

HOLY ASCENSION PARISH NEWSLETTER, SEPTEMBER 2011



NATIVITY OF THE THEOTOKOS
FROM ICONOSTASIS OF SAINT SAVVA CHURCH,
16TH-17TH CENTURY (PSKOV MUSEUM).

THE HOLY ASCENSION ORTHODOX CHURCH

is the Washington, DC, parish of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA), under the omophor (or the conciliar leadership) of Metropolitan Agafangel (Pashkovsky), Bishop of Odessa & Taurida. The Holy Ascension Parish was organized on Ascension Day, 17 May 2007.

BISHOPS & LOCAL CLERGY

✠ Metropolitan Agafangel, First Hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, Metropolitan of Eastern America and New York, and Bishop of Odessa & Taurida ✠ Vicar Bishop Joseph (Hrebinka) of Washington ✠ Father John Hinton, priest ✠ Father Andrew Frick, deacon ✠ Seraphim Englehardt, subdeacon ✠ John Herbst, subdeacon ✠

ADDRESS

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PART 1. OUR PARISH.

The Holy Ascension parish welcomes all Orthodox people to its sacraments and all people with an interest in Christianity and the abiding Tradition of the Holy Orthodox Church. The immediate Holy Ascension parish member background is Russian émigré and American, with many other English-speaking members. Members, visitors, and people in touch online come from all ethnicities. The Church is One.

<http://www.holyascension.info/>

<http://ruschurchabroad.com/>

<http://sinod.ruschurchabroad.org/engindex.htm>

PART 2. ORTHODOX HOLIDAYS IN SEPTEMBER.

SAINT AGATHONICUS, SEPTEMBER 4.

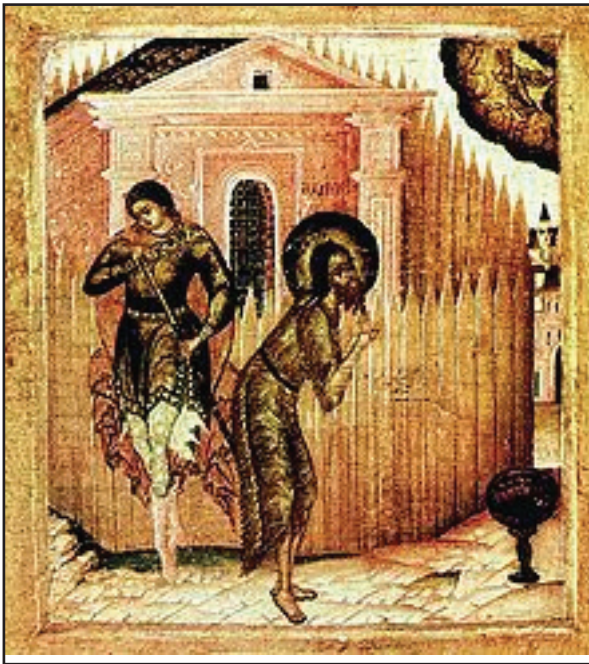
Saint Agathonicus was a third-century citizen of Nicomedia. While living in Greece, he taught the Greeks about Christianity. The imperial governor began persecuting Christians, following the orders of Emperor Maximian. In this persecution, Agathonicus' companion Zoticus was seized in Carpe, and his followers were crucified. Agathonicus was sent to Nicomedia, where he and his companions Princeps, Theoprepus, Acyndinus, Severian, Zeno, along with many others, were then taken to Byzantium. On this journey, many companions died from exhaustion and abuse, and the others were killed in Chalcedon. The survivors were taken to Thrace, tortured in front of the Greek Emperor, and were then beheaded.

THE BEHEADING OF SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST, SEPTEMBER 11.

The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist (or the Decollation of Saint John the Baptist or the Beheading of the Forerunner) is a holy day on which Orthodox Christians commemorate the martyrdom of Saint John the Baptist.

The Bible retells the beheading of Saint John the Baptist by Herod Antipas. According to the Synoptic Gospels, Herod had imprisoned Saint John because he had reproved Herod for

divorcing his wife Phasaelis and unlawfully marrying Herodias, the wife of his brother, Herod Philip I. On Herod's birthday, his stepdaughter Salome danced before the king and his guests. Her dancing pleased Herod Antipas so much that in his drunkenness he promised to give her anything she desired, up to one-half of his kingdom. When the daughter asked her mother what she should request, Herodias told her to ask for the head of [Saint] John the Baptist on a platter. Although Herod was appalled by the request, he agreed reluctantly and had Saint John put to death in prison.



RUSSIAN ICON OF THE BEAHEADING OF SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST,
MUSEUM OF ORTHODOX ICONS, RECKLINGHAUSEN, GERMANY

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus also relates in his *Antiquities of the Jews* that Herod killed Saint John, stating that he did so, "lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his [Saint John's] power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise), [so Herod] thought it best [to put] him to

death." He further states that many of the Jews believed that the military disaster which fell upon Herod at the hands of Aretas IV Philopatris, King of the Nabataeans, his father-in-law (Phasaelis' father), was God's punishment for his behavior.

The liturgical commemoration of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist is almost as old as that commemorating his Nativity. The Orthodox church celebrate this feast on August 29/September 11. The day is always a day of fasting.

There are two other related feasts observed by Eastern Christians: The First and Second Finding of the Head of St. John the Baptist (February 24), and the Third Finding (May 25). According to church tradition, after the martyrdom of John the Baptist, his disciples buried his body at Sebaste, but Herodias took his severed head and buried it in a dung heap. Later, Saint Joanna, who was married to Herod's steward, secretly took his head and buried it on the Mount of Olives, where it remained hidden for centuries.

The First Finding occurred in the fourth century. The property on the Mount of Olives where the head was buried had passed into the possession of a government official who became a monk with the name Innocent. He built a church and a monastic cell there. When he started to dig the foundation, the vessel with the head of John the Baptist was uncovered. But, fearful that the relic might be abused by unbelievers, he hid it again in the same place. Upon his death, his church fell into ruin.

The Second Finding occurred in the year fifth century. During the days of Constantine the Great, two monks on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem reportedly saw visions of Saint John the Baptist, who revealed to them the location of his head. They uncovered the relic, placed it in a sack, and proceeded home. Along the way they encountered an unnamed potter and gave him the bag to carry, not telling him what it was. The Forerunner appeared to the potter and ordered him to flee from the careless, lazy monks, with what he held in his hands. He took the head to his home.

Before his death he placed it in a container and gave it to his sister. After some time, a hieromonk named Eustathius, an Arrian, came into possession of it, using it to attract followers to his

teaching. He buried the head in a cave, near Emesa. Eventually, a monastery was built at that place. In the year 452 Saint John the Baptist appeared to Archimandrite Marcellus of this monastery, and indicated where his head was hidden in a water jar buried in the earth. The relic was brought into the city of Emesa, and was transferred later to Constantinople.

The Third Finding of the Head of St. John the Baptist is celebrated on May 25. The head was transferred to Comana of Cappadocia during a period of Muslim raids (about 820) and it was hidden in the ground during a period of iconoclastic persecution. When the veneration of icons was restored in 850, Patriarch Ignatius of Constantinople (847-857) in a vision saw the place where the head of Saint John had been hidden. The patriarch communicated this location to the emperor Michael III, who sent a delegation to Comana, where the head was found. Afterwards the head was again transferred to Constantinople, and there, on May 25, it was placed in a church at the court.

According to ancient tradition, the burial place of the rest of the body of Saint John the Baptist was at Sebaste near modern Nablus in the West Bank, and mention is made of his relics being honored there around the middle of the fourth century. The historians Rufinus and Theodoretus record that the shrine was desecrated under Emperor Julian the Apostate around 362, the bones being partly burned. A portion of the rescued relics was carried to Jerusalem, then to Alexandria, where on 27 May 395, they were laid in the basilica newly dedicated to the Forerunner on the site of the former temple of Serapis. The tomb at Sebaste continued, nevertheless, to be visited by pious pilgrims, and St. Jerome bears witness to miracles there. Today, the tomb is housed in the Nabi Yahya Mosque ("John the Baptist Mosque").

What became of the head of John the Baptist cannot really be determined. Over the centuries, there have been many discrepancies in many legends and relics have been claimed throughout the Christian world. Several different places currently claim to possess the severed head of Saint John the Baptist.

SAINTS ZACHARIAS AND ELIZABETH, SEPTEMBER 18.

In Hebrew Elizabeth means "My God has sworn." Saint Elisabeth was the mother of Saint John the Baptist and the wife of Zacharias/Zachary, According to the *Gospel of Saint Luke*, Saint Elisabeth was a descendant of Aaron the High priest (*Luke 1:5-7*). She and her husband Zacharias were "righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" (1:6), but they were childless. While ministering in the temple of the Lord, Zacharias was visited by the angel Gabriel (*Luke 8-12*):

Luke 1:13 -15. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Saint Elisabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb.

Zacharias doubted "whereby" he could know this since both he and his wife were very old. The angel identified himself as Gabriel and said Zacharias would be "dumb, and not able to speak" until the words were fulfilled, because he did not believe. When the days of his ministry were complete, he returned to house (*Luke 1:16-23*).

Luke 1:24 -15 And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying, Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.

According to the account, the angel Gabriel was then sent to Nazareth in Galilee to her "cousin" Mary, then a virgin espoused to a man called Joseph, and Gabriel informed her that she would conceive by the Holy Ghost and bring forth a son to be called Jesus. After she was also informed that her "cousin Elisabeth" had begun her sixth month of pregnancy, she travelled to "Hebron, in the hill country of Judah," to visit (*Luke 1:26-40*).

Luke 1:41 -45. And it came to pass, that, when Elisabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elisa-

beth was filled with the Holy Ghost: And she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.

After the Virgin Mary heard Saint Elisabeth's blessing, she spoke the words now known as the "Magnificat" (*Luke* 1:46-55). In Orthodox worship, the Magnificat is usually sung during the Matins service before the Irmos of the ninth ode of the canon. After each verse, the troparion is sung: "More honourable than the Cherubim, and more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim, without corruption thou gavest birth to God the Word: true Theotokos, we magnify thee."

Luke 1:56-54. And Mary abode with her about three months, and returned to her own house. Now Elisabeth's full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son. And her neighbors and her cousins heard how the Lord had shewed great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her. And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father. And his mother answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John. And they said unto her, There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name. And they made signs to his father, how he would have him called. And he asked for a writing table, and wrote, saying, His name is John. And they marvelled all. And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God.

These verses are the last mentioning of Saint Elisabeth, in the Bible. The chapter continues, however with the prophecy of Zacharias, (known as the "Benedictus") and ends with the note that John "grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts" until his ministry to Israel began; so it is unknown how long Elisabeth and her husband lived after that-

time (*Luke*1:65-80).



RUSSIAN ICON OF SAINT ZECHARIAS, HOLDING A SCROLL SHOWING THE OPENING WORDS OF THE BENEDICTUS (18TH -CENTURY, KIZHI MONASTERY, RUSSIA).-



NATIVITY OF THE THEOTOKOS, SEPTEMBER 21.

The Nativity of the Theotokos, celebrating her birth, is one of the Twelve Great Feasts of the Orthodox Church. According to the sacred tradition of the Orthodox Church, Saint Mary the Virgin was born to the elderly and previously barren parents Joachim and Anna (now saints), in answer to their prayers.

According to the sacred tradition of the Orthodox Church, Saint Mary was born to the elderly and previously barren parents Joachim and Anna (now saints), in answer to their prayers. The icon on the cover of this newsletter is another Icon of the Nativity of the Theotokos.



NATIVITY OF THE THEOTOKOS FROM
THE ICONOSTASIS OF THE SAINT SAVVA CHURCH,
16TH-17TH CENTURY (PSKOV MUSEUM).

The Nativity of the Theotokos, celebrating the birth of Saint Mary, is one of the Twelve Great Feasts of the Eastern Orthodox liturgical year. It is celebrated on September 8 on the liturgical calendar (for those churches which follow the traditional Julian Calendar, September 8 falls on September 21 of the modern Gregorian Calendar). According to the sacred tradition of the Orthodox Church, Mary was born to the elderly and previously barren parents Joachim and Anna (now saints), in answer to their prayers.

Orthodox Christianity does not accept the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary (according to which it is supposed that Mary, like her Son Jesus himself, was preserved from that original sin which befalls all other descendants of Adam and Eve, in anticipation of her giving birth to the sinless Christ).

Nor does the Orthodox Church does share the Western, Augustinian understanding of the transmission of original sin, so the question of an immaculate conceotion cannot even arise in Orthodox theology. All Orthodox are agreed, however, that Saint Mary the Virgin was kept free from actual sin by God's grace. John S. Romanides has written a learned study of some of these themes--*Ancestral Sin*, translated by George S. Gabriel (Ridge-wod Cliffs, NJ: Zepyr Publishing, 2002). ISBN 2002091364.

SAINT AUTONOMUS, SEPTEMBER 25.

Saint Autonomus died in 313 as a martyr saint. He is said to have been an Italian bishop who had escaped the persecution of Diocletian by migrating to Bithynia in Asia Minor. He evangelized in the region, served as first bishop of Bolu (Bithynium), and was subsequently martyred.

EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS OF THE LORD, SEPTEMBER 27.

This feast is called in Greek literally "Raising Aloft of the Precious Cross." According to legends that spread widely throughout Europe, the True Cross was discovered in 326 by Saint Helena, the mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great,

during a pilgrimage she made to Jerusalem.

Then the church of the Holy Sepulcher was built at the site of the discovery, by royal order of Helena and Constantine. The church was dedicated nine years later, with a portion of the cross placed inside it. Other legends say that in 614, that portion of the cross was carried away from the church by the Persians, and remained missing until it was recaptured by the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius in 628. Initially taken to Constantinople, then the cross was returned to the church in Jerusalem the following year.

The date of the feast marks the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in 335. This was a two-day festival: although the actual consecration of the church was on September 13, the cross itself was brought outside the church on September 14 so that all could come forward to venerate it.

In Orthodox practice, the Universal Exaltation of the Precious and Life-creating Cross commemorates both the finding of the True Cross in 326 and its recovery from the Persians in 628.



RUSSIAN ICON OF THE FEAST OF THE EXALTATION OF THE
CROSS (ICON FROM YAROSLAVL BY GURY NIKITIN, 1680.
(TRETYAKOV GALLERY, MOSCOW).

Holy Table, and altar) where it reposes during the Vigil. The cross is placed on a tray that has been covered with an Aër (liturgical veil) and decorated with fresh basil leaves and flowers, and a candle burns before it. The cross reposes on the "High Place" of the Holy Table, where the Gospel Book normally lies. Those portions of the Vigil which would normally take place before the Icon of the Feast (the chanting of the Polyeleos and the Matins Gospel) instead take place in front of the Holy Table where the Gospel Book normally rests. One of the high points of the celebration occurs after the Great Doxology, when the priest or bishop brings the cross out of the sanctuary. He sets the cross on a table (tetrapod or analogion) in the center of the nave of the church as the choir sings of the festal Troparion of the Cross: "Save, O Lord, Thy people, and bless Thine inheritance, granting unto the faithful victory over adversaries, and by the power of Thy Cross, do Thou preserve Thy commonwealth."

In cathedrals and monasteries, a special "Exaltation" is performed by the bishop or abbot, standing in the center of the church. This consists of his taking the cross in his hands and raising it above his head. He makes an exclamation, to which the choir responds, chanting, Kyrie eleison ("Lord, have mercy") 100 times. As they chant, he makes the sign of the cross with it three times, then slowly bows down to the ground, and stands up again raising the cross above his head as before. This process is repeated four more times, to the four points of the compass. Then, whether the special Exaltation has been performed or not, the clergy and the members of the congregation prostrate themselves on the ground as all sing, "Before Thy Cross, we bow down in worship, O Master, and Thy holy Resurrection we glorify" three times (at the words "Thy holy Resurrection" all stand up again). Then all come forward to venerate the cross and receive the priest's blessing. The cross will remain in the center of the temple throughout the Afterfeast, and the faithful will venerate it whenever they enter or leave the church. Finally, on the Apodosis of the Feast, the priest and deacon will cense around the cross, there will be a final veneration of the

cross, and then they will solemnly bring the cross back into the sanctuary through the Holy Doors. The same pattern of bringing out the cross, at the end of the celebration is repeated at a number of the lesser Feasts of the Cross mentioned below.



PART 3. SEPTEMBER SERVICES ACCORDING TO THE CIVIL CALENDAR.

Saturday, September 3, Vigil at 5 PM.

Sunday, September 4, Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost, Hours & Divine Liturgy, at 9:40 AM. Afterfeast of the Dormition of the Most Holy Theotokos. Commemoration of the Martyr Agathonicus of Nicomedia.

Wednesday, September 7, Vespers & Matins at 7 PM.

Saturday, September 10, Vigil at 5 PM.

Sunday, September 11, Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost & the Beheading of Saint John The Baptist, Hours & Divine Liturgy, at 9:40 AM.

Wednesday, September 14, Vespers & Matins at 7 PM.

Saturday, September 17, Vigil at 5 PM.

Sunday, September 18, Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Hours & Divine Liturgy, at 9:40 AM. Commemoration of Saints Zachariah & Elizabeth.

Tuesday, September 20, Vigil at 7 PM..

Wednesday, September 21, Nativity Of the Most Holy Theotokos, Hours & Divine Liturgy at 6:40 AM.

Saturday, September 24, Vigil at 5 PM.

Sunday, September 18, Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost,
Hours & Divine Liturgy, at 9:40 AM. Apodosis of the
Nativity of the Theotokos.
Commemoration of the Martyr Autonomus.

Monday, September 26, Vigil With the Bringing out of the
Holy Cross, at 6:30 PM.

Tuesday, September 27, Exaltation of The Holy Cross
of The Lord, Hours & Divine Liturgy at 6:40 AM.

Saturday, October 1, Vigil at 5 PM.

Sunday, October 2, Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost,
Hours & Divine Liturgy, at 9:40 AM. Apodosis of the
Exaltation. Commemoration of the Martyrs Trophymus,
Babatius, & Dorymedon.

Wednesday, October 5, Vigil & Matins at 7 PM.

PART 4. A MONASTERY IN COMMUNION.

The ROCA membership under the leadership of the Synod and Metropolitan Agafangel shares eucharistic communion with the old calendar jurisdictions of Bulgaria, Greece, and Romania that are not subject to local or national governments. One monastery that is easy for Americans to find is that of the Church and Brotherhood of Saint Edward the Martyr, Brookwood, Surrey, England. The church is about 30 minutes by train from central London and is under the episcopal authority of Bishop Cyprian of Oropos and Fili.

Your newsletter preparer revisited Saint Edward's in July 2011 and was made welcome by the monks and the many regular lay visitors. The visit occurred during a five-week tour of Belgium, England France, and Ireland, during a summer that was the 40th anniversary of his first trip to Europe at age 27.

Please have a look at the monastery webpage--
<http://www.saintedwardbrotherhood.org>

The brotherhood draws an interesting analogy between the

(1) fall of the Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms of Wessex and then all England, which knew the Orthodox Church well and the (2) fall of the royal family and the wider kingdom of Orthodox Russia. Several members of the Anglo-Saxon royal family married members of the ruling families of their contemporary medieval Russia, and the two countries were friendly. Saint Edward the King and Martyr died in about his at 16th year. Saint Edward's feastday is September 3/16.



KING EDWARD
THE MARTYR

962 -978
SOUTHERN ENGLAND

Please let the newsletter preparer, patrick Brown, know of any omissions and needful corrections--hpcjfbrown@cox.net.