



# Monastery of St John of Shanghai and San Francisco

Orthodox Church in America, Diocese of the West  
Manton, CA

September 2020



## The Pandemic: Doing What We Can

This summer I have had the opportunity to fill-in for parish priests in the area who have taken their families on vacation. It is wonderful to be with fellow-believers and to participate in the beauty of worship with a crowd, rather than our small monastic brotherhood. The health precautions—the masks, standing apart, and the absence of “coffee hour”—changes the feel of things but does not diminish the glory of the Body of Christ assembled and functioning as the Church.

Listening to the concerns of the people, one immediately gets a sense of the anxiety and a vague underlying fear that is plaguing many. Opportunity to attend Church has been necessarily intermittent, and, for some, it has been altogether unavailable. This has decreased morale, letting in a kind of hopelessness and suspicion. It is an anxiety that our Savior predicts in the Gospel: “...[U]pon the earth distress of nations in perplexity at the roaring of the sea and the waves, men fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world; for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.” (Luke 21:25,26)

Let's shake off our anxious and resentful attitudes! Yes, some things have been taken away from us: normal attendance at Church, Sunday school classes, social gatherings with friends and fellow believers, and, hardest of all, any certainty that things will return to normal any time soon. If we don't let these go, we will remain depressed and angry and we will lose our peace.

It is helpful to shift our focus away from what we *cannot* do to what we *can* do. If we have the right computer, we can still watch and join in with the many services that are available online. We can still pray with our families or the people we live with. We can still pray alone and find the place of inner stillness where God waits for us. We can still reach out to others with a letter or an email or a phone call. We can still go to confession—even though it might have to be over the phone. Gathering with the faithful for the Divine Liturgy is, of course, irreplaceable. But these other things are indeed a source of spiritual strength that is right there, waiting for us to use it.

This August, the Feast of the Dormition of the Theotokos reminds us that another world awaits us, if we are faithful to the end. These stressful and undesirable times can help us detach ourselves from placing any hope in a “normal” existence here on earth and instead, as the Theotokos did all her life, change our orientation “heaven-ward”. “[F]or the Mother of God...maketh ready today to pass over from earth to the heavens, to a new and divine life.” (Forefeast of Dormition, Vespers)



## The Manton Fire: Eight Years Later



On August 18<sup>th</sup>, our community gathered at noon to offer a molieben in thanks for God's deliverance. Eight years ago on that date, a terrible wildfire swept through our area and forced us to evacuate—abandoning our monastery to save our lives.

I remember watching the scene from the Red Cross shelter: full-sized tanker jets dumped hundreds of gallons of pink fire-retardant only a few miles away from where I stood. The wall of flames moved swiftly, the gray smoke from the conflagration produced and immense column. Once and a while, it burned black. That meant, as it was explained to us, that another building met its end. I prayed in my heart, “Spare

us, O Lord!”

We returned a week later to a barren, charred, and empty landscape. Yet our beloved monastery was still there! Though plastered with pink retardant, all buildings were whole and intact. The fires came within thirty feet—it was a real miracle!

As I write this, the air is hazy with smoke yet once more—a result of the many wildfires that are burning 30 to 50 miles away. This summer there have been dry lightning strikes and hot and dry conditions like never before. Over the past four years, we have made it a special focus to make our facility and the immediate surrounding forest area as defensible as possible, but we still live with the reality that all our earthly goods could be consumed by wildfire in a very short span of time. May God protect us, through the prayers of the Holy Wonderworker John.

--Hieromonk Innocent



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## Happenings at the Monastery

The monastery continues to be closed to visitors as a precaution to prevent the spread of COVID-19. We miss being able to see you all! The summer season usually brings many pilgrims. Life just with the monastics has been especially quiet. Unable to schedule work parties, we have tried to tackle the hard jobs ourselves.



**Brush Clearing.** Wildfire looms as a greater threat to our safety than viruses. To alleviate this, we have devoted one morning a week to the task of thinning out the dense trees and brush. The small trees are limbed and cut into rounds for winter firewood, and the limbs and other brush are stacked for burning during the rainy season.

**Gardening.** The warm California climate coupled with consistent watering from our automatic drip lines gives terrific results! Thanks also to a steady stream of volunteers (only working outdoors & keeping proper social distancing) the monastery gardens have produced an



abundance of tomatoes, zucchinis, cucumbers, radishes, green beans, eggplants, potatoes, turnips, and carrots. Soon there will be corn, watermelons, and winter squash. The fresh vegetables have been

great! With this flood of veggies, we have been busy harvesting and preserving everything. We use our dehydrator, large freezer, and gallon pickle jars to “put up” the harvest. Fermented cucumbers and turnips are quite tasty!



**Monastic Life.** We still keep our usual cycle of monastic services. I especially appreciate receiving commemoration lists from our friends and supporters. At each of the four Divine Liturgies which we serve weekly, hundreds of names are read. We learn to pronounce names from many different Orthodox cultures. Often there are touching notes included, such as: “Pray especially for this

person, he has terminal cancer” or “Pray for our new child, born to us against all hope” or “Remember the soul of this person who died young in tragic circumstances.” I cannot help but be moved by all the joys and sorrows people must bear and the courage with which they face life's tragedies and difficulties.



## The Sitka Mother of God: From Her Guardian

The Holy Orthodox Church even bestows her treasures on the faithful in North America. We are not without holy saints and miraculous icons. We do well to cherish these gifts. An Akathist was served at the monastery on July 21<sup>st</sup>, the feast day (Old Style) of the icon of the Sitka Mother of God. The following is an account by one of our brothers who was called upon to the the Mother of God in a special way..

Being a member of St Michael's Cathedral, I really never learned about the Sitka Mother of God Icon. She is so central to the life and worship of the parish that I guess I learned about her by osmosis. Still, she continually reveals herself to me, as to everyone witnessing her miracles wrought through her icon. When Archbishop David clothed me as a novice, he also announced that he was taking her to the All American Council in St Louis and that I was going with, as her guardian—much to my surprise.



Things went smoothly on the way there as TSA inspected her (she travels in a large wood and brass box, weighing 122 pounds). I walk with the crew to the tarmac, where I make sure she is properly strapped in, so she won't bounce around. It was in St. Louis on the way back to Alaska that things got interesting. We took her to the terminal desk to check her in (in the same way) as luggage, but this big heavy box and all these black-cassocked men really got some attention. There must have been 6 or 7 employees who came over to see, and one asked, “Can we see it—can we open the box?” Gasps and wonder greeted her: “I've never seen anything so beautiful!” I guess the Mother of God can show up anywhere and change your life—even at work and when you least expect it.

--Novice Peter

