

MONASTERY OF ST JOHN

of

San Francisco

April 2018 Newsletter

Diocese of the West—OCA

Yearning for Pascha

The Feast of feasts leaves a mark on a person that cannot be easily erased. In the fifteenth century, the celebrated Russian trader turned explorer, Afanasy Nikitin, traveled extensively throughout India, Africa, and the Middle East.

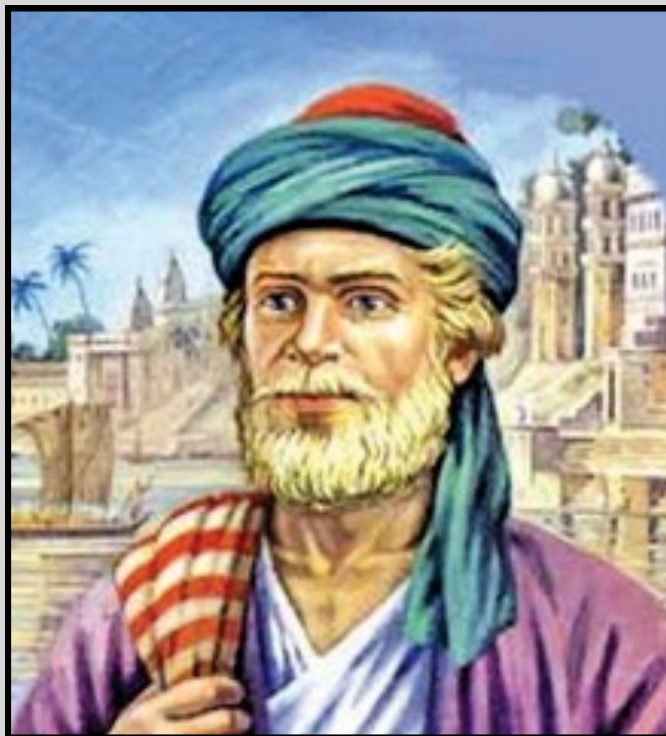
Originally on a business venture to India, he was attacked and robbed by Tatars on the way. Bereft of resources, for three years, he endeavored to return to his beloved homeland, but had to follow a circuitous route.

He met many interesting people and lands, but always lamented that he was unable to celebrate Pascha or even calculate when it occurred. Being away from the Church in pagan lands, he felt cut off and sinful:

"I, Afanasy, a damned servant of Almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth, pondered over the Christian faith, the Baptism of Christ, the fasts established by the Holy Fathers, and the apostolic commandments, and I longed to go [back] to Rus!" (Wikipedia).

Life feels not quite right without the season of the fasts and the celebrations of the feasts. There is a rhythm of living by the Typicon—the fasts and feasts and services—that gets into you and becomes a kind of spiritual homeostasis that you can't shake.

This is proof of the wisdom of the Fathers of the Church who developed and imparted to us this great heritage: the daily cycle, the weekly cycle, and the yearly cycle. Most of all, we are indebted for the wonderful feast of Pascha.



It reminds us of what it means to be a Christian. It reminds us that Christ has done this wonderful amazing work of conquering Death and making us participants in this resurrection. It is the ultimate happy ending that has started and will continue to its final completion at the Second Coming.

If you yearn for Pascha as Afanasy did, then the Holy Church has succeeded in putting her mark on your soul. We enter this season of Holy Week and Pascha with our hearts softened by Lent and fully open to the spiritual gift of Pascha, the gift of joy and hope.

History records that Afanasy Nikitin never made it back to his beloved homeland (he died not far from the Muscovite border), but I hope that his joy was fulfilled in the eternal Pascha—the joy of eternity in God which is ultimately what he and we are all really longing for.

—Hieromonk Innocent

Fruits of prayer — don't give up!

It's wonderful that we have, in our Orthodox tradition, accounts of holy men and women who have reached heights of spirituality, for example, having visions, seeing the uncreated light, and attaining to pure prayer free of disturbing thoughts.

And yet if we make the mistake of taking an all-or-nothing approach to our prayer life, the accounts of the heights they have reached can prove a hindrance to us, because we can begin to say to ourselves, "*Wow! I'm not getting anywhere. This isn't doing me any good at all. What's the point?*"

If we look at this situation in the way that St John Climacus examined the relationships among various passions, we might say that perfectionism (perhaps originating in vainglory) has given birth to despondency, and we are running the risk that despondency may lead us to abandon our endeavor entirely.

It doesn't have to be that way. Maybe what is in store for us is not the outcomes we might wish, or that we consider most impressive, but something else. Perhaps we have a situation like that of someone going to the movies wanting to see an action-adventure movie with a lot of special effects, when the theater is actually showing a love story.

In other words, instead of telling ourselves that we haven't gotten any benefit from prayer because we haven't seen the sort of thing we have read about, we are discounting what is really happening, which has its own value. I'm speaking here, of course, from my own experience and from what others have told me. First of all, let's set aside the idea that prayer is somehow a failure if distractions occur:

Constantly wrestle with your thought, and whenever it wanders call it back to you. God does not require from those still under obedience prayer completely free of distractions. Do not despond when your thoughts are plundered, but take courage, and unceasingly recall your mind. Inviolability is proper only to an angel. (St John Climacus. Ladder of Divine Ascent. Boston, MA: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1959 [2012], p. 92)

St John refers here to "those still under obedience," meaning monks and nuns living in a community, but of course his words apply equally to laypeople living in the world. It takes some of us a long time — yes, I will admit this myself — to take this advice seriously, even though many of the fathers say exactly the same thing: if you find your mind drifting during prayer, don't worry about it, but just return to your prayer. Worrying about it just makes it worse.

So let's suppose that we belong to the group that still has to "wrestle" with intrusive thoughts during our prayer time. Obviously we are not going to get the same benefits from our prayer time as do those who have attained pure prayer.

But what might be a different benefit prayer has for us, one that we tend to ignore because it appears to be less spectacular? Here is one benefit, which St John presents a few pages earlier: *In this flock, they were united by the indissoluble bond of love; and what was still more wonderful, it was free from all familiarity and idle talk.* (p 72)

One way of looking at Orthodox Christianity is to say that it is all about personal relationships. First of all, of course, there are the relations among the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity. We can see this in the Gospels, which talk repeatedly about the relationship between the incarnate Son, Jesus, and the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Then there are the relationships between Jesus and his disciples, relationships between Jesus and others He encountered in His earthly ministry, the relationships among the disciples, the relationships between them and the apostles who went out to preach, the relationships among members of the Church... all the way down to our relationship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit on the one hand and our relationships with those around us on the other hand. If we view our prayer life in this light, we can see that prayer is an important element in our relationship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but it also involves our relationships with those on behalf of whom we offer intercessory prayer.

In a way, then, we could see our prayer life as being something like the extension cord that runs between the wall socket — our relationship with God — and the lights or appliances plugged into the other end — our relationships with the fellow human beings around us who were created in the image and after the likeness of God. If we don't see "special effects" in our prayer life itself, perhaps we are looking in the wrong place. We might look instead at the effects of our prayer life on our relations with those around us. Do we enter into fewer arguments, get angry less often, cooperate more willingly, offer help and support to our brothers and sisters in Christ more readily? If so, perhaps we are functioning as an extension cord so that God's love is flowing through us to others.

Or to go back to the other image, perhaps what we have is not an action-adventure movie with lots of special effects, but a love story. Perhaps that is the story God wants to write in our lives.

WORK PARTY FROM HOLY TRINITY CATHEDRAL

On the first weekend in February we were blessed by a visit from a small but energetic group of parishioners from Holy Trinity Cathedral in San Francisco who brought with them a brand new Ryobi chain saw as a gift, and who proceeded to thin out the surrounding forest and provide much needed firewood. In addition, our neighbor Mary Catherine Parker joined the group's mother-daughter pair in replenishing our prosphora supply. Our thanks go to Protodeacon Brendan Doss for organizing this visit.



Lenten Retreat Photos



To all our friends:

God grant you much joy during this Paschal season!

Upcoming Events

- **Orthodox Life School** (Sun– Sat) June 17-23, 2018 For young adults 18-35 yrs. old ; Many Orthodox guest speakers, manual work, outreach
- **St Peter Youth Camp** (Sun– Fri) June 23-29, 2018
For young people ages 14-22; Harrison, Montana
- **Dormition Retreat** (Fri– Sun) August 10-12, 2018
“Life of the Virgin Mary”, with Fr. Innocent

Read more about these at:

<http://www.monasteryofstjohn.org/retreats/>

<http://stpetersmonastery.com/jekyll/update/2016/12/17/summer-youth-camp.html>

Contact Information:

Monastery of St John

21770 Ponderosa Way

Manton, CA 96059

(530) 474-5964

www.monasteryofstjohn.org