Perplexed Angels at the Ascension of our Lord?

Written by Fr. Paul Fuller

The Great Feast of the Ascension of our Lord is the completion of the Paschal season, the 40-day period of our Lord’s post-resurrectional appearances...as we read in Holy Scriptures: “Then He led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up His hands He blessed them. While He blessed them, He parted from them, and was carried up into heaven” (Lk 24:50-51). The Resurrectional season is filled with great joy; therefore, its completion with the Feast of the Ascension 40 days later might be characterized as emptiness. But this would be a mischaracterization, a misunderstanding of the “greatness” of this Feast in the history of salvation and the Life of the Church.

It is a great Feast indeed! Like the disciples who were present on that glorious day upon the mountain, we too are witnesses of our Lord’s saving work, His ascension-in-the-flesh to be with the Father in Heaven! The long-awaited redemption of humanity is complete, the heavenly doors are opened, for in amazement, a human body is now in the presence of the Father. In ascending from the Mount of Olives into heaven, Christ, who is for all eternity consubstantial with the Father and the Holy Spirit, also remains consubstantial with the race of men. He retains his human nature and thus could say to his disciples: “I go to prepare a place for you” (Jn 14:3).

Amazingly, a human body is now in the presence of the Father, where before there was not....no wonder the angels were confused when they saw the Ascension of a Man to the right hand of God the Father. As we learn from the hymnography of the Feast: “Today the powers above, beholding our nature in the heavens, were perplexed, being surprised at the manner of its strange Ascension, and said to one another, Who is this that cometh? And when they saw that it was their own Master, they were commanded to lift the heavenly gates. Wherefore, with them we ceaselessly praise Thee, O Thou Who didst come thence in the flesh, as Thou art the Judge of all, and Almighty God.”

The angels are perplexed, beholding Christ with the nature of our humanity gone through the heavenly gates – this same Savior whose nature of His divinity smashed through the gates of Hades (death)! As another hymn for this Feast emphasizes: “As the angels, O Savior, wondered at Thy strange elevation, and the Disciples were amazed at Thy dread rising, Thou didst ascend in glory, being God, and the gates were lifted up for Thee. Wherefore, the heavenly powers were surprised, shouting: Glory to Thy condescension; glory to Thy reign; glory to Thine Ascension, O Thou Who alone art the Lover of mankind.”
Virgin-martyr Pelagia of Tarsus – May 4

St. Pelagia of Tarsus in Cilicia (southeastern Asia Minor) lived in the third century, during the reign of Diocletian (284-305) and was the daughter of illustrious pagans. When she heard about Jesus Christ from her Christian friends, she believed in Him and desired to preserve her virginity, dedicating her whole life to the Lord. Emperor Diocletian’s heir (a boy he adopted), saw the maiden Pelagia, was captivated by her beauty and wanted her to be his wife. The holy virgin told the youth that she was betrothed to Christ the Immortal Bridegroom and had renounced earthly marriage.

Pelagia’s reply greatly angered the young man, but he decided to leave her in peace for a while, hoping that she would change her mind. At the same time, Pelagia convinced her mother to let her visit the nurse who had raised her in childhood. She secretly hoped to find Bishop Linus of Tarsus, who had fled to a mountain during a persecution against Christians, and to be baptized by him. She had seen the face of Bishop Linus in a dream, which made a profound impression upon her. The holy bishop told her to be baptized. St. Pelagia traveled in a chariot to visit her nurse, dressed in rich clothes and accompanied by a whole retinue of servants, as her mother wished.

Along the way St. Pelagia, by the grace of God, met Bishop Linus. Pelagia immediately recognized the bishop who had appeared to her in the dream. She fell at his feet, requesting Baptism. At the bishop’s prayer a spring of water flowed from the ground. Bishop Linus made the Sign of the Cross over St. Pelagia, and during the Mystery of Baptism, angels appeared and covered the chosen one of God with a bright mantle. After giving the pious virgin Holy Communion, Bishop Linus offered a prayer of thanking to the Lord with her, and then sent her to continue her journey. She then exchanged her expensive clothing for a simple white garment and distributed her possessions to the poor. Returning to her servants, St. Pelagia told them about Christ, and many of them were converted and believed.

She tried to convert her own mother to Christ, but the obdurate woman sent a message to Diocletian’s son that Pelagia was a Christian and did not wish to be his wife. The youth realized that Pelagia was lost to him, and he fell upon his sword in his despair. Pelagia’s mother feared the emperor’s wrath, so she tied her daughter up and led her to Diocletian’s court as a Christian who was also responsible for the death of the heir to the throne. The emperor was captivated by the unusual beauty of the virgin and tried to turn her from her faith in Christ, promising her every earthly blessing if she would become his wife.

The holy virgin refused the emperor’s offer with contempt and said, “You are insane, Emperor, saying such things to me. I will not do your bidding, and I loathe your vile marriage, since I have Christ, the King of Heaven, as my Bridegroom. I do not desire your worldly crowns which last only a short while. The Lord in His Heavenly Kingdom has prepared three imperishable crowns for me. The first is for faith, since I have believed in the true God with all my heart; the second is for purity, because I have dedicated my virginity to Him; the third is for martyrdom, since I want to accept every suffering for Him and offer up my soul because of my love for Him.”

Diocletian sentenced Pelagia to be burned in a red-hot bronze bull. Not permitting the executioners to touch her body, the holy martyr signed herself with the Sign of the Cross and went into the brazen bull and her flesh melted like myrrh, filling the whole city with fragrance. St. Pelagia’s bones remained unharmed and were removed by the pagans to a place outside the city.

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Four lions then came out of the wilderness and sat around the bones letting neither bird nor wild beast get at them. The lions protected the relics of the saint until Bishop Linus came to that place. He gathered them up and buried them with honor. Later, a church was built over her holy relics. During the reign of Emperor Constantine (306-337), when the persecutions against Christians had stopped, a church was built at St. Pelagia’s burial place.

Troparion (Tone 3) of St. Pelagia:

Through thy knowledge of the Faith thou abandoned the darkness of ignorance, O fairest virgin of Christ. Thou wast refreshed by dew and finished thy contest by fire. O glorious Martyr Pelagia, entreat Christ our God to grant us His great mercy!

Holy Martyr Christopher – May 9

The holy Martyr Christopher lived during the third century and suffered about the year 250, during the reign of the emperor Decius (249-251). There are various accounts of his life and miracles, and he is widely venerated throughout the world. St. Christopher is especially venerated in Italy, where people pray to him in times of contagious diseases. There are various suggestions about his descent. Some historians believe that he was descended from the Canaanites, while others say from the “Cynoscephalai” [literally “dog-heads”] of Thessaly.

St. Christopher was a man of great stature and unusual strength. According to tradition, Christopher was very handsome, but wishing to avoid temptation for himself and others, he asked the Lord to give him an unattractive face, which was done. Before Baptism he was named Reprebus [Reprobate] because his disfigured appearance. Even before Baptism, Reprebus confessed his faith in Christ and denounced those who persecuted Christians. Consequently, a certain Bacchus gave him a beating, which he endured with humility.

Because of his renowned strength, 200 soldiers were assigned to bring him before the emperor Decius. Reprebus submitted without resistance. Several miracles occurred along the way; a dry stick blossomed in the saint’s hand, loaves of bread were multiplied through his prayers, and the travelers had no lack thereof. The soldiers surrounding Reprebus were astonished at these miracles. They came to believe in Christ and they were baptized along with Reprebus by St. Babylus of Antioch (September 4).

Christopher once made a vow to serve the greatest king in the world, so he first offered to serve the local king. Seeing that the king feared the devil, Christopher thought he would leave the king to serve Satan. Learning that the devil feared Christ, Christopher went in search of Him. St. Babylas of Antioch told him that he could best serve Christ by doing well the task for which he was best suited. Therefore, he became a ferryman, carrying people across a river on his shoulders. One stormy night, Christopher carried a Child Who insisted on being taken across at that very moment. With every step Christopher took, the Child seemed to become heavier. Halfway across the stream, Christopher felt that his strength would give out, and that he and the Child would be drowned in the river. As they reached the other side, the Child told him that he had just carried all the sins of the world on his shoulders. Then He ordered Christopher to plant his walking stick in the ground. As he did so, the stick grew into a giant tree. Then he recognized Christ, the King Whom he had vowed to serve.

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St. Christopher was brought before the emperor, who tried to make him renounce Christ, not by force but by cunning. He summoned two profligate women, Callinike and Aquilina, and commanded them to persuade Christopher to deny Christ, and to offer sacrifice to idols. Instead, the women were converted to Christ by Christopher. When they returned to the emperor, they declared themselves to be Christians. Therefore, they were subjected to fierce beatings, and so they received the crown of martyrdom. Decius also sentenced to execution the soldiers who had been sent after Christopher, but who now believed in Christ. The emperor ordered that the martyr be thrown into a red-hot metal box. St. Christopher, however, did not experience any suffering and he remained unharmed. After many fierce torments they finally beheaded the martyr with a sword. This occurred in the year 250 in Lycia. By his miracles the holy Martyr Christopher converted as many as 50 thousand pagans to Christ, as St. Ambrose of Milan testifies. The relics of St. Christopher were later transferred to Toledo (Spain), and still later to the abbey of St. Denis in France.

In Greece, many churches place the icon of St. Christopher at the entrance so that people can see it as they enter and leave the building. There is a rhyming couplet in Greek which says, “When you see Christopher, you can walk in safety.” This reflects the belief that whoever gazes upon the icon of St. Christopher will not meet with sudden or accidental death that day. The name Christopher means “Christ-bearer.” This can refer to the saint carrying the Savior across the river, and it may also refer to St. Christopher bearing Christ within himself (Galatians 2:20).

*Troparion (Tone 2) of St. Christopher:

O Christopher, robed in the purple of your martyrdom, thou came before the Lord of Heaven; therefore, with the choirs of angels, thou now singeth the Thrice-Holy Hymn. Intercede for the salvation of those who honor thee.

**Axios! Mustahek! He is Worthy! Our Beloved Proto-deacon Elias Corey**

It was a great blessing for our parish community to have His Grace, Bishop ANTHONY with us during Holy Week and Bright Week. In recognition of his over 30 years of loving dedication and service to our parish community, Dn. Elias Corey was elevated to the Rank of Proto-deacon. May God continue to bless him and his family and grant them many years!
The St. George Social Center is available to the public for those special days of celebrations: wedding receptions, anniversary parties, graduation parties; for your business needs: banquets, meetings, fund raising events, company parties; and for the good times: holiday parties, dinners, etc.

For more information and to schedule an appointment, please contact Michael C. Ellis at (812) 841-1338.
Please include the following people in your daily prayers. Prayer requests may be sent to Fr. Paul Fuller (frpaul.fuller@gmail.com).

**LIVING**
Those suffering from the recent tragedies in Syria
Metropolitan Paul & Archbishop John (Aleppo, Syria)
Archpriest Stephen Rhudy
Miriam Yazge
Mary Lou Saikley
Christina Phipps
Amy Issa
Sdn. Chuckie Shahadey (Ft. Lauderdale)
Doug Sperry
Ethan Sperry
Carol Ball
Jorge Martin (Jordanville, NY)

**DEPARTED**
+Those newly-departed from the recent tragedies in Syria
+Archpriest George Rados
+Joseph Haiek (CA)
+Carol Latinovich;
+Jackson Pirtle
+Mary Beth
+Mike Blane

Please join us as we recognize our school graduates (high school, college, & graduate programs) of our parish community, as well as those children & youth who have participated in our Church School program for 2017-2018.

Graduates and Church School Teachers are asked to contact the Church Office for the recognition form.

CONGRATULATIONS and may GOD grant you many years!
Vacation Bible School

June 12-14 (Tuesday-Thursday) 4:00p-7:00p

“Suffer the little children to come unto Me ... for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Ages 4-13 — Parents are asked to join us for the last hour each day!
Crafts, Songs, Prayers, Meals, & Parental Discussions

Please register your children to attend;
contact Fr. Paul for more information!
St. George Orthodox Church  
1900 South Fourth Street  
Terre Haute, IN  47802

Return Service Requested

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<td>May 20 Bill &amp; Sandy Kassis</td>
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We encourage those hosting the Holy Oblation and Coffee (Fellowship) Hour to offer a meal for fellowship. Please take notice of the Apostles’ Fast (June 4-29) and plan accordingly for meals during this Lenten season.  

Approx. 3 Sundays in 2018 available to host!

“The Messenger” is the monthly publication of our Community at

St. George Orthodox Church  
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Terre Haute, IN  47802

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www.stgeorgeterrehaute.com  
Please check our website for updates on all services, gatherings, and events.

Liturgical Schedule

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A parish of the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America