authorities for the body to be buried. Pilate expressed surprise that Jesus had already died, as the crucified sometimes hung there for several days. Having checked with the centurion, who confirmed Christ’s death, he ordered to give the Body to Joseph. According to Saint John, Nicodemus — who previously came to Jesus at night (see John chap. 3) — arrived, bringing with him about 100 pounds of myrrh and aloe mixture. Joseph bought a long and expensive shroud. They took the Body down and according to the custom, anointed it with aromatic oils, wound the shroud around it and placed it in a new burial cave in Joseph’s garden, situated close to Golgotha. As the sun was setting in the west, everything was performed hastily, but diligently. Having rolled a stone across the entrance, they left. All that time, the women that stood at Golgotha before, observed the activity.

Saint Chrysostom and also Blessed Theophylactus consider that *“Mary the mother of James and Joses”*, mentioned by the Evangelists, was the Ever Holy Theotokos, “for James and Joses were the sons of Joseph and his first wife. As the Mother of God was called the wife of Joseph, then She was rightfully called the mother, i.e. the stepmother of his sons.” The others were of the opinion that it was Mary, the wife of Cleopas, the cousin of the mother of God. As narrated by Saint Matthew (27:61), they all were sitting close to the opening of the cave. Then according to Saint Luke, they later returned and prepared aromatic herbs and paste, so that at the end of Saturday’s quiet and in accordance with the Jewish custom, they would anoint the body of Christ (Luke 23:56). According to Saint Mark, those women, named “myrrh-bearing” didn’t purchase the aromatic herbs on the day the Lord was interred, but after Saturday had passed, i.e. at Saturday night. There are no contradictions here. Evidently, there was very little time left on Friday evening before the sunset. They prepared it partly on Friday, and what they didn’t finish, they did on Saturday evening.

Evangelist Matthew narrates about another important circumstance, which occurred on the day after the burial — *“On the next day, which followed the Day of Preparation,”* i.e. Saturday, the high priests and Pharisees gathered at Pilate’s residence (not even thinking about violating the rest on the Sabbath) and asked him to place a guard at the tomb for three

days. They declared their motive as: *“We remember, while He was still alive, how that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise.’ Therefore command that the tomb be made secure until the third day, lest His disciples come by night and steal Him away, and say to the people, ‘He has risen from the dead.’ So the last deception will be worse than the first.”* As “the first deception” they call the Lord Jesus Christ’s teaching about Himself as the Son of God, the Messiah, while the “last deception” — the sermon about Him as the resurrected Conqueror of hell and death. They feared that sermon more, and in that they were quite right, as the future history of spreading the Christianity showed. Pilate dryly answered their request: *“You have a guard; go your way, make it as secure as you know how.”* At the disposal of the members of the Sanhedrin there were the Roman soldiers-guards for the time of the feast, which they used in order the order and peace would be maintained, because of the huge gathering of people from all the countries in the world in Jerusalem. Pilate offers that they utilize those guards as they wished, so that later they would not be able to blame anyone for anything. *“So they went and made the tomb secure, sealing the stone and setting the guard”* — i.e. placing a cord and a seal on the stone, with which the tomb was closed in the presence of the soldiers, who remained at the tomb to guard it.

Thus, without realizing it, the most evil enemies of the Lord prepared undisputable proof of His glorious resurrection from the dead.

The Resurrection.

Narrating about this greatest event, all the four Evangelists say nothing on the mysterious and the incomprehensible for us side of it. They don’t describe how it happened, and how the Resurrected Lord came out of the tomb without breaking the seal. They speak only of the earth-quake, which was the result of the Lord’s Angel rolling the stone away from the entrance of the tomb (after the Lord had risen — which is emphasized in our church songs — and not as is commonly thought, that the Angel rolled the stone away so that the Lord might come out of the tomb), and of the Angel’s speech addressed to the women myrrh-bearers that came to the tomb, and a further range of appearances of the Resurrected Lord to the them and to His disciples.

The Arrival of the Women Myrrh-Bearers at the Tomb.

(Mat. 28:1-8; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12 and John 20:1-10).

To the women that were present at Golgotha and then at the Lord’s burial, it seemed that His priceless Body was too hastily prepared for the burial, and they were grief-stricken because they were not involved in the Jewish custom of anointing His body. That’s why in accordance with the law, after spending all Saturday at rest, on the first day of the week — at sunrise — they hurried to the tomb in order to fulfill their wish and final duty of love to their Beloved Teacher. At the head of those deeply committed to Christ women, who entered into the history with the name of “**myrrh-bearers**” (as testified by all the four Evangelists) was **Mary Magdalene**; she was followed by the “other Mary” or Mary, the mother of James, Salome and the others that followed the Lord from Galilee (Luke 23:55). It was a whole multitude of women, some of whom walked fast, nearly running while the others walked slowly, without any great haste. Therefore, it is not surprising that, the time of their arrival at the tomb as determined by the Evangelists varies, what at the first glance creates a feeling of contradiction between them, which in reality does not exist.

Before all: who is this “other Mary,” twice mentioned as such by Saint Matthew in his narration about the Lord’s burial (Mat. 27:61), and then — in that about the resurrection (Mat. 28:1). According to the ancient Church tradition, enunciated in the Sinarksis on the day of the Passover, it was no one other than **the Mother of God**. Why isn’t it mentioned directly? As the Sinarksis explains, “so that it would not appear questionable” (that the testimony of such an enormous event belonged to His Mother), the Evangelists say: the Lord appeared first to Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9), who saw an Angel sitting on the stone.

Salome was the mother of the “sons of Zebedee” — Apostles James and John. Joanna, mentioned by Saint Luke (24:10), was the wife of Chuza, King Herod’s steward. The other women-myrrh-bearers are not mentioned by name, but Saint Luke clearly states that there were “*other women with them*” (Luke 24:10). Among these “others,” the Church tradition also points at: Mary and Martha, the sisters of Lazarus, who was resurrected by the Lord, Mary, the wife of Clopas and Susanna, and many others, “As Divine Luke narrates: those serving to Christ and the disciples with their possessions” (Synaksarion on the week of the Women Myrrh-bearers).

The women myrrh-bearers were awaiting the end of the Sabbath rest. Moreover, as Saint Luke states, some of them had purchased some aromatic spices on Friday evening (23:56), while the others — “when the Sabbath was passed,” i.e. on Saturday evening (Mark 16:1).

The Evangelists use different expressions, concerning the time of the myrrh-bearers’ arrival at the tomb.

Saint Matthew — “*Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn...*”

Saint Mark — “*Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week... when the sun had risen*”

Saint Luke — “*Now on the first day of the week, very early in the morning...*”

Saint John — “*Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was still dark...*”

Thus, all these indications of time coincide, only that they speak of different moments of the coming morning, from which can be seen that the women-myrrh-bearers didn’t all arrive at one and the same time. Saint John’s description is the one that differs most from the other Evangelists’ ones, which is understandable, for as usual, he omits what had been narrated by the first three Evangelists, but completes them with what relates to Mary Magdalene and the two disciples. In comparing the narratives of the four Evangelists, there emerges a full picture of everything that happened. The earthquake, described by Saint Matthew alone, that occurred when the Angel rolled the stone, took place before the arrival of the women-myrrh-bearers. The purpose to this was to make the guards run away and reveal the tomb empty. The Lord resurrected prior to that, just as it is sung in our church cants: “While the tomb was sealed, Thou, O life, didst shine forth from the grave, O Christ God....” (Troparion on the week of Thomas). That’s why the depiction of Christ’s Resurrection, with the stone removed, Christ emerging from the tomb, and the guards falling on the ground with fear — is wrong. The Angel descended from Heaven and rolled the stone, only **after** Christ had risen. That brought the guards in the state of trembling and stupor, and made them flee to Jerusalem.

By comparing the four Evangelists’ narratives, a clear picture of the sequence of events appears. As can it be seen from Saint John’s narrative, the first to arrive at the tomb was Mary Magdalene, “*while it was still dark*” (John 20:1). She wasn’t alone, but with the multitude of myrrh-bearers, as narrated by the first three Evangelists. Because of her especial love for the Lord and her lively temperament, she overtook the other women and arrived while it was still dark, whereas the other women approached the tomb when the day was breaking.

That she was not alone can be seen from John's narrative, because when she returned to Apostles Peter and John, she spoke in the plural and not in the singular: "*We do not know where they have laid Him*" (John 20:2). Thus, it is clearly evident from the Greek text, and that's the way it was translated into the Russian language. Seeing the stone removed from the entrance (she did not see the Angel that later appeared to the women), she thought that the Lord's Body had been carried away, and immediately ran to inform Apostles Peter and John about this. On the way back, she of course met the other women, occupied with the idea about who would move the stone for them, Mark 16:3), and told them of her fears. While she was going to the Apostles, the rest of the women-myrrh-bearers approached the tomb, saw the Angels, heard the good news of Christ's resurrection, and hurried back to the Apostles to share the great joy with them. All of this is narrated in detail by the first three Evangelists (Mat. 28:5-8; Mark 16:4-8 and Luke 24:3-8).

Meanwhile, as a result of the news brought to them by Mary Magdalene, (and perhaps by the other myrrh-bearers, whom they didn't believe — "*And their words seemed to them like idle tales, and they did not believe them*" Luke 24:11) the two Apostles — Peter and John — rapidly went, or even ran to the tomb. Being younger than Peter, John ran faster and therefore approached the tomb sooner, when the women had left, but did not go inside. Perhaps, it was his timidity of being alone in the garden that held him back. However, hunched over and peering into the opened tomb, he saw some swaddling-cloth lying on the ground.

Immediately after, there arrives Simon Peter who, being bolder and more courageous, decides to enter the tomb and sees just the swaddling-cloth lying on the ground and a face cloth that was wrapped around the Lord's head, "*not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself*" (John 20:3-7). "*Then the other disciple, who came to the tomb first,*" i.e. John, "*and he saw and believed,*" i.e. believed in the truth of Christ's resurrection, because if they robbed the Body, there would have been no need to unwind and divest the swaddling-cloth from it and then leave them in such a neat order. "*For as yet they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead*" — until the Lord "*opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures*" (Luke 24:25), there was much that they didn't understand clearly: they didn't comprehend the Lord's words about His forthcoming sufferings and resurrection (as it can be seen, for example, in Luke 18:34 and Mark 9:10), and therefore were in need of material evidence. Such an evidence of the verity of Christ's resurrection to John, was that circumstance the swaddling-cloth and the faith cloth were left in the tomb, carefully folded. That fact convinced in the truth of what had happened only John. About Peter, Saint Luke stays that "*he departed, marveling to himself at what had happened*" (Luke 24:12). After his triple renouncement of Christ, the state of his spirit was very heavy and was not inclined towards the living belief. And thus, apparently after his return from the tomb, the merciful Lord appeared in front of Peter in order to console him and pacify his heart. This is mentioned briefly by Saint Luke 24:34 and Saint Apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 15:5. As it can be seen from these segments, the Lord appeared to Peter alone, prior than to the other Apostles.

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene.

(John 20:11-18; Mark 16:9-11; Mat. 28:9-10).

After Apostles Peter and John had left the tomb, Mary Magdalene, who perhaps arrived there with them or just after them, was left on her own. Her soul was in upheaval and she was crying, thinking that the Lord's Body had been stolen. Crying, she leaned towards the opening of the tomb, and saw inside two Angels, sitting on the bier upon which the bodies of the dead were placed, inside the burial cave. Her grief was so great that it deadened all the other feelings. That's why Magdalene is not staggered by the sight of those Angels, and to their consoling question: "*Woman, why are you weeping?*" she simply — as though speaking to the terrestrial creatures — expresses her grief in the same words as she had expressed it before to Apostles Peter and John: "*Because they have taken away my Lord, and I*

do not know where they have laid Him.” Having said this, maybe by chance, in the state of perplexity, and then again perhaps, driven by an instinctive inner feeling, she turned around and saw Jesus, but did not recognize Him. Apparently, she didn’t recognize Him, because He appeared **“in another form”**, like to the Emmaus travelers, in the “humble and ordinary” appearance (Saint Chrysostom). That’s why she took Him for a gardener. Maybe she didn’t recognize Him, because her eyes were full of tears, as she was overawed by grief and didn’t expect to see the Lord alive. She didn’t even recognize His voice when He asked her: *“Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you seeking?”* Taking Him for a gardener (which is quite natural, because who else would be in the garden so early other than a gardener), she says to Him: *“Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away,”* not even considering whether she, being a weak woman, would be able to lift Him. The Lord then revealed Himself by calling her name with a special and long-familiar to her intonation: *“Mary!”* — this shows that after her words to the seeming gardener, she turned her gaze towards the tomb, — *“and said to Him, ‘Rabboni!’ which is to say, Master”* and obviously, full of indescribable joy, fell at His feet wishing to cling to them, perhaps to convince herself that she was seeing real alive Jesus and not a spirit. The Lord forbade her to do that, saying: *“Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.’”* It is as though the Lord told her: “Believe My word and not your sense of touch”. Another meaning of this forbiddance is that the Lord wanted to tell Mary: “Leave Me, as you cannot remain with Me permanently. Don’t detain Me, but go and proclaim My resurrection. It is needed that I should not remain with you but ascend to the Heavenly Father.” A good explanation of this forbiddance in touching the Lord can be found in the matins hymn of the eighth verse: “Because the woman was thinking in earthly terms, she was sent away and forbidden to touch His garment.”

“Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken these things to her” — comparing these words with the narration of Saint Matthew, we have to assume that along the way, Mary Magdalene encountered the *“other Mary,”* and the Lord again appeared to both of them (the second appearance), *“saying: rejoice!”* They stretched themselves at His feet. He repeated anew His behest that they should go to His disciples (having called them *“His Brethren”*), and announce of His resurrection to them, repeating that what the Angel stated prior to that: *“Tell My brethren to go to Galilee.”* The resurrected Lord, already the glorified Messiah ready to go to His Father, very touchingly calls His disciples *“brethren”*. He wasn’t ashamed to call them as such — as Apostle Paul later emphasized that in his Epistle to the Hebrews 2:11-12.).

Saint Mark states that the women myrrh-bearers were so overcome with excitement and horror (of course, reverential), that they *“said nothing to anyone.”* This has to be understood in the sense that, when they were running along the way, they did not mention anything to anyone about what they saw and heard. Further on, Evangelist Mark himself (as well as other Evangelists, Luke 24:9) narrates that having come home, they told everything to the Apostles (Mark 16:8 and 6:10)

According to the Evangelic stories, it would seem that the Lord’s first appearance was to Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9-10). However, from the ancient times, our Church preserves the tradition, that before Mary Magdalene, the resurrected Lord first appeared to His Ever-Pure **Mother** — which is quite natural and understandable. Up to this day within the temple of Resurrection at Jerusalem, they show the place of the Lord’s appearance to His Ever-Pure Mother, not far from the *“cuvuclia”*. The tradition, sanctified with centuries, cannot be but based on the real fact. And if it was not mentioned in the Gospel, it is because in general, there is much that is not recorded, as Saint John testifies (21:25; 20:30-31). It has to be assumed that because of the Ever-Pure Mother of God’s humility, it wasn’t to Her liking that the concealed secrets of Her life would be made known — that’s why there is extremely little said about Her in the Gospel, except for the very essential facts, directly connected with the

life of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Evidently, the Evangelists didn't want to mention the Ever-Blessed Theotokos at all, as the witness of the genuineness of Christ's Resurrection, because the testimony of the mother would have been met with skepticism by those that doubted (see the Synaksarion of the Paschal week). The Evangelists say, that the women-myrrh-bearers' story about what they saw and heard at the tomb about the appearance of the resurrected Lord Himself, seemed senseless to them and were not believed (Luke 24:11). If even the Apostles didn't believe them, would strangers believe the witness of the Mother?

The Bribing of the Guards.

(Mat. 28:11-15).

"Some of the guard," (that ran from the Lord's tomb) who apparently were in charge and responsible for leaving their position, informed the high priests of everything that had occurred, -- exactly to them and not to Pilate, because they were placed after their command and not the procurator's one. The high priests gathered the Sanhedrin and decided to bribe the guards to slander the truth of the Lord's Resurrection. "They bought His blood," — states Saint Chrysostom — "when He was alive, and with His crucifixion and resurrection, they again are using money to undermine the truth of the resurrection." *"Tell them, 'His disciples came at night and stole Him away while we slept'"* — that's what they taught the soldiers to say. "Their words are completely unbelievable and have no plausibility," reasons Saint Chrysostom: "In what manner did His disciples steal the body, these poor and simple people, who didn't even dare to show themselves? And wasn't there a seal placed at the tomb? Wasn't that area surrounded by many guards, soldiers and ordinary Jews? And for what purpose would they steal Him? Is it so that they could invent a teaching about the resurrection? But how would it occur to the people that wished to live in anonymity, to invent something like that? And how did they remove the sealed stone? How did they remain undetected by some many guards? And what benefit would it bring to them, if Christ didn't resurrect?" All the interpreters of the Gospel note in a just way, that all the endeavors of the Sanhedrin — to retain the Lord's Pure Body in the tomb as secure as possible, were invented and executed as though purposely to confirm the authenticity of the event, with all historical clarity, which the members of the Sanhedrin wanted to obscure and present like false. After all, the stealing of bodies was completely unheard of among the Jews, fearing desecrating themselves through touching a corpse (Num. 19:11-12).

How could it happen that the guards fell into a deep sleep at the precise time, when the actual theft was expected on the third day? Their sleep must have been extraordinarily deep, if they couldn't even hear the stone of the tomb being rolled away. Even if they decided to fall asleep — which is totally untypical of the Roman soldiers — they would have done so in front of the entrance, so that it would have been impossible to roll the stone without crushing them. The most unbelievable thing about this is that the frightened and scattered disciples would decide to commit such a senseless theft, with which they would have gained no benefit, but an apparent enormous danger. Remarkable is also the fact that the soldiers would spread such reports about themselves, without arousing amazement among their listeners about why they weren't punished for such breach of duty. Notwithstanding the obviousness of the hateful Jews' fabrication, their stubborn unwillingness to believe in the authenticity of Christ's resurrection only confirms this great Christian truth.

Lord's Appearance to His Disciples on the Road to Emmaus.

(Luke 24:13-35 and Mark 16:12)

Evangelist Luke — according to the tradition, being one of those two disciples — was the only one to describe this event in detail, the other one being Cleopas, a relative of the Mother of God. Both were among the seventy disciples of Christ. Saint Mark briefly men-

tions of this event as well (16:12). Even the very vivid description of the narrative of this event, and the fullness of the portrayal with all its inner sufferings, shows that one of its two participants undoubtedly was Luke himself, who according to the custom of the holy writers, does not call himself by name. The disciples were heading towards Emmaus, a settlement located approximately 7 miles to the west of Jerusalem. They were traveling there at the slow pace, it would require nearly 3 hours to fulfill the trip, while for a quick return trip, it would take them 1 ½ - 2 hours. This was the “*same day*,” i.e. the very day of Christ’s resurrection. They were walking slowly, discussing among themselves all the sad events associated with the Lord’s last days on earth that laid as heavy burden upon their hearts. As it can be seen further on, they also discussed the events of the current day, which evidently couldn’t affirm their faith in the authenticity of Christ’s resurrection, for they walked in sadness. Along the way, the Lord Himself joined them as a traveler, heading in the same direction. “*But their eyes were restrained, so they did not know Him.*”

Saint Mark explains that the Lord appeared to them “*in another form*,” i.e. in a different appearance, that’s why they did not recognize Him. The Lord did that intentionally, because it wasn’t good for Him to be recognized immediately. He did that, so as to edify them giving the necessary in their spiritual state instructions. As Saint Theophylactus thinks, He wanted them, “to reveal their perplexity, expose their wound and then accept the medicine; to appear before them, after a long break, as more pleasing; to instruct them through Moses and the Prophets, and only then to be recognized; so that they might believe that His Body is no longer the same, which can be seen by everyone in general, but that while it is the same body that resurrected and suffered, at the same time, it can visible only to those, whom He allows to see Him.”

Being omniscient — He wants to know from themselves, what is the reason for their sorrow: “*What kind of conversation is this that you have with one another as you walk and are sad?*” With this question, the Lord is trying to provoke the disciples to reveal their feelings before Him. Cleopas then perceives the Lord to be a Judean, having arrived at Jerusalem from some other country for the Passover, as one could not visualize that a Palestinian resident wouldn’t know all about what happened during those days. The disciples then confessed their sorrow to the Lord. However, characteristically, they refer to their Teacher as just to a “prophet,” at the same stating that their expectations of Him, as of the Messiah, had not been realized: “*We were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel.*” Moreover, they themselves still don’t know what to think of everything that happened, because some women, having been to the tomb early, related some amazing things: they didn’t find His Body, but saw the appearance of the Angels, who said that He was alive. Evidently, Luke and Cleopas left Jerusalem before hearing about the appearance of the Lord to Mary Magdalene and the other myrrh-bearers. “*Certain of those who were with us went to the tomb*” — here, evidently, the conversation is about the Apostles Peter and John, about what narrates the latter (John 20:1-10) — “*but Him they did not see*” — and because of this they find themselves in the predicament, for they do not know what to think of all this.

Without still revealing Himself, the Lord begins His dialogue, letting them understand that the reason for their uncertainty in the spiritual state lies within them — in their incomprehension and in the sluggish state of their hearts. “*Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?*” — He directly calls their Teacher as Christ and explains, that everything happened in accordance with the Old Testament prophecies about Christ, that exactly through the sufferings, the Messiah had to “enter into His glory” — the glory of His spiritual and not terrestrial kingdom.

The disciples listened to their mysterious companion with greater attention an inner zeal, and their hearts got so pre-disposed towards Him, that they started to persuade Him to stay with them for the night, pleading that the night was approaching and to travel alone at night in Palestine was not at all safe. The Lord stayed, and when it was time for supper, as the eldest, “*He took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.*” Evidently this gesture,

characteristic of their Teacher, served as an impulse that their eyes became open, and “*they knew Him; and He vanished from their sight.*” As it can be seen from the Evangelists’ narratives, the glorified Body of the Lord was already extraordinary. It wasn’t like the former mortal human body: there were no barriers to it, and it could appear and become invisible suddenly.

Why was it that only then the Lord allowed Himself to be recognized? The purpose of His appearance was to explain to the disciples, how all the prophecies of the Old Testament had been realized through Him. If only they recognized Him instantly, the impulsive joy that would have undoubtedly taken them might have hindered the quiet reflection about the authenticity of His resurrection and conviction in its reality. As the Lord guided them slowly towards the profound conviction in this truth, by their own admission, making their hearts inflame, He finally revealed Himself to them, having ignited them with such burning faith, inaccessible to any doubts or temptations.

Notwithstanding that the night had fallen, they immediately hurried to Jerusalem, to share their joy with the other disciples. They in turn related to them that “*The Lord is risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!*” According to Saint Mark (16:12-13), Luke’s and Cleopas’s story **was not believed** by the other disciples. It has to be assumed that what confused them, were the incomprehensible appearances of the Lord, first here then elsewhere, which was impossible for an ordinary person, and as well that He appeared to the travelers to Emmaus “in another form.” They didn’t understand the Lord’s new being upon the resurrection, consequently their faith was not yet very firm — they didn’t know the nature of His resurrected Body. That’s why when He appears to them collectively, behind the closed doors, they regard Him as a ghost.

The Appearance to the Ten Disciples.

(Mark 16:14; Luke 24:36-45 and John 20:19-23).

Saint Mark speaks briefly about this appearance, while Saints Luke and John, narrate about this in detail, being the complement of one another. As indicated by Saint Luke, the Lord appeared to the ten disciples (Thomas was absent, according to Saint John), just when Luke and Cleopas, who returned from Emmaus, were continuing their narration, as though for the purpose of dispelling all the disciples’ doubts and curing them of their remnants of disbelief. According to Saint John, this was “*the same day at evening, being the first day of the week.*” Here, John abandons the normal Jewish calculation of time according to which, the evening is the beginning of the next day. Because of the fear of Jews, the doors of the house were locked — “for the sake of the Jews’ fear”; evidently, some rumor reached the disciples that the body of Christ was as if stolen by them. That’s why they naturally feared some type of violent measures on the part of those Jews that were hostile towards them. And so — “*when the doors were shut,*” “*Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, “Peace be with you.*” Here, an especial quality of the glorified Body of Christ manifested itself, according to which material substances were not an obstacle for penetrating through them. The Lord’s miraculous passage through the closed doors caused confusion among the disciples, about which Saint Luke says: “*But they were terrified and frightened, and supposed they had seen a spirit*” — they thought that this was only the Lord’s spirit, detached from the body and having come to them from “sheol”, i.e. that the appeared to them as dead and not alive. In order to assure them that it was Him indeed, the Lord shows them His hands and feet, the wounds, which testify that it is the same body that was crucified on the cross. He offers them to touch Him, so as to convince themselves that it is Him and not His ghost. The Lord partakes of the food in front them (probably some baked fish and honeycomb left over from the supper), with the aim of eradicating the last remnants of doubt in the disciples. “*The disciples were glad when they saw the Lord*” — their doubts dispersed and the joy, about

which the Lord foretold them at the Last Supper, enveloped them: *“But I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you”* (John 16:22).

According to Saint Mark, the Lord reproached them for their disbelief and their hard-heartedness that they didn’t believe those that had seen Him resurrected, i.e. the women myrrh-bearers, Luke and Cleopas (Mark 16:14).

“These are the words which I spoke to you” — everything that happened — this is the fulfillment of that, which I repeatedly foretold you before, saying about My forthcoming sufferings and resurrection. All this had been predicted in the Old Testament — **“the Law of Moses”** **“prophecies”** and **“Psalms”**. That was why all that had to be fulfilled. Here, the Lord is pointing at the three-part division of the Old Testament holy books, which existed among the Jews. They divided their sacred books into three sections: 1) **The law**, which embraced the Five Books of Moses; 2) **The Prophets**, which included nearly all the rest of the historical and Prophetic books, and 3) **The Psalms**, or **angiographs**, to which were assigned the instructive books and minor historical ones. Thus, through the indications of the Lord Himself, the whole Old Testament, in its complete composition, is filled with prophecies about Him. Before, the Apostles didn’t comprehend those prophecies correctly: now, through the extraordinary blessed enlightenment, the Lord *“opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures”*.

Saint John adds that the Lord then told them for the second time: *“Peace to you!”* Having said that, He then through the visible sign of breathing reported to them the preliminary grace of the Holy Spirit — before the day of Pentecost — instructing them: *“Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are detained.”* The full descending of the Holy Spirit’s gifts on the Apostles occurred on the day of the Pentecost; but evidently, before this day, it was essential that the Apostles would receive those gifts of the Holy Spirit, that would strengthen them in the absolute and firm belief in the genuineness of Christ’s resurrection, that would help them to understand the Gospel correctly, and especially to awake within the 11 Apostles the belief in their Divine mission -- the faith in that they were not only the former traveling companions and listeners of the Lord Jesus Christ, but **“the Apostles”** — His envoys, appointed by Him for the great service of spreading the good news of the Gospel throughout the world: *“As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.”* This was the commencement of the Spirit, which was essential for the strengthening of the apostolic assembly. With that breathing, all the Apostles were given the power to absolve sins, which was previously promised to Peter — for professing Christ as the Living Son of God (Mat. 16:19) — as well as to the other Apostles (Mat. 18:18).

Thomas’s Disbelief.

(John 20:24-31)

Evangelist John notes that when the Lord first appeared to all His disciples, who were gathered together, Thomas (called **the Twin**, or **Didimus**, in Greek) was absent. As it can be seen from the Gospel, the character of this Apostle was distinctive in its persistence, bordering with stubbornness, which was natural for the people of a simple, yet firmly formed viewpoint. Even when the Lord was going to Judea to resurrect Lazarus, Thomas expressed his conviction that nothing would come out of that journey: *“Let us also go, that we may die with Him”* (John 11:16). When the Lord stated to His disciples in His farewell speech: *“And where I go you know, and the way you know,”* Thomas started to contradict: *“Lord, we do not where You are going, and how can we know the way?”* (John 14:5).

That’s why the Teacher’s death at the cross produced an especially painful, depressing impression on Thomas: it was as though he stagnated in the conviction that the loss of Him was irretrievable. He was so depressed that he even wasn’t with the other disciples on the day of the resurrection; he evidently decided that there was no reason for them to be together, because everything was finished, everything had fallen apart and now, every disciple had to return to his previous, individual and independent life. And then, having met the other

disciples and suddenly hearing from them: “We have seen the Lord.” Consistent with his character, he sharply and definitively refuses to believe their words. Regarding the resurrection of his Teacher as impossible, he declares that he would believe that not only if he saw that with his own eyes, but also felt the nail wounds on the Lord’s hands and feet with his own hands, as well as the wound made by a spear to His side. “*And put my hand into His side*” — it can be seen through these words of Thomas, that the wound, inflicted by a soldier to the Lord, was very deep.

In ten days after the Lord’s first appearance to the ten Apostles, the Lord again appeared with “*the doors being shut*”, evidently in the same house. That time, Thomas was with them. Perhaps, under the influence of communication with the other disciples, the obdurate disbelief began to leave him, and his soul, slowly but surely started anew to be capable of believing. The Lord appeared specially to fire his faith. As in the first case, the Lord appeared among them quite unexpectedly, and after wishing them peace, the Lord turned to Thomas: “*Reach your finger here, and look at My hands...*” The Lord is answering to Thomas’s doubts with his own words, with which he preconditioned his belief in the Lord’s resurrection. Obviously, Thomas should have been stunned by the very fact that the Lord knew of his doubts. And the Lord added: “*Do not be unbelieving, but believing,*” i.e. you are in the position to decide definitively: there are now only two ways before you — the absolute belief and decisive spiritual hard-heartedness. Although the Gospel doesn’t say whether Thomas really touched the Lord’s wounds — it can be assumed that he did. In any case, belief fired within him, and he exclaimed: “*My Lord and my God!*”, confessing with those words, not only his belief in Christ’s Resurrection, but also in His Divinity.

Nonetheless, this belief was still based on the sensuous verifications. That’s why, edifying Thomas, the other Apostles and all the people, the Lord reveals to the ultimate path towards faith, praising those that have achieved it, in other way than Thomas did: “*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*” And in the past, the Lord more than once gave preference to that belief, which is based on the word rather than on a miracle. The spread of the Lord’s teaching throughout the world would have been made impossible, if everyone demanded the similar confirmation for his belief like Thomas did, or continuous miracles in general. That’s why the Lord praises those, who attain faith only through trust, through trusting the testimony by **word** and **the teaching of Christ**. This is **the best way to believe**.

Saint John concludes his Gospel with this final passage. His 21st chapter was written some time later, as they think, concerning the rumor, stating that he was to live until the Second Coming of Christ. For the moment, Saint John concludes his narrative with the testimony that “*truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book.*” Even though Saint John had a goal of supplementing the narratives of the first three Evangelists, he recorded **not everything**, far from that. At the same time, as it can be seen, he feels that what has been written is sufficient “*that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name*” — and that little what has been recorded, is sufficient to support the belief in Christ’s Divinity and for salvation through this faith.

The Appearance at the Sea of Tiberias.

(John 21:1-14).

Even before His sufferings, the Lord had warned His disciples that upon His resurrection, He would appear to them in Galilee. This was also stated by the Angels to the women-myrh-bearers, at the Lord’s tomb (Mat. 26:32 and 28:7). Having spent the full 8 days of the Passover in Jerusalem, the Apostles returned to Galilee, where, naturally enough, they again began to practice their profession — catching fish on the Lake of Gennesaret to earn their living.

Here “*Jesus showed Himself again to the disciples at the Sea of Tiberias.*” According to Saint John, that was the third appearance of the Lord to His disciples, gathered together. That time there were seven of them: Simon, Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, the sons of Zebedee, i.e. James and John, and two more, who were not named. In this outline, because of his humility, Saint John places himself and his brother last, not even mentioning their names, whereas, in the other Gospels, they are usually placed after Andrew and Peter. The Apostles fished throughout the whole night but caught nothing. This undoubtedly should have reminded them of that night, which according to Saint Luke (5:5 and others) preceded their selection for apostolic mission 3 years before. And that time, once again, something similar occurred.

“*But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus*” — an expression of a sudden appearance. Perhaps the disciples didn’t recognize Him because, as with Luke and Cleopas, He might appear “in another form,” or perhaps simply because the darkness of night or the morning fog had not yet disappear. The Lord turned to them with: “*Children, have you any food?*”, as it can be seen further, the word “*food*” was meaning fish. To their negation, the Lord suggested them to cast their net “*on the right side of the boat*” and again, the miracle that they experienced three years before it was repeated: because of the huge size of the catch, they couldn’t haul in the net. Undoubtedly, that miracle like the first one, symbolized their future fruitful apostolic activity, in which their personal labors would be under the Lord’s directives.

“*That disciple whom Jesus loved,*” i.e. John, as he usually calls himself, stunned by that miraculous catch, immediately knew in his heart, Who that mysterious stranger that stood on the beach was, and informed Peter of His supposition: “*It is the Lord!*” Not daring to appear before the Lord undressed, Peter put on his “*outer garment*” and plunged into the sea, to emerge before the Lord from the water, on the other side, fully clothed. This event shows us the distinctive characters of these two Apostles: John — elevated, Peter — zealous, John, more able to observe, Peter — more decisive in action. As Blessed Theophylactus says: “John is more acute, Peter more ardent; John was the first to recognize the Lord, while Peter, the first to hurry towards Him.”

In the meantime, the other disciples came in their boat, dragging the net with the fish. Because the catch was so large, they did not dare to haul the fish into the boat so that it would not be capsized under the weight of the caught fish. That’s why they were dragging the net towards the beach, where they could haul it onto the beach more easily, without any risk.

“*Then, as soon as they had come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid on it, and bread*”. Once again, the Lord had miraculously prepared food for them, but so that they could also try the bread of their own labors, He said: “*Bring some of the fish which you have just caught.*” Simon Peter returned to the boat and evidently, with the help of the other disciples, dragged the net, filled with 153 fish, ashore. The other apparent miracle was the fact that the net didn’t burst from such an amount of fish. In any case, it can be assumed that this miraculous catch of fish produced a profound impression on John — he even remembered the number of the caught fish for the rest of his life. It must have been to their particular reverence that the amazed by what had happened Apostles stood away from the Lord at a respectful distance. That’s why He invited them to come closer and begin the meal with the words: “*Come and eat breakfast.*” The Lord too must have been standing at some distance, because further it is said: “*Jesus then came.*” As a host, He began to treat them to bread and fish. “*None of the disciples dare ask Him, ‘Who are You?’* — knowing that it was the Lord — the disciples saw something extraordinary in the appeared Lord: evidently, He didn’t appear to be as they were accustomed to see Him, because upon the resurrection, His body became exceptional, glorified, filled with special greatness and Divinity. However, they **knew** that it was undoubtedly Him.

The Restoration of Apostle Peter.

(John 21:15-25).

“So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?’” — before the Lord’s sufferings, Simon — more than anyone else — had promised his loyalty to Him: “Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble” (Mat. 26:33); “I will lay down my life for Your sake” (John 13:37); “If I have to die with you, I will not deny You!” (Mark 14:31); “Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death” (Luke 22:33). In spite of that ardent reassuring, Peter renounced the Lord three times, and of course through this lost his apostolic calling and apostolic rights — he ceased to be an Apostle. This is noted by Evangelist Mark — undoubtedly from Apostle Peter’s words — who narrates that the Angel which appeared to the women myrrh-bearers, said: “But go, tell His disciples — and Peter...” singling out Peter as the one, who through his renouncement, had fallen away from the Apostolic image, placing him as the last, after the other Apostles.

For his sincere and profound repentance, the Lord mercifully restores Peter to his apostolic worthiness. Peter renounced for three times, so three times the Lord forces him to answer the question: “Do you love Me?” — with “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You!” And after every affirmation, the Lord entrusts him — as an Apostle — to feed His lambs, His sheep. Peter was aggrieved because he was asked for the third time: “Do you love Me?” — “You know that I love You” (that’s why on the 29th of June, in the church service, on the day of commemoration of the holy supreme Apostles Peter and Paul, the verse for “Glory” is sung).

The Roman-Catholics, quite fruitlessly and without a base, wish to see in this a special endowment of rights and seniority to the Apostle Peter by the Lord — in comparison with the other Apostles. “The lambs,” which the Lord entrusts to Peter to feed, are the youngest, newly born, so to speak, members of Christ’s Church, which are in need of special attention of the shepherd. “The lambs” are the ordinary, spiritually mature members of the Church, which do not need special and diligent care. It is very characteristic that the Lord asks Peter for the first time: “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?”, as if hinting at Peter’s promise to the Lord of his greater fidelity and loyalty, than the other disciples. Also very characteristic is the fact that the Lord calls Peter by his former name — “**Simon**” — and not Peter, because having renounced, he revealed his instability, the lack of spiritual firmness, and through that ceased to be “**Peter**”, i.e. “the rock.” Humbly acknowledging the depth of his fall, Peter doesn’t now compare his love for the Lord with that of the other disciples. He even doesn’t dare to reassure the Lord of his love for Him, but only alludes to His omniscience: “You know that I love You.” Moreover, through his humility, instead of the word “love” — “**agapan**” used by the Lord in His question and meaning full and complete love, Peter uses another word — “**filin**” meaning the personal sincere attachment and loyalty. Asking Peter for the third time, the Lord uses that same word “**filin**.” That saddened Peter that his personal attachment to Him was as if being subjected to doubt by the Lord. That’s why, on the third time, he confesses his love with the exceptional force, referring to His omniscience. Just as he had renounced the Lord for the third time with the exceptional force, oaths and swearing, the Lord is now compelling Peter — for the third time — to confess his love for Him, with the same exceptional force.

The Lord combines the restoration of Peter in his Apostolic calling with the prediction, that his currently attested love for the Him will lead to his martyr-like death at the end of his Apostolic mission. “When you were younger, you girded yourself and walked where you wished; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish” — here, under the guise of a helpless elder, being dealt with against his will, the Lord symbolically predicts the martyr’s violent death. Indeed, Peter was in fact crucified in Rome during the reign of Nero, in the year 68. “Follow Me” — were the last definitive words of restoring fallen Peter’s to his apostolic rank.

After those words, the Lord left and evidently the disciples followed Him. Seeing the Lord’s beloved disciple John, Peter was overtaken with the desire to know his future — if a

martyr's death for Christ awaited him. But the Lord did not wish to reveal the type of death of His beloved disciple. He answered Peter, that it was not his business to know that: *"What is that to you? You follow Me."* Here we find another refutation of the Roman-catholic false teaching, about that the Lord entrusted the other disciples to Peter and that he had been appointed as their "prince." If the Lord in fact entrusted Peter, as His vicar, the other disciples, then Peter would of course be fully entitled to ask about John, and the Lord wouldn't have responded with: "What is that to you?"

The words said by the Lord about John, gave a reason to think that he wouldn't die, but would live till the Second Coming of Christ: *"If I will that he remain till I come, what is that to you?"* However, the Evangelist himself refutes this, underlining the fact that the Lord's speech was conditional: *"If I will that he remain..."*

The narrative about this and in fact his Gospel, Saint John concludes with a testimony: *"This is the disciple who testifies of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true."* This confirms this Gospel to belong to Saint John the Theologian, and the truth of everything that he narrated in the Gospel. In conclusion, Saint John again repeats that much *"that Jesus did"* was not recorded in the Gospel, because if everything was to be recorded in detail, *"I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."* Although this may seem an exaggeration, a hyperbolic expression, the discourse here is namely about **the immensity of the Lord's works**, the meaning of which the limited world is unable to absorb. Some assume that the last two verses — 24 and 25 — were subsequently added to John's Gospel by his readers of the ancient times, who wanted to confirm the truth of this Gospel for eternity.

The Appearance in Galilee.

(Mat. 28:16-20; Mark 16:15-18 and Luke 24:46-49).

"Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshipped Him; but some doubted" — as the Angels told the women myrrh-bearers that the Lord was preceding them in Galilee, then it must be assumed that the Apostles were not the only ones to rush towards Galilee in order to see Him, as He had promised to be there. Many think that it was that specific appearance of the Lord on the mountain, about which the Apostle Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 15:6, that the Lord *"was seen by over five hundred brethren at once."* The name of the mountain is not mentioned, but it was most likely the Transfiguration Mount Tabor, where the disciples had a chance to witness the transfigured glorious state of the Lord, in which He then appeared to them. Some of those gathered "doubted," which definitely shows that it couldn't be a massive hallucination, as the unbelievers attempt to convince.

"And Jesus came," i.e. approached them so as to dispel all doubts that it was really Him, *"and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in Heaven and on earth."* Since the beginning of the world, as the Begotten Son of God, He had the full authority in heaven and on earth: now, as the Conqueror of hell and death, He acquired the similar authority over everything and as the Redeemer of the world — over mankind. Having appeared on the earth as a human, the Son of God curbed Himself in the use of His Divine authority, because He didn't want to accomplish the redemption of mankind matter purely through His omnipotence. Through His resurrection, He assumed the fullness of His Divine authority already as Human God. And then it depended on Him to crown the whole matter of mankind's salvation by sending the Holy Spirit, establishing His Church and sending the Apostles to preach throughout the whole world.

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations," writes Saint Matthew, or as Saint Mark relays: *"Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature,"* or as Saint Luke conveys the authority given by the Lord to His Apostles: *"Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and the repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at*

Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things.” Now, the Lord doesn’t restrict their sermons to be preached just the Judeans as before (Mat. 10:5-6; 15:24), but sends them out to teach **all the nations**, because **the whole world** had been redeemed through Christ’s sufferings, and should be summoned to Christ’s Kingdom. *“Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”* — Human God is giving His disciples the right, and imposes the responsibility, of baptizing **all the peoples in the name of the Holy Trinity**. This means that those baptizing are not acting on their own volition, but by the authority granted to them by **the Trinity of God**. And those receiving baptism accept through this the responsibility of believing in the Holy Trinity, and dedicating their lives to the Divine Trinity, Which called, atoned and revived them. Baptism is the symbolic sign of the cleansing of a person’s sins through the invisible action of the Holy Spirit, and the sign of the person’s entry into Christ’s Church for a new, revived life in God. Baptism should be preceded with instructions, and those receiving It, should follow all that was decreed by Christ the Savior: *“Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.”*

Saint Mark adds to it the miraculous signs that will appear as a consequence to those, that have believed: *“In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues, they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.”* From the man’s sin, the whole world has come to the state of disorder, and the evil has become its master: those who have believed in Christ the Redeemer will receive the authority to conquer all types of the evil, as well as the fallen spirits, who incite people towards evil works. These miracles, which the subsequent history of the Church testifies of, were truly performed by the Apostles and many true Christians. Thus, through His disciples and their successors, the Lord reinstates the harmony that the world lost.

“I am with you always, even to the end of the age,” — charging the Apostles with the heavy task of spreading the good news of the Gospel throughout the whole world, the Lord encourages them, promising His mysterious, invisible presence with them “always, even to the end of ages.” However, because the Apostles did not live to “the end of ages,” then this promise has to be applied to all of their successors. This doesn’t mean that **to the end** of ages, the Lord will not be with His disciples. “No, it is then that He will be present” (Blessed Theophylactus). It simply means that till the end of ages, He will be found unseen among the faithful, as the head of the Church, established by Him, guiding it towards mankind’s salvation.

The Ascension of the Lord.

(Luke 24:50-53 and Mark 16:19-20).

Evangelist Luke has the most detailed narrative about the final appearance of the Resurrected Jesus Christ, which concludes with His ascension into Heaven. Evangelist Mark also speaks about this briefly. This appearance took place in Jerusalem, where subsequently — after 40 days — the Apostles again arrived from Galilee, during which time the Lord appeared to them several times, teaching them about God’s Kingdom. Saint Luke conveys that in the first chapter of the Acts (1:2-5). The Lord gave instructions to the Apostles to remain in Jerusalem, until they were endued with powers from above, pledging to send upon them the Promise of His Father. This has to be understood as the descending of the Holy Spirit, to assist in their task of the universal sermon. The Lord then led His disciples out of Jerusalem to Bethany, situated on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives, where *“He lifted up His hands and blessed them,”* and evidently pronouncing the traditional words, as it was typical of in the Old Testament, which the Evangelists didn’t record. The symbolic act of lifting the hands during a blessing, is well known in the Old Testament e.g. Leviticus 9:22.

“Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into Heaven.” “What a wonderful kind of act,” — comments the Moscow Metropolitan Philaret on this event: “The Lord is blessing and doesn’t stop but continues while ascending into Heaven. What does this mean? It means that He doesn’t want to cease His blessing, but continues endlessly to bless His Church and all that believe in Him. Let us ponder brethren, that even now His hands are lifted over us, and His gaze, and His blessing. What shame and fear to those who forget this in the earthly hustle and bustle. What joy is to those that love Him.” The disciples **worshipped** the ascending to His Father Human God, *“and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.”* This joy emanated from the fact that they then saw with their own eyes the glory of their Lord and Teacher, and were anticipating the fulfillment of His promise to send down the Holy Spirit. It was as though they were born again — no doubt, as a result of the Resurrected Lord’s 40-day stay with them, Who taught them the mysteries of God’s Kingdom. In this prayerful state of the elevated spiritual ascension, they *“were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God”* for everything that they had to endure, see and hear, and for their forthcoming high mission of preaching the Evangelic teaching.

Saint Mark adds that the Lord, having ascended into Heaven, *“sat down at the right hand of God.”* This is a graphic phrase, based on a number of visions (Acts 7:36), which means that the Lord had accepted the Divine authority over humanity and the whole world with God the Father, because being placed on the right hand side, in the Biblical language, means the separation of authority between the one, who is seated, with that who is placed on the right side.

Saint Mark concludes his Gospel with the testimony of what had happened after the descent of the Holy Spirit: about how the Apostles “went out” of Jerusalem, certainly **“preached everywhere”**, throughout the whole world, with *“the Lord working with them,”* with God’s help, *“and confirming the Word through the accompanying signs,”* — i.e. proving the truth of their words by the accompanying their sermons miracles. This is narrated in detail in the Apostolic Book of Acts.

All the Gospels end with the word: **“Amen”**, which means: **truly so**, that is it all happened the way, as it was narrated in the Gospel.

Addendum.

The Selected Sermons of Christ.

The Lord Jesus Christ’s dialogue with Nicodemus. The Talk with the Samaritan woman. The Sermon in the Nazareth Synagogue. On the Equality of the Father and the Son. The Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes. The Light of the World. Two Measures of Righteousness. The Main Task is to Please God. The Prayer “Our Father”. The Eternal Treasure. Do Not Judge. Steadfastness in prayer. The Narrow Path. About the False Prophets. The Lord’s Response to Those Hesitating to Follow Him. The Plentiful Harvest, but Few Laborers. Christ Sends His Apostles on their Mission. The Talk about the Heavenly Bread. The Exposure of the Pharisees Seeking the Signs. The Lord Foretells His Death and Resurrection. The Talk about Who is the Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. The Teaching about the

Struggle with Temptations. Sending Seventy Disciples to Preach. The Conversation with the Jews in the Temple. The Sermon about the Good Shepherd. The Sermon at the Feast of the Dedication. The Exposure of the Scribes and Pharisees. About the Divisions among the People. The Narrow Path towards the Heavenly Kingdom. About the True Followers of Christ. The Teaching on the Sanctity of Marriage and on Celibacy. About the Power of Faith. Christ's Second Coming. The Apostles will Inherit Eternal Life. The Hellenes' Desire to See Jesus Christ. About Paying Taxes to Caesar. The Shaming of the Sadducees. About the Greatest Commandment. The Exposure of the Scribes and Pharisees. The Final Conversation. The Continuation of the Farewell Conversation. The Archpriest Prayer.

Christ's Miracles.

The First Miracle at the Wedding at Cana of Galilee. The Healing of the Nobleman's Son. Healing in Capernaum. The Healing of Peter's mother-in-law. The Healing of the Leper. The Healing of a Paralytic in Capernaum. The Calling of Matthew. The Healing of a Paralytic at the Sheep Gate Pool. The Healing of the Man with a Withered Hand. The Healing of the Leper. The Healing of the Capernaum Centurion's Servant. The Resurrection of the Nain Widow's Son. The Healing of the Possessed and the Exposure of the Pharisees. Calming the Storm. The Casting Out of a Legion of Demons. The Healing of a Woman with a Flow of Blood and the Resurrection of Jairus's Daughter. The Healing of Two Blind Men. The Lord's Walk on the Water. The Miraculous Feeding of Four Thousand People. The Healing of a Blind Person in Bethsaida. The Healing of the Possessed Adolescent. The Miraculous Payment of the Temple Tax. The Healing of the Born Blind Man. The Healing of the Deformed Woman. The Healing of the Man with Dropsy. The Cleansing of ten Lepers. The Healing of the Jericho Blind. The Resurrection of Lazarus.

The Gospel's Parables.

The Lord Jesus Christ's Teaching in Parables. The Parable about the Sower. The Parable about the Tares. The Parable about the Mustard Seed. The Parable about the Leaven. The Parable about the Treasure Hidden in the Field. The Parable about the Pearl. The Parable about the Dragnet, Cast into the Sea. About the Owner, Preserving the New and the Old. The Teaching about the Struggle with Temptations. The Parable about the Lost Sheep. The Parable about the Unmerciful Debtor. The Sermon about the Good Shepherd. The Parable about the Good Samaritan. The Parable about the Persistent Appeal. The Parable about the Reckless Rich Man. The Parable about the Servants, Awaiting the Return of their Master. The Parable about the Wise House-Steward. The Parable about the Fruitless Fig Tree. The Parable about those that Love to be First. The Parable about the Invitees to the Supper. The Parable about the Prodigal Son. The Parable about the Unjust House-Steward. The Parable about the Rich Man and Lazarus. The Parable about the Unrighteous Judge. The Parable about the Publican and the Pharisee. The Parable about the Workers that Received Equal Payment. The Parable about the Talents. The Parable about the Two Sons. The Parable about the Wicked Vine-dressers. The Parable about the Invited to a Wedding Banquet. The Parable about the 10 Virgins. About the Final Judgment.

The Index of Chapters and Verses.

Events	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
The Gospels' Preface: their Authenticity and Purpose			1:1-4	20:31
The Pre-Eternal Birth and the Incarnation of the Son of God				1:1-14
The conception of Christ's Forerunner, John			1:1-25	
The Annunciation of the Holy Virgin Mary			1:26-38	

Holy Trinity Orthodox Mission

The Meeting of the Holy Virgin Mary with Elizabeth					1:39-56
The Birth of St. John the Baptist					1:57-80
The Earthly Lineage of the Lord Jesus Christ	1:1-17				3:23-38
The Navity of Christ					
The Revelation of the mystery of the incarnation.	1:18-25				
The Circumstances and Time of the Nativity of Christ.					2:1-20
The Circumcision and Meeting of the Lord.					2:21-39
The Adoration of the Magi.	2:1-12				
The Flight into Egypt and the Slaying of the Infants.	2:13-23				
Jesus Christ's adolescence.					2:40-52
The Savior's Social Service.					
John the Baptist and his testimony of our Lord Jesus Christ.	3:1-12	1:1-8	3:1-18		1:15-31
The Baptism of the Lord Jesus Christ.	3:13-18	1:9-11	3:21-22		1::32-34
The Forty-Day Fast and Tempting by the Devil.	4:1-11	1:12-13	4:1-13		
The First Disciples of Christ.					1:35-51
The First Miracle at the Wedding at Cana of Galilee.					2:1-12
The First Pascha.					
Driving the sellers out of the Temple.					2:13-25
The Lord Jesus Christ's dialogue with Nicodemus.					3:1-21
The Last Testimony of John the Baptist.					3:22-36
The Imprisonment of Saint John.	14:3-5	6:17-20	3:19-20		
The Talk with a Samaritan woman.	4:12	1:14	4:14		4:1-42
The Arrival to Galilee and the Beginning of the Sermon.	4:13-17	1:15	4:14-15		4:43-45
The Healing of the Nobleman's Son.					4:46-54
The Calling of the Fisherman.	4:18-22	1:16-20	5:1-11		
Healing of the Possessed in Capernaum.		1:21-28	4:31-37		
The Healing of Peter's mother-in-law.	8:14-17	1:29-34	4:38-41		
The Sermon in Galilee.	4:23-25	1:35-39	4:42-44		
The Sermon in the Nazareth Synagogue.			4:16-30		
The Healing of the Leper.		1:14-45	5:12-16		
The Healing of a Paralytic in Capernaum.	9:1-8	2:1-12	5:17-26		
The Calling of Matthew.	9:9-17	2;13-22	5:27-39		
The Healing of a Paralytic at the Sheep Gate Pool.					5:1-16
On the Equality of the Father and the Son.					5:17-47
The Plucking of Cornheads on Saturday.	12:1-8	2;23-28	6:1-5		
The Healing of the Man with a Withered Hand.	12:9-14	3:1-6	6:6-11		
The Lord Avoids Fame.	12:15-21	3:7-12			
Choosing the Disciples.	10:2-4	3:13-19	6:12-19		
The Sermon on the Mount.	5:1—		6:12-49		
The Beatitudes.	5:1-12				
The Light of the World.	5:14-16				
Two Measures of Righteousness.	5:20				
The Main Task is to Please God.	7:21				
The Prayer "Our Father".	6:9-13				
The Eternal Treasure.	6:19-21				
Do Not Judge.	7:1-5				
Steadfastness in prayer.	7:7-8				
The Narrow Path.	7:13				
About the False Prophets.	7:15-20				
The Healing of the Leper.	8:1-14				
The Healing of the Capernaum Centurion's Servant.	8:5-13		7:1-10		
The Resurrection of the Nain Widow's Son.			7:11-17		
The Messengers of John the Baptist.	11:2-19		7:18-35		
Exposing the Cities of Galilee.	11:20-30		10:13-22		
Forgiving the Sinful Woman in the House of Simon the Pharisee.			7:36-50		
The Healing of the Possessed and the Exposure of the Pharisees.	12:22-37	3:20-30	11:14-23		
The Lord's Answer to Those Waiting for the Signs from Him.	12:38-45		11:29-32		
A Woman Glorifies the Mother of Jesus.	12:46-50	3:31-35	11:27-		
The Parable about the Sower.	13:1-23	4:1-20	8:4-15		
The Parable about the Tares.	13:24-30				
The Parable about the Seed That Grows Unnoticeably		4:26-29			

Holy Trinity Orthodox Mission

The Parable about the Mustard Seed.	13:31-32	4:30-32	13:18-19
The Parable about the Leaven.	13:33-35	4:33-34	13:20-21
The Parable about the Treasure Hidden in the Field.	13:44		
The Parable about the Precious Pearl.	13:45-46		
The Parable about the Dragnet, Cast into the Sea.	13:47-50		
About the Owner, Preserving the New and the Old.	13:51-52		
The Lord's Response to Those Hesitating to Follow Him.	8:18-22		9:57-62
Calming the Storm.	8:23-27	4:35-41	8:22-25
The Casting Out of a Legion of Demons.	8:28-34	5:1-20	8:26-40
The Healing of a Woman with a Flow of Blood and the Resurrection of	9:18-26	5:21-43	8:41-56
The Healing of Two Blind Men.	9:27-34		
The Second Visit to Nazareth.	13:53-58	6:1-6	
The Plentiful Harvest, but Few Laborers.	9:35-38	6:6	8:1-3
Christ Sends His Apostles on their Mission.	10:1-42	6:7-13	9:1-
The Beheading of John the Forerunner.	14:1-12	6:14-29	9:7-9
The Miraculous Feeding of Five Thousand People.	14:15-21	6:32-44	9:10-17 6:1-15
The Lord's Walk on the Water.	14:22-36	6:45-52	6:16-21
The Talk about the Heavenly Bread.			6:22-71
Exposing the Pharisees' Traditions.	15:1-20	7:1-23	
The Healing of a Canaanite Woman's daughter.	15:21-28	7:24-30	
The Healing of the Speech-Impeded Deaf Person.	15:29-31	7:31-37	
The Miraculous Feeding of Four Thousand People.	15:32-39	8:1-9	
The Exposure of the Pharisees Seeking the Signs.	16:1-12	8:11-21	
The Healing of a Blind Person in Bethsaida.		8:22-26	
Peter's Confession: Jesus is Christ, the Son of God.	16:13-20	8:27-30	9:18-21
The Lord Foretells His Death and Resurrection.	16:21-28	8:31-34	9:22-27
The Transfiguration of the Lord	17:1-13	9:2-13	9:28-36

Holy Trinity Orthodox Mission

The Healing of the Possessed Adolescent.	17:14-23	9:14-32	9:37-45	
The Miraculous Payment of the Temple Tax.	17:24-27			
The Talk about Who is the Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.	18:1-5	9:33-37	9:46-48	
Working Wonders in Christ's Name.		9:38-41	9:49-50	
The Teaching about the Struggle with Temptations.	18:6-10	9:42-50	17:1-2	
The Parable about the Lost Sheep.	18:10-20		15:3-7	
The Parable about the Unmerciful Debtor.	18:21-35		17:3-4	
Christ Goes to the Feast of Jerusalem.				7:1-9
The Samaritans do not Accept Christ.			9:51-56	
Sending Seventy Disciples to Preach.			10:1-16	
Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles.				7:10-53
The Judgment of the Adulteress.				8:1-11
The Conversation with the Jews in the Temple.				8:12-59
The Healing of the Born Blind Man.				9:1-41
The Sermon about the Good Shepherd.				10:1-21
The Sermon at the Feast of the Dedication.				10:22-42
The Return of the 70 Disciples.			10:17-24	
The Parable about the Good Samaritan.			10:25-37	
The Lord Jesus Christ in the House of Martha and Mary.			10:38-42	
The Parable about the Persistent Appeal.			11:5-8	
The Exposure of the Scribes and Pharisees.	23:1-39		11:37-54	
The Parable about the Reckless Rich Man.			12:13-21	
The Parable about the Servants, Awaiting the Return of their Master.	24:42-44		12:35-41	
The Parable about the Wise House-Steward.	24:45-51		12:42-48	
About the Divisions among the People.			12:49-53	
The Fall of the Siloam Tower.			13:1-5	
The Parable about the Fruitless Fig Tree.			13:6-9	
The Healing of the Deformed Woman.			13:10-17	
The Narrow Path towards the Heavenly Kingdom.			13:22-30	
Herod's Threats.	23:37-39		12:31-35	
The Healing of the Man with Dropsy.			14:1-6	
The Parable about those that Love to be First.			14:7-15	
The Parable about the Invitees to the Supper.			14:16-24	
About the True Followers of Christ.			14:25-33	
The Parable about the Prodigal Son.			15:11-32	
The Parable about the Unjust House-Steward.			16:1-17	
The Parable about the Rich Man and Lazarus.			16:19-31	
The Teaching on the Sanctity of Marriage and on Celibacy.	19:3-12		16:18	
About the Power of Faith.			17:5-10	
The Cleansing of ten Lepers.			17:11-19	
Christ's Second Coming.			17:20-37	
The Parable about the Unrighteous Judge.			18:1-8	
The Parable about the Publican and the Pharisee.			18:9-14	
The Blessing of the Children.	19:13-15	10:13-16	18:15-17	
The Rich Young man.	19:16-26	10:17-27	18:18-27	
The Apostles will Inherit Eternal Life.	19:27-30	10:28-31	18:28-30	
The Parable about the Workers that Received Equal Payment.	20:1-16			
About the Forthcoming Sufferings of Christ.	20:17-28	10:32-45	18:31-34	
The Healing of the Jericho Blind.	20:29-34	10:46-52	18:35-43	
The Visit of Zacchaeus.			19:1-10	
The Parable about the Talents.	25:14-39		19:11-28	
The Resurrection of Lazarus.				11:1-46
The Sanhedrin's Decision to Kill Jesus Christ.				11:47-57
The Supper at Lazarus's House.				12:1-11
The Lord's Entry into Jerusalem.	21:1-11	11:1-11	19:28-44	12:12-19
Driving the Dealers out from the Temple.	21:12-17	11:15-	19:45-48	
The Curse of the Fruitless Fig Tree.	21:18-22	11:12-14		
The Hellenes' Desire to See Jesus Christ.				12:20-50
The Withered Fig Tree.	21:20-22	11:20-26		
The Conversation with the Elders.	21:23-27	11:27-33	20:1-8	
The Parable about the Two Sons.	21:28-32			
The Parable about the Wicked Vinedressers.	21:33-46	12:1-12	20:9-19	
The Parable about the Invited to a Wedding Banquet.	22:1-14			
About Paying Taxes to Caesar.	22:15-22	12:13-17	20:20-26	
The Shaming of the Sadducees.	22:23-33	12:18-27	20:27-40	
About the Greatest Commandment.	22:34-46	12:28-37	20:40-44	
The Exposure of the Scribes and Pharisees.	23:1-39	12:38-40	20:45-47	

Holy Trinity Orthodox Mission

The Widow's Mite.	12:41-44	21:1-4	
About the Second Coming.	24:1-51	13:1-37	21:5-38
The Parable about the 10 Virgins.	25:1-13		
About the Final Judgment.	25:31-46		
The High Priests' Decision to Kill Christ.	26:1-16	14:1-11	22:1-6
Great Thursday.			
The Mystical Supper	26:17-29	14:12-25	22:7-30 13:1-30
The Washing of the Feet.			13:2-20
The Lord Announces of the Betrayer.	26:21-25	14:18-21	22:21-23 13:21-30
The Establishment of the Eucharist Mystery.	26:26-29	14:22-25	22:19-20
The Argument about Superiority.			22:24-30
The Final Conversation	26:30-35	14:26-31	22:31-38 13:31-
The Continuation of the Farewell Conversation.			15:1-16:33
The Archpriest Prayer.			17:1-26
The Appeal about the Cup.	26:36-46	14:32-42	22:39-46 18:1
The Lord's Arrest.	26:47-56	14:43-52	22:347-53 18:2-12
The Trial over the Lord, Held by High Priests.	26:57-68	14:53-65	22:54-65 18:12-23
Peter's Renouncement.	26:69-75	14:66-72	22:55-62 18:16-18-
The Sanhedrin's Sentence.	27:1	15:1	22:66-71
The Death of Judas.	27:3-10		
At the Trial of Pilate	27:1-32	15:1-19	23:1-25 18:2-19:22
The Cruciferous Way to Golgotha.	27:31-32	15:20-21	23:26-32 19:16-17
The Crucifixion.	27:33-44	15:22-32	23:33-38 19:18-24
The Repentance of the Wise Robber.			23:39-43
The Mother of God at the Cross.			19:25-27
The Death of Christ.	27:45-56	15:33-41	23:44-49 19:28-37
The Burial of the Lord Jesus Christ.	27:57-66	15:42-47	23:50-56 19:38-42
The Resurrection.			
The Arrival of the Women Myrrh-Bearers at the Tomb.	28:1-8	16:1-8	24:1-12 20:1-10
Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene.	28:9-10	16:9-11	20:9-10
The Bribing of the Guard.	28:11-15		
Lord's Appearance to His Disciples on the Road to Emmaus.		16:12	24:13-35
The Appearance to the Ten Disciples.		16:14	24:36-45 20:19-23
Thomas's Disbelief.			20:24-31
The Appearance at the Sea of Tiberias.			21:1-14
The Restoration of the Apostle Peter.			21:15-25
The Appearance in Galilee.	28:16-20	16:15-18	24:46-49
The Ascension of the Lord		16:19-20	24:50-53