



## *Fall/Winter 2012 Newsletter*

**Monastery of St. John of San Francisco**

---

### **Raging Fires—Physical and Spiritual**

Our monastery stands on the slopes leading up to Mount Lassen, in the midst of a forest of Ponderosa pine, oak, fir, and manzanita. During the night of Friday, August 17, a night without rain, some nine hundred lightning bolts hit the forest around us. Among the places hit was a stand of manzanita four miles to the east. Apparently it smoldered all night and flames finally burst out of control the following morning at 11:37. By early afternoon, smoke filled half the sky and the telephone lines hummed with calls from one neighbor to another, warning that we might need to take action quickly. Around 4:00 pm, the sheriff pulled into our driveway and shouted at us through his bullhorn,



"MANDATORY EVACUATION NOW! MANDATORY EVACUATION NOW! MANDATORY EVACUATION NOW!"

We had already packed up the relics, a couple of icons, gathered the two dogs and one of the four cats, and each of us had grabbed whatever he wanted to take or could snatch at the last minute. We jumped into the cars, SUVs, and the truck, and made it down to the elementary school where the Red Cross and the Salvation Army were setting up an evacuation center.

Enormous helicopters and planes flew back and forth overhead, 707s and DC-10s converted to carry tanks of water or flame retardant, dumping it on the fires. Around 6:00 pm our abbot called a brotherhood meeting

there in the gym. We decided not to burden the relief services. We agreed instead that we should all go, singly, in pairs, or in threes, to stay with friends or relatives. We scattered to different parts of the state. A few days later we gathered at a parish on the San Francisco Peninsula so that we could be together for matins and vespers and eat together every day. We were able to return to our monastery the following Friday.

According to an information sheet released by Cal Fire, this conflagration covered 27,676 acres. It destroyed 52 residences and 90 outbuildings. The total personnel required to fight it totaled 1901, and they used 132 fire engines, 9 bulldozers, and 5 helicopters. The information sheet did not give a total of the planes that flew over dropping flame retardant.

***We're updating our mailing list.***

We will be sending our newsletters electronically, to save time and paper. Please enter your current email address into the Email List box on our website; if you are already subscribed, it will let you know. Thank you!

We lived through an event in which we had to recognize ourselves as powerless. The often-repeated phrase “Lord, have mercy” took on a new and intense meaning for us. The conflagration reminded us that our clever plans always depend on the assumption that everything would run along smoothly and predictably. Perhaps our plans and God’s plan for us weren’t always identical.

We returned to the monastery grateful to discover that nothing had been damaged, although the fire blazed right up to the edge of the property line, some twenty feet or so from the nearest building, the living quarters for a number of the monks. Other dwellings on the same road had burned completely, and vast areas of forest were reduced to black skeletons of dead trees with no leaves or needles, and white ash covered the ground all around those sectors. Clearly it had been a good idea to put out prayer requests during the previous week. People had been praying for us in various time zones all over the world, and God had watched over us.

Another conflagration raged through our monastery over the last few months, this time within the brotherhood, and this time a metaphorical and more damaging blaze. In the last days of June, when our abbot Archimandrite Meletios and one of the senior monks, Fr Nektarios, had just returned from just over two weeks in Greece, a division took place within the brotherhood which resulted in the departure of half the brotherhood and the resignation of our abbot. Most of the monks who left went to another monastery in another jurisdiction.

We currently have eight members in the brotherhood. We do not currently have an abbot, but in obedience to our archbishop, His Eminence Benjamin, we meet often in council to make decisions. Hieromonk Photios is entrusted with managing the monastery’s finances and oversight of daily services in the church, while day-to-day matters are decided jointly by Hieromonk Alexis and Monk Innocent. Just as fire often purges dross from ore to create pure metal, so have we experienced the events of the last few months, which have spurred us to a deeper emphasis on repentance, forgiveness of one another, and a greater willingness to listen to one another and yield to one another.

The monastery has survived the two fires—literal and spiritual—and continues to operate. Some obediences have shifted around, and some of us have taken on tasks that are new to us. Just as before, we welcome visitors.

## St. John's Monastery Bookstore



After some time offline to regroup, we are happy to announce the Grand Re-opening of the online bookstore of the Monastery of St. John! Please visit the bookstore at [www.stjohnsbookstore.com](http://www.stjohnsbookstore.com) and browse around. We have paused our soap production for the time being, but there is still a selection of flavors to sell. It will be available only as long as it lasts, so get your order in soon! We are looking at the possibility of restarting production of soap and will be sure to keep you posted. In the meantime, we have our usual icons, beeswax candles, books, incense, and other gift items in stock now for purchase, so come on over and have a look!

## Former Brother in the News



It has been a great joy to see Fr Job, who was with us here for a couple of years during a transition point in his life as he was exploring the possibility of mission work, go through the process of application and approval by OCMC, make an initial stay, receive further

training and orientation, and be sent out on a two-year deployment to a country that he has come to love, Mongolia. He will be working closely with Fr Aleksey Dubach, the priest at the cathedral in Ulan Bator, and learning the language and local culture from a mentor. As Fr Job explains his plans, "There are several things under consideration. I am investigating the possibility of starting a soup kitchen for the needy, and perhaps an Orthodox orphanage at some point in the future. I also hope to assist in catechism and ongoing Christian education at the Church. All plans are subject to change, of course, according to the plan of our Creator." Please keep him and his ministry in your prayers.



# Reflections on the Feast

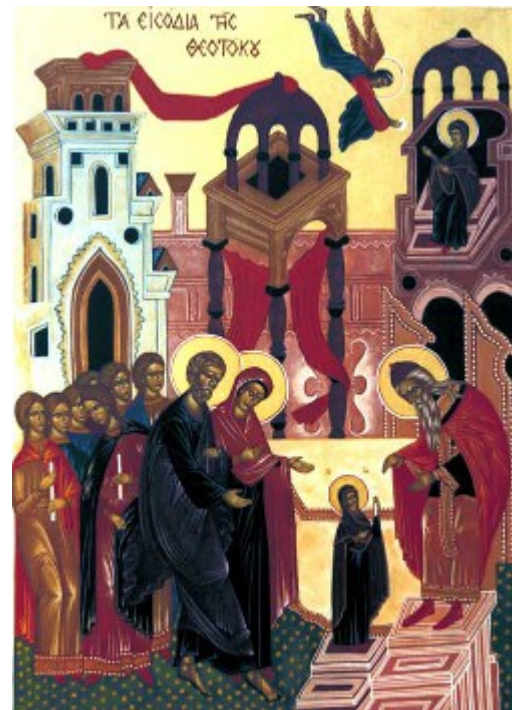
## Entry of the Theotokos

By Monk Innocent

I am new to Orthodoxy, having converted to the faith during my college years. On this journey, I read many books and learned many things. Along the way, I also discovered that God teaches me about Himself and about the faith in a way that is experiential and is beyond what I can learn from books.

One thing I noticed is that, in spite life circumstances, no matter what mood I find myself in, the Great feast days always bring a quiet joy to my heart. It is as if God is telling me that He is greater than my outward circumstances, greater than my transient emotional state.

I have also discovered that each feast seems to take on a personal significance. What I mean by that is that I find myself less of a spectator of the feast and more of a participant in the feast. In the church hymnody the perspective points towards this participation: “today” Christ is born, “today” the Virgin enters the temple, etc. As I learn to enter this present moment, this “eternal now,” I find that there is something about the feast that I actually *live through*--an intimate experiential knowledge. As any reader who has attended a full Holy Week service might agree: the Orthodox don't just observe the Passion of Christ, they actually experience it.



The personal significance of the Feast of the Entry of the Theotokos really hit home for me about 11 years ago. It was a time in my life when I was wrestling with the decision to leave the world and become a monk. The Orthodox parish that I was a member of at that time was in the process of constructing a new temple. It was an exhilarating time—we would soon move out of our rented store-front location & construct an Orthodox temple from the ground up! I even got to help a little with digging the foundation. Finally, the slab for the floor was poured. It was November, and, for the Feast of the Entrance, our priest decided for our parish to have an outdoor Vesperal liturgy at the new church location.

It was a calm evening, the air was mildly warm. We in the choir turned on our flashlights to read the music as the evening progressed. The stars came out and shone brightly overhead. As usual, there was a blessing of the virgins, and the young girls of the parish all received a flower. Our priest gave a homily that you could really sense was spoken from his heart. He spoke of preserving chastity and keeping this is the greatest gift—a gift to be given to your spouse or to God. I don't remember all the details of that evening, but I will always remember the sense of peace and wonder and awe that washed over the whole congregation as we sang the praises of the Mother of God on that starry night. Over the next year I began to see my own exit from the world to join a monastery as a reflection of the Virgin's entrance into the temple. When the time was right I, too, made my entrance into the temple of monastery life.

The principle action of the feast is this movement toward God. It is a movement that I am constantly trying to incorporate into my own life. I flee the world not so much as out of disgust or disdain of the emptiness I find there, as out of a child-like wonder and attraction for the mystery of the presence of God. The reading from the synaxarion describes how Joachim and Anna led their three-year-old Mary to the temple to consecrate her to God. They were concerned that she might not be willing to leave her parents, but, perhaps to their surprise, she ran the final steps into the temple on her own. For many of us it takes our whole life to really discover that *all that we need is God*. As a little girl, the Theotokos already knew that, and that is straight where she went.

## From the Church Fathers

*Below are extracts from a sermon delivered on the Feast of Our Lord's Nativity, ascribed to St. John Chrysostom, which the brothers would like to share with everyone; it certainly deserves to be better known in its entirety. The opening is a model of rhapsodic prose, a treasured style of past centuries. We gratefully acknowledge permission from Ignatius Press to reprint these passages from Volume 1 of The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers, 4 Volumes, tr. & ed. M.F. Toal, pp.110-117 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000).*



I behold a new and wondrous mystery. My ears resound to the Shepherd's song, piping no soft melody, but chanting full forth a heavenly hymn. The Angels sing. The Archangels blend their voice in harmony. The Cherubim hymn their joyful praise. The Seraphim exalt His glory. All join to praise this holy feast, beholding the Godhead here on earth, and man in heaven. He Who is above, now for our redemption dwells here below; and he that was lowly is by divine mercy raised.

Bethlehem this day resembles heaven: hearing from the stars the singing of angelic voices, and in place of the sun, enfolds within itself on every side, the Sun of Justice. And ask not how: for where God wills, the order of nature yields. For He willed, He had the power, He descended, He redeemed; all things move in obedience to God. This day He Who is, is Born; and He Who is, becomes what He was not. For When He was God, He became man; yet not departing from the Godhead that is His. Nor yet by any loss of divinity became He man, nor through increase became He God from man; but being the Word He became flesh, His nature, because of impassibility, remaining unchanged...

And so the kings have come, and they have seen the heavenly King that has come upon the earth, not bringing with Him Angels, nor Archangels, nor Thrones, nor Dominations, nor Powers, nor Principalities, but, treading a new and solitary path, He has come forth from a spotless womb.

Yet He has not forsaken His angels, nor left them deprived of His care, nor because of His Incarnation has He departed from the Godhead. And behold kings have come, that they may adore the heavenly King of glory; soldiers, that they might serve the Leader of the Hosts of Heaven; women, that they might adore Him Who was born of a woman so that He might change the pains of childbirth into joy; virgins, to the Son of the Virgin, beholding with joy, that He Who is the Giver of milk, Who has decreed that the fountains of the breast pour forth in ready streams, receives from a Virgin Mother the food of infancy; infants, that they may adore Him Who became a little child, so that out of the mouth of infants and of sucklings, He might perfect praise; children, to the Child Who raised up martyrs through the rage of Herod; men, to Him Who became man, that He might heal the miseries of His servants; shepherds, to the Good Shepherd Who has laid down His life for His sheep; priests, to Him Who has become a High Priest according to the order of Melchisedech; servants, to Him Who took upon Himself the form of a servant that He might bless our servitude with the

reward of freedom; fishermen, to Him Who from amongst fishermen chose catchers of men; publicans, to Him Who from amongst them named a chosen Evangelist; sinful women, to Him Who exposed His Feet to the tears of the repentant; and that I may embrace them all together, all sinners have come, that they may look upon the Lamb of God Who taketh away the sins of the world.

What shall I say! And how shall I describe this Birth to you? For this wonder fills me with astonishment. The Ancient of Days has become an infant. He Who sits upon the sublime and heavenly Throne, now lies in a manger. And He Who cannot be touched, Who is simple, without complexity, and incorporeal, now lies subject to the hands of men. He Who has broken the bonds of sinners, is now bound by an infant's bands. But he has decreed that ignominy shall become honor, infamy be clothed with glory, and total humiliation the measure of His Goodness. For this He assumed my body, that I might become capable of His Word; taking my flesh, He gives me His Spirit; and so He bestowing and I receiving, He prepares for me the treasure of Life. He takes my flesh, to sanctify me; He gives me His Spirit, that He may save me.





Back row: Br. Ioann, Fr. Cosmas, Fr. Andrew  
Front row: Fr. Innocent, Fr. Alexis, Fr. Photios, Fr. John  
Not pictured: Fr. Valentin