



28th Sunday After Pentecost

Sunday of the Holy Forefathers & Martyr Eustratius and Company

13 / 26 December

"This the second Sunday before Christmas - it calls to remembrance the ancestors of Christ according to the flesh, whether before or under the Law. The Sunday that follows is still broader in scope, commemorating all the righteous men and women who pleased God from the beginning of time, from the days of Adam the first man down to Joseph, the betrothed of the Mother of God. Approaching Christmas in this way, the worshipper is enabled to see the Incarnation, not as an abrupt and irrational intervention of the divine, but as the culmination of a long process extending over thousands of years." - the Festal Menaion.

Resurrection Tropar, Tone 2: When Thou didst descend to death, O Life Immortal, Thou didst slay hell with the splendour of Thy Godhead! And when from the depths Thou didst raise the dead, all the powers of Heaven cried out: O Giver of Life, Christ our God, Glory to Thee!

Tropar of the Holy Fathers, Tone 4: Daniel, the man of divine desires, seeing Thee, the Stone uncut by human hands, O Lord, prophetically called Thee a babe born without seed, the Word incarnate of the Virgin, the immaculate God, the Saviour of our souls.

Troparion of the Holy Martyrs of Armenia tone 4: Wise Eustratius, divine Auxentius, Eugene, Mardarius and Orestes,/ five members of the choir of Martyrs,/ enlighten the whole world with the torch of their contests./ O faithful, in praising them let us cry out:/ Rejoice, you five holy Martyrs of Christ.

Resurrection Kondak, Tone 2: Hell became afraid, O Almighty Saviour, seeing the miracle of Thy resurrection from the tomb! The dead arose! Creation, with Adam, beheld this and rejoiced with Thee! And the world, O My Saviour, praises Thee forever.

Kondak of the Holy Fathers, Tone 6: O thrice-blessed ones, who did not honour an image wrought by hands, but were defended by the indescribable Essence, ye were glorified in your ordeal by fire; and, standing in the midst of unbearable flame, ye called upon God, saying: Make speed and haste Thou to help us, O Compassionate One, in that Thou art merciful; who what Thou wilt, Thou canst do!

Kontakion of the Holy Martyrs of Armenia tone 2: Thou wast a shining light for those in the darkness of ignorance,/ O herald of Christ,/ and armed with the spear of faith,/ thou wast unmoved by the adversaries' audacity,/ Eustratius most eloquent of orators.

Matins Gospel V

Epistle: Colossians 3: 4-11

When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience, In which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them. But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, And have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him.

DO NOT LIE TO ONE ANOTHER, SINCE YOU HAVE PUT OFF THE OLD MAN WITH HIS DEEDS

You shall destroy all those who utter a lie (Ps. 5:7). The mouth that speaks a lie will slay the soul (Wis. 1:11). Forasmuch as all sins arise through a love of pleasure or avarice or vainglory, we can say that lying has its roots in these three vices: a man has to avoid blame and humiliation to fulfil his own desires or to gain something ...And in the end no one believes him when he speaks the truth ...A man whose very life is a lie is one who is licentious and pretends to be temperate, or a miser and speaks of almsgiving and compassion, or ostentatious and goes in raptures over poverty, not wanting to acquire the virtue he praises ...'the devil changes himself into an angel of light' (II Cor.11:14) ...the man whose very life is a lie: he is not a simple but a two-faced man; he is one thing on the inside and another on the outside.

St. Dorotheos of Gaza. Discourses, IX. On Falsehood. B#45, pp. 160-162.

for the Martyrs: Eph. 6:10-17

GOSPEL: ST. LUKE 14: 16-24

Then He said to him, "A certain man gave a great supper and invited many, And sent his servant at supper time to say to those who were invited, 'Come, for all things are now ready.' But they all with one accord began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them. I ask you to have me excused.' Still another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' So that servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house, being angry, said to his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind.' And the servant said, 'Master, it is done as you commanded, and still there is room.' Then the master said to the servant, 'Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper.' "

Sunday of the Forefathers.

'Many are called but few are chosen'. So says Christ in today's Gospel. If we think of the knowledge of God conserved among different peoples in the world before Christ, these words have a special significance.

Some peoples conserved a dim memory of events of the human past. In Australia the Aborigines kept a vague memory of how God created the world perfect, which they call the 'Dreamtime'.

All over the world, from Asia to South America, some 120 different peoples and cultures have kept the memory of a great, universal flood, which is known to us in detail through Noah.

In India the Hindus long ago kept an intuition of a Trinitarian God, but among them their knowledge of God became so twisted that their trinity is a trinity of destructive gods.

Other peoples fell even further and began worshipping stones and trees, rivers and mountains, mistaking creation for the Creator. For instance, in this country, thousands of years before Christ, the 'cleverest' people, not unlike some today, worshipped the stars, as we can see from the great astronomical monument that they built and called Stonehenge. At that time in Egypt too the cleverest people built huge Pyramids to worship the Sun, and through which they believed that their leaders, the Pharaohs, would become stars.

Other peoples altogether gave up on ever knowing God and declared that the way ahead consisted in following the wisest men of their cultures, Buddha in India, or Confucius in China.

In Ancient Greece, the wisest men declared that men could never know God unless God first revealed Himself to man and in Athens they set up an altar to 'the Unknown God'.

Many were called but few were chosen, for among all these peoples and cultures, there were representatives of one people who conserved the true history of mankind. This people were the Jews, the ancient Hebrews, the chosen people, and today we commemorate all the righteous among them, our forefathers and foremothers in the Faith. From Adam and Eve on, there were among that people righteous and holy men and women. In their lives they prefigured the life of Christ and foresaw Christ.

Abel, who was murdered by his brother Cain, is a prefiguration of Christ, who was also murdered by men.

Melchizedek the priest is the prefiguration of Christ the High Priest.

Enoch and Elijah, who were taken up to heaven, prefigure Christ Who was also taken up to heaven.

Noah, whose family alone survived the Flood, is a prefiguration of the baptism of purification given to us by Christ.

Job the long-suffering prefigures the longsuffering of Christ.

Abraham, who was asked to sacrifice his son Isaac, prefigures the sacrifice that God the Father made with His Son.

Jacob prefigures Christ, for he saw the ladder that connects earth to heaven, enabling heaven to come down to earth and earth to rise up to heaven.

Joseph, who was betrayed by his twelve brothers, prefigures Christ who was betrayed by His disciples.

Moses, the leader of his people, who was given the great revelation of the Ten Commandments, unsurpassed until Christ gave us the Beatitudes, prefigures Christ, for Moses saw the burning bush unconsumed, which is the Virgin's womb, which was unconsumed by the fire of Christ.

Joshua, whose name is the same as Christ's, that is Jesus, the Saviour, prefigures Jesus the Deliverer of His people.

David, related by blood to Christ, saw Christ in the Psalms which he wrote down.

Solomon expressed the Wisdom of God in his Books of Wisdom.

The Prophet Daniel saw the Holy Trinity through the Three Holy Youths in the furnace of Babylon.

The Prophet Isaiah saw Christ the suffering Servant.

The Prophet Jonah prefigures the three-day burial of Christ through his three-day stay in the belly of the whale.

All these holy forefathers together with our holy foremothers, Sarah, Rebecca, Ruth, Deborah and many, many more, whose icons are all on the back wall of our church, which is devoted to the righteous of the Old Testament, all these we commemorate today. All these are in fact our spiritual family, for they saw, long before we were born, the One Whom we confess, Christ our true God Who is Risen from the dead.

Let us in these last few days before the celebration of the Birth of the Saviour on earth, read one, or at least one part, of their writings, for example, in the Book of Genesis, the Book of Exodus, the Book of Proverbs, or simply the Psalms, and let us renew our links with our ancestors in the Orthodox Faith.

Holy Forefathers and Foremothers of Christ, pray to God for us!

<http://www.orthodoxengland.org.uk/>

Just out the front door, you can see the work that is going on in the street. The street is still there, but there are roadblocks, holes, bumps, equipment and so on. In order to get from one end to the other, all of those obstacles must be avoided. If you get stuck, even though you are still on the right street, you won't be able to get through to the other end.

Today in the Gospel there was the parable of a king who prepared a great feast for all his friends – but each one had a reason why he couldn't come. Each of those friends were on the same street as the king, wealthy, powerful, respected – but each of them got stuck somewhere along the way so that they never were able to come to the feast. One man claimed that he had bought some land and had to go see it. Another had just bought 5 yoke of oxen and had to go see to them. A third had just married and had to attend to his new wife. Each of these men had gotten trapped by an obstacle and so did not come to the feast. The king, in his anger, filled his hall with the poor and the lame and the sick and still there was room and so went out and brought in those who were strangers to him, travelers and visitors. These people did not get caught in the obstacles of the other wealthy guests and were able to attend the feast.

The king who has prepared the feast is of course God. Today as we recall the memory of the Forefathers of Christ, we recall the careful preparation that our Lord has made for his own incarnation. There were centuries and generations of bringing the right people to the right place so that at the perfect moment for our salvation, He would become incarnate, born as a child into the world so that we might know Him and follow Him. As He prepared for this great event, there were also those in the world who watched and waited and served the One True God as best as they could. But many of these followers were not at the birth of the Savior, for they got "stuck" in the obstacles of the world and so were replaced by the humble shepherds and the magi from afar.

Now that our Lord has come into the world and has revealed Himself to us, the path of salvation is much clearer and it has been opened to us. As part of the Church, we strive to walk that path with the help of grace and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But there are still obstacles on the path that we must avoid or we will not be able to enter into the feast prepared for us in eternity. In this parable we see some of those obstacles.

One man had purchased land and had to go see to it. This obstacle of land is one that we see quite clearly in the melting pot of North American culture. Too often the Orthodox faith is confused with nationalism or patriotism. There are those who consider themselves Orthodox simply because they are from an Orthodox nation. "I'm Russian (or Greek or Serbian) so of course I am Orthodox" This is not unlike the American attitude that "I'm American so I naturally I am a Christian" This attitude, in small doses has its benefits, because then one is led into the Church by the force of culture, but culture or ethnicity or "country" must never become the equal of the Church. Many of the Jews at the time of the Birth of our Lord were fervent patriots, zealots for the freedom of the Jewish nation – they remembered that they were the chosen people of God, but they forgot that this meant that they were chosen to worship God, not for national prominence. We must always remember that the Orthodox Christian faith is about worshipping God, about following Christ, about becoming one with Him – not about nationality or customs or the prominence of the land of our birth or adoption. When national or ethnic customs (no matter how pious in nature) take the place of worshipping God then we have fallen into the trap of this obstacle on the path of salvation

Another man had just purchased 5 yoke of oxen and had to prove them. Oxen in the Gospel parables are usually linked to works. St Luke the Evangelist is often portrayed as a winged ox since his Gospel tells us primarily of the earthly works and miracles of Christ. The obstacle of works comes most clearly in the form of phariseism or legalism. There are many practices and traditions in the Church that are given to us to help us work out our salvation. However, when the fulfillment of those practices becomes an end in itself, as if the "rules" are the purpose of the Christian life, then we come to another barrier – the barrier of legalism. The traditions and practices of the Christian life are given to us to guide us toward our Lord Jesus Christ. They help develop in us certain qualities (virtues) that become fountains of grace within our own hearts. But when these traditions and practices become rules and laws that must be followed or else, when the keeping of the rules for their own sake becomes paramount and their fulfillment replaces the worship of God, then we have fallen into the trap of this obstacle of legalism on the path of salvation.

A third man in the parable had just married a wife and was unable to attend the feast on her account. This represents for us the trap of good deeds, the trap wherein we substitute taking care of others in place of worshipping God. Certainly the Gospel tells us that we must love God and love our neighbor, and the parable of the Good Samaritan shows us the necessity of compassion and care for others – this is an inalienable part of the Christian faith. However we must always recall that the purpose of the Christian faith is to worship God and to draw near to Him. When good works, or the so called “social Gospel” replaces the worship of God then there is an obstacle. Our love and compassion for others mirrors and draws upon the love and compassion of God for all mankind. Our good and compassionate works are the expression of God’s love through us towards the whole world. The doing of good works should be an act of worship and glorifying God, but when good works takes the place of worship, when the social gospel becomes our only Gospel, when our good works come out of our own fallen need for love rather than the superabundance of God’s love, we have fallen into the trap of this obstacle of good deeds on the path of salvation.

The remedy for all of this is humility. When we insist on our own will, our own desires, our own ideas of the Christian life, then pride gains a hold in our hearts. But when we set aside our own desires, and in humility accept all that God gives to us (some familiar, some unfamiliar, some easy and joyful, others difficult and full of struggle) then we can avoid these traps. Back out on the street - if you get caught behind a barrier or obstacle and insist on continuing straight ahead, you will remain trapped and never get through. If however, you relinquish your own ideas of how to travel the road and accept the path open to you by the work that day, then you will be able to go from one end to the other. Remember that those who eventually came and enjoyed the feast were those who were humble, who had nothing of their own, but rather who depended upon the king for everything. These humble ones had no stake in fulfilling their own agenda, they thankfully received everything that God gave to them. They did not insist on lands or rules or good deeds – they gave what they could give and received with joy all that was given to them. As we prepare ourselves for the feast of our Lord’s Nativity, let us seek to develop humility above all so that we might enter into the feast with joy and gladness, receiving with thankfulness all that God has prepared for us.

Archpriest David Moser
<https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/propoved/info>

for the Martyrs: Luke. 21:12-19

Saints of the week

13 / 26 December — Nativity Fast — The Holy Martyrs Eustratius, Auxentius, Eugene, Mardarius and Orestes - These five courageous men shone like five resplendent stars in the dark days of the anti-Christian Emperors Diocletian and Maximian. St Eustratius was a Roman general in the city of Satalios, Eugene was one of his comrades in arms and Orestes likewise a respected soldier. Auxentius was a priest and Mardarius a simple citizen who came, like Eustratius, from the town of Aravraca. The imperial governors, Lycias and Agricola, tortured Auxentius first as he was a priest. Beholding the innocent suffering of the Christians, Eustratius presented himself before Lycias and declared that he also was a Christian. While Eustratius was being tortured, Eugene stood up before the judge and cried out: 'I am a Christian too, Lycias!' When they were driving Eustratius and the other martyrs through the town, Mardarius saw them from the roof of his house, and he took leave of his wife and two frail daughters and hastened after them, shouting into the faces of their tormentors: 'I am a Christian too, like the Lord Eustratius!' Orestes was a young and handsome soldier, who stood head and shoulders above all the other soldiers. One day, when he was at target practice in Lycias's presence, the Cross he was wearing fell from his breast, and Lycias realised that he was a Christian. Orestes openly confessed his faith, and was martyred with the others. Auxentius was beheaded, Eugene and Mardarius died under torture, Orestes was exposed on a red-hot iron grid and Eustratius died in a flaming furnace. St Blaise gave Communion to St Eustratius in prison before his death. Their relics were later taken to Constantinople, and are preserved in the church dedicated to them—The Holy Five Companions. They were seen alive in that church, and St Orestes appeared to St Dimitri of Rostov. A beautiful prayer by St Eustratius is extant, which is read at the Midnight Service on Saturdays: 'I glorify Thy majesty, O Lord for Thou hast regarded my lowliness and hast not shut me up in the hands of my enemies, but hast saved my soul from want ...'. The Holy Martyr Lucy the Virgin; The Hieromartyr Gavriilo, Patriarch of Serbia; St. Odilia, virgin of Alsace, France (720);

St. Judoc, hermit of Ponthieu - (Died AD 675) (*Welsh: Iudog; Latin: Iudocus; English: Joyce*). Prince Judoc (or Josse, as he was commonly called) was educated at the monastery of San Maelmon. On the abdication of his brother, Prince Judicael of Domnonee, around 636, Judoc immediately ascended the Domnonian throne. He asked for eight days to consider his position, but decided he too preferred the religious life and fled to Ponthieu where he became chaplain to the local Count. Judoc later retired from the World to Ray where he set up a small hermitage. Unfortunately, the locals took to worrying him for miracle cures and he was forced to move to Caer-Runiac (Saint-Josse-sur-Mer) to escape them. He lived there thirteen years, and then in the Valley of Pidrague before travelling on a pilgrimage to Rome. Judoc died some time after his return, on 13th December 675. St. Judoc's bones were enshrined at Saint-Josse, before being taken to Winchester New Minster in 902 by some refugee monks. Hence his popularity in England.

14 / 27 December — Nativity Fast - The Holy Martyrs Thyrsus, Leucius and Callinicus - Saints Thyrsus and Leucius were eminent citizens of Bithynian Caesarea; the latter being baptised and the former still a catechumen. Callinicus, however, was a pagan priest who offered sacrifice to idols. When Cumbrius, heir to the Emperor Decius, began to torture and murder the Christians, the intrepid Leucius stood before him and reproached him: 'Why have you begun to make war on your own soul, Cumbrius?' The enraged judge ordered that he be flogged and tortured, and then beheaded with the sword. In terrible torment, Leucius went to his execution as joyfully as if he were going to a wedding. When he beheld Leucius's courageous death, blessed Thyrsus was inflamed with divine zeal and, like Leucius, went before the judge and rebuked him for his crimes and his lack of belief in the one, true God. He was therefore beaten and cast into prison. He was healed of his wounds by the invisible hand of God, which also opened the prison doors and led him forth. Thyrsus went at once to Phileas, the Bishop of Caesarea, to be baptised by him. After his baptism, he was again seized and tortured, but he endured all the torments as if in a dream and not in reality. Many idols fell down through the power of his prayer. When he saw this, Callinicus, a pagan priest, was converted to the Christian faith, so both he and Thyrsus were condemned to death. Callinicus was beheaded with the sword, and Thyrsus was placed in a wooden coffin to be sawn asunder, but God's power prevented this and the saw could not penetrate the wood. Then Thyrsus arose from the coffin, praying and thanking God for his sufferings, and he peacefully gave his soul into the Lord's hands. At the end of the fourth century, the Emperor Flavian built a church to St Thyrsus near Constantinople, and placed his holy relics in it. The saint appeared in a vision to the Empress Pulcheria, and suggested that she bury the relics of the Forty Martyrs beside his own. The Holy Martyrs Philemon, Apollonius, Arrian and others; St. Hybald, Abbot in Lincolnshire, England (7th c.) - Benedictine abbot at Bardney, Lincolnshire, England. Mentioned by the Venerable Bede as an acquaintance of Saint Chad. Hermit in later life. Some churches, the village of Hibaldstowe, and other locations are named in his honour. Died c.690 of natural causes; relics at Hibaldstowe, Lincolnshire, England

15 / 28 December — Nativity Fast — The Hieromartyr Eleutherius - A good fruit of a good tree, this wonderful saint had noble and eminent parents. He was born in Rome, where his father was in imperial service. His mother, Anthea, heard the Gospel from the great Apostle Paul himself, and was baptised by him. Being early left a widow, she entrusted her only son to the education and service of the Bishop of Rome, Anacletus. Seeing how greatly Eleutherius was gifted and illumined by the grace of God, the bishop ordained him deacon at the age of fifteen, priest at eighteen and bishop at twenty. Endowed by God with wisdom, he made up for what he lacked in years. This godly man was made bishop in Illyria, with his seat at Valona in Albania. He kept his flock like a good shepherd, adding to their number from day to day. The Emperor Hadrian, a persecutor of Christians, sent a commander, Felix, with soldiers, to seize Eleutherius and take him to Rome. When the furious Felix arrived in Valona and went into the church, and heard and saw God's holy hierarch, his heart was suddenly changed and he became a Christian. Eleutherius baptised him and set off with him for Rome, as merrily as though he were going to a feast, not to trial and torture. The Emperor put the gently-born Eleutherius to harsh torture, flogging him, burning him on an iron grid, boiling him in pitch and burning him in a fiery furnace. But, by God's power, Eleutherius was delivered from all these deadly torments. Seeing all this, Choribus the governor proclaimed that he himself was a Christian. Choribus was tortured and then beheaded, and so also blessed Felix. Finally, the imperial executioners cut off the honoured head of St Eleutherius. When his mother, holy Anthea, came and stood over the dead body of her son, she was also beheaded. Their bodies were taken to Valona, where St Eleutherius glorifies the name of Christ to this day by many wonders. He suffered in the time of Hadrian, in the year 120. St Stephen the Confessor of Suroz; Our Holy Father Paul of Latros; Our Holy Father Pardus the Solitary.

16 / 29 December — Nativity Fast — The Holy Prophet Haggai - Born in Babylon in the time of the captivity of Israel, he was of the tribe of Levi. He prophesied in 520 B.C., and visited Jerusalem as a young man. He urged Zerubbabel and Joshua the priest to restore the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, prophesying for this Temple greater glory than the former Temple of Solomon: 'The glory of this latter house shall be greater than that of the former, saith the Lord of Hosts' (2:9), for the Lord, the Saviour, would appear in the new Temple. He lived to see the first half of the new Temple completed by Zerubbabel. and died in old age, and rested with his fathers. St Nicolas Chrysoverges, Patriarch of Constantinople; St Theophano the Empress.

17 / 30 December — Nativity Fast — The Holy Prophet Daniel, and the Three Children: Ananias, Azarias and Misael - All four of them were of the royal tribe of Judah. When Nebuchadnezzar destroyed and plundered Jerusalem, Daniel, as a boy, was taken off into slavery together with Jehoiachin, King of Judah, and many other Israelites. The account of his life, sufferings and prophecies can be found in detail in his book. Utterly given to God, Daniel from his early youth received from God the gift of great discernment. His fame among the Jews in Babylon began when he denounced two lecherous and unrighteous elders, and saved the chaste Susannah from an unjust death. But his fame among the Babylonians stemmed from the day when he solved and interpreted the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar. For this, the king made him a prince at his court. When the king made a golden idol in the Plain of Dura, the Three Children refused to worship it, for which they were cast into the burning fiery furnace. But an angel of God appeared in the furnace and soothed the flames, so that the Children walked in the furnace untouched by the fire, and sang: 'Blessed art Thou, Lord God of our fathers!' The king saw this marvel, and was amazed. He then brought the Children out of the furnace and did them great honour. In the time of King Belshazzar, when the king was eating and drinking with his guests at a feast out of consecrated vessels taken from the Temple in Jerusalem, an invisible hand wrote these three words on the wall: 'Mene, Tekel, Upharsin'. No-one could interpret these words but Daniel. That night, King Belshazzar was killed. Daniel was thrice thrown into a den of lions for his faith in the one, living God, and both times God preserved him alive. Daniel saw God on His throne with the angelic powers, often saw angels, had insight into the future of certain people, of kingdoms and of the whole human race, and prophesied the time of the coming of the Saviour on earth. According to St Cyril of Alexandria, Daniel and the Three Children lived to great old age in Babylon, and were beheaded with the sword for the true Faith. When Ananias was beheaded, Azarias held out his robe and caught his head, then Misael caught Azarias's head and Daniel Misael's. An angel of God carried their bodies to Judea, to Mount Gebal, and placed them under a rock. According to tradition, these four men arose at the time of the death of the Lord Jesus and appeared to many, then fell

asleep again. Daniel is counted as one of the four Great Prophets (with Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel). He lived and prophesied half-way through the thousand years before Christ. Our Holy Father Daniel; Our Holy Fathers, the New Martyrs Paisius and Habakkuk; In Wales, in Merionethshire,

St. Tydecho, brother of St. Cadfan. Whose tropar in Tone 8 is: By thy labours for Christ, O Father Tydecho,/ thou didst win the crown of eternal glory/ and didst light the way into the Ark of Salvation./ Wherefore, O Saint, intercede for us that in following thee we may be found worthy of Christ's great mercy. Born in Wales. Several Welsh churches are named for him. No other information has survived.

18 / 31 December — Nativity Fast - The Holy Martyr Sebastian and those with him - This glorious martyr of Christ was born in Italy and brought up in the city of Milan. He was destined in his youth to be a soldier, and, as an educated, handsome and courageous man, commended himself to the Emperor Diocletian, who made him captain of the imperial guard. He secretly confessed the Christian faith, and prayed to the living God. An honourable, upright and merciful man, Sebastian was greatly loved by his soldiers. Whenever possible, he saved Christians from torture and death and, when this was not possible, gave them courage to die for Christ the living God without turning back. Two brothers, Marcus and Marcellinus, who were in prison for Christ and already on the verge of denying Him and worshipping idols, were confirmed in their faith and strengthened in their martyrdom by Sebastian. As he spoke with them, exhorting them not to fear death for Christ, his face was illumined like that of an angel of God. Sebastian supported his words by marvels: he healed Zoe, the wife of Nicostratus the gaoler, who had been dumb for six years, and brought Nicostratus and his whole household to baptism; he healed the two sick sons of Claudius the commander, and brought him and his whole household also to baptism; he healed Tranquillianus, the father of Marcus and Marcellinus, of gout and pains in his legs which had troubled him for eleven years, and brought him to baptism together with his whole household; he healed the Roman Eparch, Chromatius, of the same infirmity and brought him and his son Tiburtius to baptism. Of these, Zoe was the first to suffer, being seized while at prayer beside the tomb of the Apostle Peter. After torture, she was thrown into the river Tiber. Then Tiburtius was seized, and the judge placed live coals before him, challenging him to choose life or death: to cast incense on the coals and cense the idols, or to stand himself barefoot on the coals. St Tiburtius made the sign of the Cross and stood barefoot on the coals, and remained unharmed. He was then beheaded with the sword. Nicostratus was killed with a stake, Tranquillianus was drowned and Marcus and Marcellinus were run through by spears. Then Sebastian was taken before the Emperor Diocletian. The Emperor rebuked him for his betrayal, but he said: 'I always pray to my Christ for your health, and for the peace of the Roman Empire.' The Emperor ordered that he be stripped and shot at with arrows. The soldiers then shot at him, until the martyr's whole body was so covered with arrows that it was invisible beneath them. When they thought that he was dead, he showed himself alive and healed of all his wounds. Then the pagans beat him to death with staves. He suffered gloriously for Christ his Lord and entered into the heavenly Kingdom in 287, when Gaius was Bishop of Rome. St Florus, Bishop of Aminsus; St Modestus, Patriarch of Jerusalem.

Martyrdom of Hieromonk Nestor of Zharki (Ivanova), defender of the holy icons (1993) - in the world Nestor Savchuk was born in Crimea in 1960. An artist, he travelled to Odessa in the early 1980's to undertake further studies. There he came in contact with Orthodox Christians, afterwards journeying to the Pochaev monastery where he was tonsured and later ordained a priest. An 'unregistered' monk, he fled the authorities and settled in Zharki, where he served in the church and ministered to the people. He struggled with great courage against the Russian Mafia which was at that time stealing the holy icons from the churches for sale abroad. He was murdered on December 18, 1993, at the age of 33, defending the church from thieves.

19 December / 1 January — Nativity Fast - The Holy Martyr Boniface - Martyrdom for Christ makes sinners into saints. This is shown by the example of St Boniface. He was at first servant to a wealthy and dissolute woman, Aglais, in Rome, and had unclean and unlawful relations with her. They were both pagans. Aglais evinced the desire to have the relics of some martyr in her house as an amulet against evil, so she sent her servant to Asia to find and buy for her what she desired. Boniface took some slaves with him and a fair amount of money and, at the moment of parting, said to Aglais: 'If I can't find any martyrs and if they bring you back my body, martyred for Christ, will you receive it with honour? Aglais laughed, and called him a drunken old sinner, and so they parted. Coming to the city of Tarsus, Boniface saw many Christians undergoing torture: some were having their legs cut off, some their hands, others their eyes put out, yet others were dying on the gallows and so forth. Boniface's heart was changed, and he repented of his sinful life with tears. He called out among the Christian martyrs: 'I too am a Christian!' The judge took him for interrogation and ordered that he be harshly flogged, then that boiling lead be poured into his mouth and, as this did him no harm, that he be beheaded. The slaves then took his body back to Rome. An angel of God appeared to Aglais and said: 'Take him who was at one time your servant, but is now our brother and fellow-servant; he is the guardian of your soul and the protector of your life.' Aglais went in wonder to meet them, took Boniface's body, built a church for his relics and placed them there. She then repented, gave away all her goods to the poor and withdrew from the world, living a further fifteen years in bitter penitence. St Boniface suffered in the year 290. St Gregory, Bishop of Omir; St Boniface the Merciful, Bishop of Ferentino; Our Holy Father Elias of Murom; St. Manirus, b, apostle of Nth. Scotland; St. Winebald the Pilgrim, abbot and missionary of England and Heidenheim, Germany (761).