



# 'Heaven on Earth': Members of the Church and Citizens of Heaven

By Dr Christine Mangala Frost

Some years back I was at a service in Newcastle Cathedral, New South Wales, organized by the Australian Board of Missions. The preacher was a black bishop from Papua New Guinea, with the best opening to a sermon I've ever heard. He beamed down from the pulpit over his predominately white congregation and said: 'My dear friends: were it not for the missionaries, instead of preaching to you, I would be *eating* you.'

His point was that Christian faith makes a difference. His tribe had been delivered from constant wars with its neighbours and from devouring its dead enemies in the belief that, if you ate them, you would get their strength and skills. The love-feast of the Eucharist had united them with their neighbours in the service of God and one another; they now gained their power by consuming the Body and Blood of Christ. For Jesus has promised that 'the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh' (John 6:51). The bishop's grandfather was the last in the family to remember the taste of human flesh. These Papuans, now part of the Kingdom of God, 'citizens of heaven', fed by Christ, had a new life that transformed their world.

People sometimes say 'Religion is trouble', 'Christianity causes wars'. It is certainly true that religious hatred, and violence quite contrary to Christ's teaching, have at times disgraced the Christian faith. But that should not lead us to overlook how vastly greater is the good that Christianity has done. We have taught the world that human beings are of equal value, that we are all brothers and sisters, that we have a duty to care for one another; ideals now so accepted that they are incorporated into the charter of the United Nations. From its earliest beginnings, the Christian Church, the Body of Christ, has worked to fulfil its Christ-given duty – to love the poor, the needy, the hungry and thirsty, the sick, the prisoner, the stranger, the aged, the demented, the handicapped, the children, our neighbours in any shape or form and with whatever need, as if they were Christ himself. The former President of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, made the point that the Christian Church (in all its branches) is the world's largest 'non-governmental organization' devoted to humanitarian purposes. It has vastly more power and resources than Oxfam or Traidcraft, or Greenpeace or Médecins sans Frontières or any other body you care to mention. According to the World Health Organization, the Christian Church is the world's largest provider of health care, reaching into almost every village on earth.

I come from a very ancient and sophisticated non-Christian culture. My Hindu family traces itself back at least four hundred years, a long line of saints, scholars, musicians, poets and all of them devout worshippers of the Hindu god Shiva. Our religious fervour was intense – yet it could not satisfy me. We were taught to treat this world as unreal: illusion or maya. Cultivating detachment, we sought release from the endless cycle of birth, death and re-

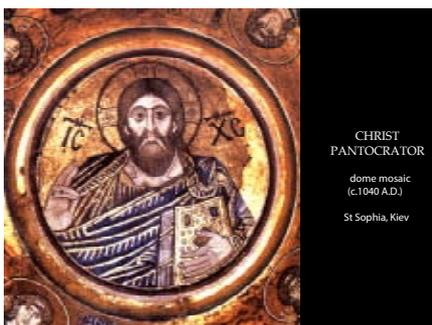
birth; so we strove to be rid of all pain, struggle and suffering. Our goal was to go beyond suffering and joy, beyond good and evil and enter a state where we were finally absorbed into the divine. Our personalities, together with everything we had known, experienced or cared about, would cease to be.

Such an impulse to escape is common to much religion, especially when life is hard. But I can tell you from experience what the effect is. It tends to make most of what we do in this life pointless, insignificant. Hindus love and hate, care for and injure other people, like anyone else. But we were taught that birth itself is an evil, and all that we experience in the physical world is *maya* or illusion. To be freed from this illusion is to enter a rarified spiritual sphere. Life is a grubby station waiting-room, longing for a train that will take us to a featureless zone, a kind of spiritual Ground Zero where we will merge into the One.

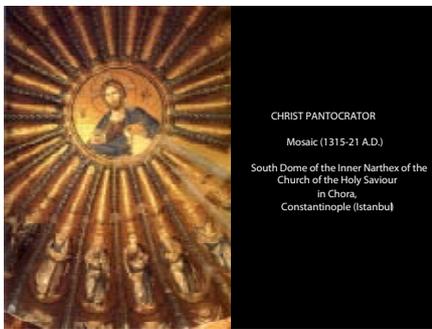
In contrast, when I heard the Psalms, I heard of a Creator God who had made this world 'good' (Genesis 1:3-31). The Gospels teach that this God 'so loved the world' and our daily existence that he sent his own Son into it, to bring it back to the beauty and glory he had intended it to have (John 3:16). The Christian idea of our future state is not one where everything we have known and loved is left behind. In the Kingdom of Heaven we shall have bodies, (that is) a means of expressing ourselves, and we will be persons who love and are loved. We will certainly be changed: but the change will be that we will love God and other people *more*, with fuller knowledge. What we value in this life will be transfigured, glorified – but it will not be obliterated. Our memories, our experiences, will go with us, as we advance 'from one degree of glory to another' (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Death, for Christians, is neither the end, nor just a welcome release but 'the last enemy' (1 Corinthians 15:26). We were not created to die. Death is a ghastly violation, an evil consequence of our *falling* away from God who is the source of our life. And 'the sting of death is sin', says St. Paul (1 Corinthians 15:56). What does he mean? Inevitably, separated from God, we go wrong, get twisted, suffer decay and destruction. My Hindu background had no adequate explanation of evil. If innocent people suffered, we were told it must be because of something they had done in a previous existence – it's their bad *karma*. This is a simplistic and ultimately unsatisfactory explanation. In Christian understanding, evil cannot be fully explained in merely human terms, for the appalling wrongs of this world are the result of evil occupation; much of the world is under the sway of what St Paul calls the 'god of this age' (2 Corinthians 4:4). Evil has a parasitic life, feeding on God's *good* creation and perverting human existence. Only the invasion by God in Christ has made possible the restoration of *His* rule.

I want now to show you three images, three *icons*, of that invasion. The first two are a picture both of the present and of the future.



*Visual Aid 1:*  
*Christ Pantocrator, Kiev*

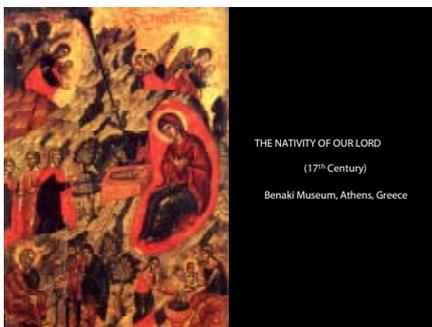


CHRIST PANTOCRATOR  
Mosaic (1315-21 A.D.)  
South Dome of the Inner Narthex of the  
Church of the Holy Saviour  
in Chora,  
Constantinople (Istanbul)

## Visual Aid 2: *Christ Pantocrator, Chora*

Christ has come, death is overthrown, the enemy defeated: God rules, his Kingdom is established. This is the image of Christ governing all things – a rule that has begun already but which will be completed in the future, at the Second Coming of Christ.

However, that rule was not begun as an act of force. Here is an image of the First Coming, where God was born into the world as a human child.



THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD  
(17<sup>th</sup> Century)  
Benaki Museum, Athens, Greece

## Visual Aid 3: *The Nativity*

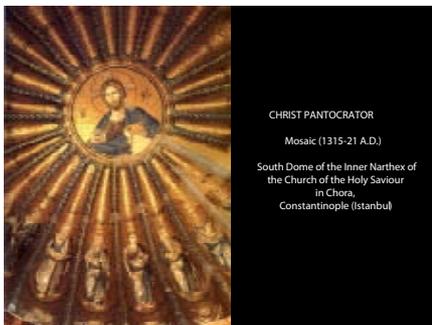
God came into our existence courteously, not to bully us but to persuade. The freedom he gave us from the beginning, the free will to love him or not to love him, he still respects. He wants to win our love, not to compel it. To do that he becomes a vulnerable human being, in every way like us. He enters into what is still enemy territory, to start a revolution, willing to suffer everything the enemy can do to him. And by suffering even death, he demonstrates by living again that the enemy is wrong, that death is not the end, for him or for us – the power and the goodness and the love of God cannot be defeated.

But the immediate consequences for Jesus show the cost of ‘doing it *his way*’. He suffered savage criticism from the most respectable and learned religious authorities of the time. He was slandered by those who had seen him heal the sick: he could cast out evil, it was said, only because he was in league with the Prince of Evil (Matthew 12:24; Mark 3:22). For a while, his own family thought he was ‘out of his mind’ (Mark 3:21), while the people of his home town rejected him (Mark 6:1-6; Luke 4:28-29). Many of his followers left him because they couldn’t accept the magnitude of his claims (John 6:66); and when he was finally betrayed by one of his inner circle, he saw his closest allies desert him and run away. The movement he had built to announce the Kingdom of God on earth simply fell apart. When he was hauled before the authorities on trumped up charges, insulted and abused, the system let him down: the supreme legal authority, the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate, was too cowardly to save him. He was whipped with a scourge that cut to the bone, pierced by a crown woven from a thorn bush, jeered at in a false worship that derided his claims to authority over men. They beat him when blindfolded and taunted him as a false prophet

by inviting him to say who had hit him. As the culmination of abandonment, torture and humiliation, he was executed by one of the most agonizing and protracted methods of killing, innocent of what he was charged with, but dying in the company of common criminals. Worst of all – and this is something so terrible that only two of the four Gospels dare to record it – he called out from the cross ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ (Mark 15:34, Matthew 27:46). It seems that Jesus while dying suffered the worst that human nature can endure – a sense of being cut off from God himself.

The modern world would write him off as an abject, pathetic *loser*. No advertising agent would take him on, no spin-doctor feel the record might be made to look better. Applying all those standards by which we normally judge, the career of Jesus was a flop. Yet within weeks the once-demoralized disciples are announcing in Jerusalem that ‘This Jesus God [has] raised up, and of that we are all witnesses’ (Acts 2:32). A few years later, we hear of the people of Thessalonica complaining that ‘these men *who have turned the world upside down* have come here also ... and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus’ (Acts 17:6-7 [*italics added*]). Thirty-five years after Jesus’ execution, Rome itself is persecuting his followers as a threat to pagan rule. Within three hundred years, the whole Roman Empire, then the supreme world power, will put itself (at least in theory) under the authority of Christ. Only the fact that our Crucified King rose from the dead can explain such a sudden and complete reversal of everything the evil powers had attempted.

We do indeed belong to ‘another king, Jesus’. We are, St Peter says, ‘aliens and exiles’ (1 Peter 2.11) in this world. We don’t fit in, because, as St Paul writes, ‘our citizenship is in *heaven*’: different place, different rules. Sensible people might keep their heads down and get through this life as quietly as possible.



#### *Visual Aid 4: Christ Pantocrator, Chora*

But what *we* look for is rather different. Paul says: ‘Our commonwealth is in heaven,’ and he goes on to say, ‘and from it we eagerly await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself’ (Philippians 3:20-21). Jesus taught us to pray to ‘Our Father in heaven’ that ‘Your Kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth, as it is in heaven.*’ We are asking for the Kingdom of this world and everyone in it to be taken over, transformed and glorified, into the Kingdom of God.

To pray for God’s will to be done on earth involves *us* doing it. We have no licence to sit on our hands: we are to be fellow-workers with Christ in bringing in the Kingdom. ‘You are the light of the world’ Jesus tells us (Matthew 5.14). ‘You are the salt of the earth’

(Matthew 5.13): without what we have to offer, nothing will taste good to anyone. We are to be the leaven in the lump, the yeast in the dough that gives the whole world a lift ( See Matthew 13.33). Hence, when the priest at the Liturgy presents the Body and Blood of Christ on our behalf as a sacrifice, he offers it ‘on behalf of all and for all’.

But there’s a catch. We are to be fellow-workers with Christ in bringing in the Kingdom of God – but by the same methods as brought Jesus to his death. Not by force, not by deceit, but respecting people’s freedom to choose between good and evil. We are to speak the truth, persuade by our lives as well as by our words, challenge evil, and (if necessary) pay the price. Our only weapons in winning people over from the Kingdom of this world are love, forgiveness, patience, humility, sacrifice. Those methods are going to *cost*.

Even before he was killed, Jesus warned us of what we were getting into: ‘Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple’. That is St Luke, chapter 14, verse 27 – but the warning is so important that it crops up five times in the Gospels (Matthew 10:38, 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23, 14:27). Jesus tells his twelve apostles: ‘I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves’ (Matthew 10:16). As Raimundo Panikkar (a Roman Catholic theologian) observes, the most usual fate of sheep is to get eaten. No wonder Jesus reminds us in the Gospel according to St John that ‘In the world you have tribulation’. Yet he goes on to explain why we should not be afraid: ‘but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33).

Why are we heading for trouble? Because our battles are with the world, the flesh and the devil: with the *world* because it is still partially under evil control; with the *flesh*, because our own and other people’s selfish inclinations are still not fully under God’s rule; with the *devil*, because the prince of darkness is overcome but not finally put down. Battle, trials, suffering are unavoidable. Millions of Christians, in the past and now, have witnessed that from the moment of our baptism, when (in our Orthodox service) we or those who speak for us ‘spit at Satan’ and ‘turn to Christ’, then we have declared war. The fight with evil will continue to the moment we die.

Not many of us are likely to be killed if we say we are Christians, as happened in the early centuries of the Church and still happens in various parts of the world up to the present. If a Muslim, for example, converts to Christianity, he or she is liable under a strict interpretation of *sharia* law to be put to death. But we will meet constant pressure to conform to the ways of this world rather than those of the Kingdom of Heaven. It isn’t easy to be ‘Members of the Church and Citizens of Heaven’: we are forced to commute between two countries that have very different rules and standards.

Worse, it is not just a case of the Church against the World. Much persecution comes to Christians from within the Church, for (as we said in an earlier session) the Church has two natures, one divine, the other often all-too human. ‘A man’s foes will be those of his own household,’ Jesus warns us (Matthew 10:36) – and that can be true even of the refuge that is our church. St Basil wrote in one of his letters that the Devil realized that getting Christians martyred was just causing the Church to grow. So he changed tack, placing ‘hidden snares’, ‘concealing his treachery by means of the name that Christ’s followers bear, in order that we may endure the same sufferings as our fathers, and yet not seem to suffer for Christ, since our persecutors have the name of Christians.’<sup>1</sup>

In the situations of our ordinary lives – in our families and friends, our jobs, our companies, our schools and universities, our clubs, our churches, our local or national governments and organizations – how do we tell if we are meeting a demand from the Kingdom of this World or one from the Kingdom of Heaven? I'll give you six signs of the Kingdom of this World and against them, six signs of the Kingdom of God.

A CHART OF TWO KINGDOMS	
THE KINGDOM OF THIS WORLD	THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN
1) Selfishness and interest, the motive of action, and no one responsible for the well-being of anyone else.	1) Love for God and for one's neighbour is the driving force, the well-being of everyone matters as much as our own.
2) Competition is the rule of life. If there is co-operation, it is only while two individuals or groups stop fighting one another, so as to do down a third.	2) Co-operation and mutual dependence are the name of the game.
3) Power is concentrated in the hands of a few, who dictate action to their underlings.	3) All are Kings, power is a gift of God to all, and consultation is how they decide action together.
4) Obedience is assured by sanctions, laws, and the threat of punishment.	4) Agreements need no enforcing, since all honour them in love.
5) There are marked differences in status and reward, depending on power and possessions.	5) Everyone is equal, they receive equal esteem whatever their role in society, and no one has power, rewards or possessions greater than another.
6) The Kingdom of Satan is known for hatred, fear, lies, frustration, depression and ugliness, leading to physical, spiritual and emotional death.	6) The Kingdom of Christ is marked by love, joy, peace, beauty, truth, abundant and continuing life.

## Visual Aid 5: The Two Kingdoms

- 1 The Kingdom of this World has selfishness, self-interest, as the motive of action, and no one is responsible for the well-being of anyone else. In contrast, in the Kingdom of God, love for God and for one's neighbour (one's fellow man) is the driving-force; the well-being of everyone matters as much as our own.
- 2 In the Kingdom of this World, competition is the rule of life. If there is co-operation, it is only while two individuals or groups stop fighting so as to do down a third. In the Kingdom of God, on the contrary, co-operation and mutual dependence are the name of the game.
- 3 In Satan's Kingdom, power is concentrated in the hands of a few, who dictate action to their underlings. In the Kingdom of Christ, all are kings, power is a gift of God to all, and in obedience to him they decide action together.
- 4 In the Kingdom of this World, obedience is assured by sanctions, laws, and the threat of punishment. In God's Kingdom, agreements need no enforcing, since all honour them in love.
- 5 In the Kingdom of this World, there are marked differences in status and reward, depending on power and possessions. In the Kingdom of God, everyone is equal, they receive equal esteem whatever their role in society, and no one has power, rewards or possessions greater than another.
- 6 The Kingdom of this world under the power that Jesus calls 'the ruler of this world' (John 12:31), is known for hatred, fear, lies, frustration, depression and ugliness, leading to physical, spiritual and emotional death. The Kingdom of Christ is marked by love, joy, peace, beauty, truth, abundant and continuing life.

If the Kingdom of God sounds to you like a dream, thank God that the Kingdom of Satan is only a nightmare: neither Kingdom has yet been fully realized in the experience of human beings. From the first, God has had his friends, who have undermined the authority and control of the Prince of Darkness. But it shouldn't be very difficult, from these tests, to decide to which Kingdom our bit of the country more truly belongs.

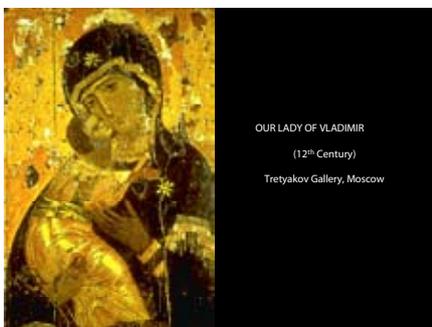
There's a story that nicely sums up the difference between the two Kingdoms and it concerns the eating arrangements. In both, you sit tightly packed on either side of a great

long table, with the food in the middle and only enormous long forks to pick it up with. In the nightmare Kingdom, everyone spears the food in the middle, then tries to get it back into their mouths, elbowing the people beside them and stabbing the fork into their own faces and those of their neighbours. In the Kingdom of God, everyone uses the fork to feed the person on the other side of the table – who in return feeds *you*.

It is sometimes a frightening thought that, every hour of every day, a word or an action of ours is advancing or damaging the Kingdom of Heaven. But Jesus tells us not to worry beforehand about what we are going to say or to do: when the crunch comes, we will not be let down, for the Holy Spirit will direct us (See Matthew 10.17-20).

What is more, we don't fight alone, for we are surrounded by what the writer to the Hebrews calls 'a great cloud of witnesses' (Hebrews 12.1) – the saints. These are people from every country and every century, people like us, with very various temperaments and abilities and situations, who in very different ways have been made Christ-like. One or other will have a personality, or a task, or a gift rather like ours, something we can relate to and learn from. One of the Desert Fathers, Abba John, said: 'The saints are like a group of trees, each bearing different fruit, but watered from the same source.'<sup>2</sup> Saint Basil, in another of his letters, writes that we should study the saints as if they were artist's models in a life-class. By observing them in detail, we learn how to draw our own lives.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, we believe that even the saints who have died take a vivid interest in what we do. They have not gone into some deep freeze: in the 'communion of saints' they are bound to Christ in love and therefore involved with us when we are in contact with Christ. Therefore it makes sense to petition them, asking them to guide and help us in our struggles, seeking their prayers to God on our behalf, just as we would ask for the prayers of our other friends.

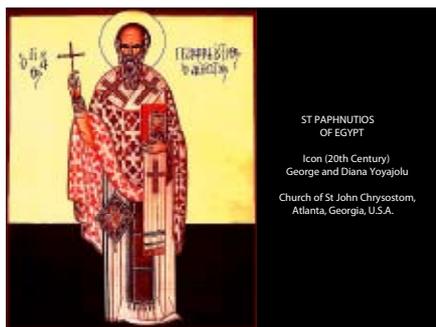
I've put together a tiny selection from the vast army that makes up the 'communion of saints'.



### *Visual Aid 6: Our Lady of Vladimir*

First and foremost is **Mary, the Theotokos**, the 'God-bearer', the virgin Mother of God. Her essential characteristic is obedience. She responded to an extraordinary call: to be the mother of Jesus, the saviour, 'the Son of the Most High', the promised Messiah, of whose 'kingdom there will be no end' (Luke 1:32-33). She consents: 'I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me according to your word' (Luke 1:38). She is called to do a normal thing: to bear and nurture a child – something that is a possibility for one half of the human race. But her willingness to bear the suffering and the cost makes possible a unique event: God can be born into the world as a human being. That is why we burst into praise of Mary at the Liturgy: '*more honourable than the cherubim, more glorious than the seraphim, in virginity you gave birth to God the Word*'. As with all the saints, doing God's will involved Mary in paying a price: she had to suffer what all parents dread, a child dying before its parent. Simeon's prophecies – that the child would be 'a sign that is spoken against' and that 'a

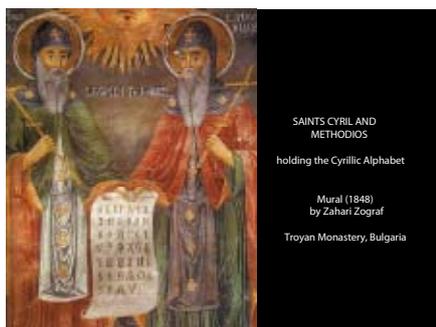
sword will pierce through your own soul also' (Luke 2:34-35) – these prophecies came true. But without Mary, nothing could have happened.



### *Visual Aid 7: Saint Paphnutios*

My second saint is Paphnutios, one of the monks of the Egyptian desert (the ‘Desert Fathers’), who fled the distractions of the world and renounced the comforts and entanglements of family life, so as to concentrate on God in prayer and in solitude. But like so many monastics and ascetics, he found that God treated his seclusion as a preparation and sent him back into the world – in his case, as a bishop in southern Egypt. Such a role made him prominent, and under the Emperor Maximinus (who was emperor from 308 to 313 AD) he had his right eye torn out and his left hamstring cut, because he would not renounce Christ. He was then sent to forced labour in the mines.

We are told that at the First General Council of the Church, summoned by the Emperor Constantine at Nicaea in AD 325, the Emperor so venerated the crippled bishop for his faithfulness to Christ that he took to kissing Paphnutios’ empty eye-socket in public. As important, Paphnutios, though himself a monk and renowned for his chastity, dissuaded the Council from imposing celibacy on all bishops, priests and deacons who had married before they were ordained. The faith imposes burdens enough, he argued. Why impose unnecessary burdens that some may find too hard to bear? And what, he asked, are you going to do about the poor abandoned wives? Here was a monk who had cut himself off from family life, someone of no great education, unable to read and write, but who was able through his devotion to Christ to understand the situation of others and speak unusual wisdom.



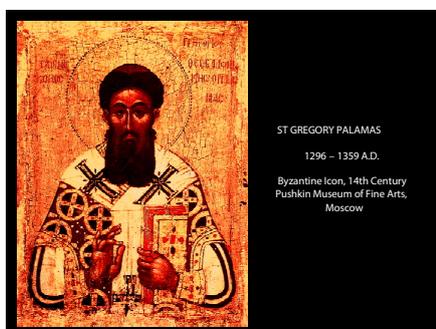
### *Visual Aid 8: Saints Cyril and Methodios*

Third, I have a pair of saints, Cyril and Methodios, who come from a time five hundred years after Paphnutios. Unlike him, they were well-educated and belonged to a family of senatorial rank in the Greek city of Thessalonica. Like Paphnutios they were inclined to abandon the secular world, preferring a life secluded with God, away from distractions and temptations. And like Paphnutios again, they found that God treated their monastic life as a preparation. Their renunciation of intimate family, as with our modern bishops, liberated their love for a much bigger family. In 862 AD they were sent as missionaries to the Slavs

in Moravia. Cyril's education and intelligence were put to work devising an alphabet in which to write the Slav language. Once it was done, the brothers began translating the scriptures and the church services into Slavonic, so that the Slavs could read about and worship God in their own tongue.

But as is so often the case, they found their work for Christ opposed by other Christians. These argued that God should only be worshipped in one of the three holy (and civilized) languages: Greek, Latin or Hebrew. The demand so irritated Methodios that he nicknamed their opponents 'Pilate's disciples' – 'Pilate's disciples' because Pontius Pilate had used three languages for the charge against Jesus that was pinned to his cross – 'the King of the Jews', in Greek, Latin and Hebrew.

More than the false notion of some languages being holier than others, it was politics that made endless trouble for Cyril and Methodios. They suffered persecution from fellow Christians, slander, imprisonment, and they died, worn out by politics. Probably neither brother knew that their sufferings had established the principle that all races and languages are equal and every nation has the right to glorify God in their own tongue.



### *Visual Aid 9: St Gregory Palamas*

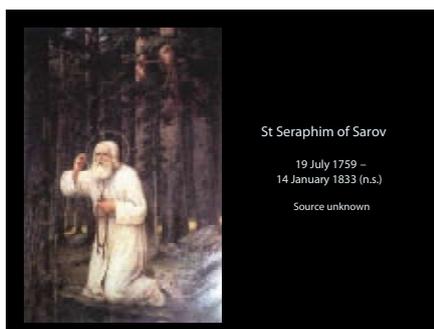
St Gregory Palamas, who lived from 1296 to 1359, was called to quite different work – not only to teach the faith but to make it clearer in an area where there was lack of understanding. A monk of Mount Athos, he practised the discipline of prayer known in Greek as 'hesychia', or inward stillness, silence. The hesychasts believed it was possible to experience God through such prayer, as a vision of light. What provoked St Gregory to controversy was hearing of another monk, Barlaam, who maintained an old Greek view that God was essentially unknowable to human beings. You could know about him, indirectly, but he could not be experienced. St Gregory accepted that God is far beyond anything we can think of. But he argued that through Christ's incarnation the whole human personality was redeemed, body and soul, and the sacraments united the whole of man to God. God can therefore be part of our experience, physical as well as mental. He could be known through his energies – that power by which he touches our minds, hearts and spirits and which is also seen in what he has created. So teaching, St Gregory saved the hesychastic tradition for the Eastern Church – a discipline of prayer that leads us to what many of the religions of the world have looked for: not head-knowledge about God but relationship with him, experience.

At this juncture, it is well to remember that the saints we commemorate are not all austere or learned monks but belong to all walks of life: among them we find laymen, women and children, soldiers, kings, queens, housewives, rich, poor, educated, illiterate, and many with what one might call a 'colourful past'. Take, for instance, Photini, the Samaritan Woman by

the well (commemorated on 26 February), the woman with whom Christ has that astonishing exchange about worship. A woman who had had four husbands and a live-in partner, she not only converted to Christ, but, according to tradition, she followed the Apostles, and suffered horrible tortures and was martyred under Emperor Nero. Another example of someone with a colourful past is Mary of Egypt, whom we sing to as Holy Mother Mary, during Lent. Her story is a paradigm of dramatic repentance and conversion, from a life of sexual promiscuity to a revered desert ascetic.

That married life is no hurdle to sainthood is exemplified early in the history of the Church: Aquila and Priscilla were a husband and wife team, described as tireless, co-workers with the Apostle Paul, whose lives ended in martyrdom. In our own times, the Russian St John of Kronstadt was a priest and a married man. He was a noteworthy preacher and writer whose life was steeped in the divine liturgy and he was gifted with wonder-working.

Whatever their age, sex, historical background, and status in life, there is one thing saints have in common: their lives are ‘irradiated’ by the presence of God. They demonstrate what it means to be fully alive, to be transfigured, to become a luminous, new creation of God. Saint Symeon the New Theologian says that the light of holiness in the soul makes the body transparent too.



### *Visual Aid 10: St Seraphim of Sarov*

St Seraphim of Sarov  
19 July 1759 –  
14 January 1833 (n.s.)  
Source unknown

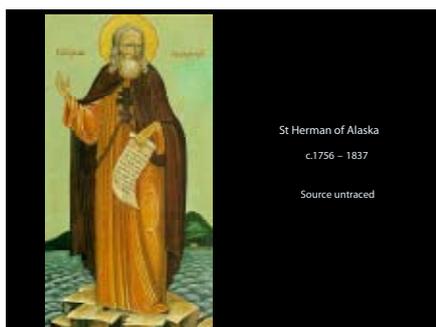
This experience of a radiant holiness that makes a saint brings me to St Seraphim of Sarov. The story of this eighteenth century Russian monk is well-known. He sought God in solitary prayer. When visitors disturbed his devotions in his forest cell, seeking his advice and blessing, he finally banned them all. It is said that if he met someone in the forest, he would fall face down and not get up till that person had passed by.

Misunderstanding critics sometimes see such behaviour as a search for personal salvation that makes such monks indifferent to the world or to other people. But St Seraphim’s progress illustrates the truth that to draw near to God in love is to come closer to what is dear to God – which is us, human beings, and the world that God has made. The saint once said, ‘Acquire the spirit of peace, and a thousand souls will be saved around you.’<sup>4</sup>

While he was in the forest, there were reports that, as with St Francis, the wild animals became gentle and ate from his hand. His ascetical practices were well-known: not just abstention from food and sleep, but a thousand days and nights spent on a great rock in the forest, praying ‘God be merciful to me, a sinner’. But towards the end of his life, he was instructed by a vision of the Virgin Mary to end his seclusion and devote himself to others. Thereafter, thousands came to him for guidance, and found a man who gave them an extraordinary sense of being loved and understood as they were. He left a treasury of

sayings – among them is this unusual advice: ‘Man must be lenient with his soul in her weaknesses and imperfections and suffer her failings as he suffers those of others, but he must not become idle, and must encourage himself to better things.’<sup>5</sup>

We are called to make an effort, but it is important to understand what sort of effort. It is the type of exertion commended by St. Paul writing to the Thessalonians: ‘We continually remember before God and Father your *work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Thessalonians 1:3, in the *NIV Study Bible*). A modern Japanese writer speaks of spiritual effort in terms of a sailor on a sailing boat waiting for a good breeze. It is important that the sailor keep alert and be awake to unfurl the sails when the wind blows, so that he can set sail. He can’t expect to move if he is asleep and his sails are not ready.



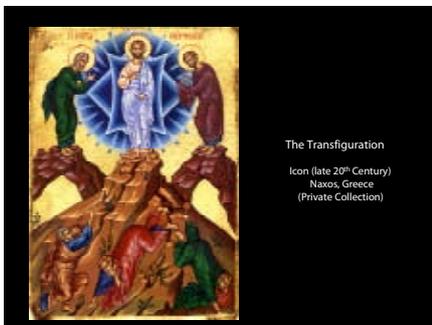
### *Visual Aid 11: St Herman of Alaska*

St Herman of Alaska was in many ways a parallel to St Seraphim: the same discipline of solitary prayer, similar ascetic practices, self-sufficient as regards his physical needs. He ate little, fasted much, and in heat, rain or snow wore only a deerskin smock (which he would not take off for several years at a time), a worn, patched cassock, and his monk’s headdress. He burdened himself with chains weighing about sixteen pounds, which are still preserved in his cell. But again, a devotion to God involved inevitably a devotion to those whom God cares about. When he was in his thirties, he parted from his much-loved community of the Varlaam Monastery on the islands of Lake Ladoga near the borders of Finland and volunteered as one of ten missionaries to the native inhabitants of North America. They had recently become Russian subjects. After an initial success the mission crumbled in the face of hostile Russian traders; only Herman remained with the Aleutian islanders, for over forty years. To teach the faith, build churches, conduct services, advise the faithful proved not to be all that was required: love involved ministering to the needs of the whole person. So he organized a school, nursed and comforted the sick when they were struck down by diseases brought by foreign ships, and became involved in political strife, championing the natives against exploitation by their Russian masters. In an appeal to Yanovsky before that official arrived to administer the colony, Herman described it as a ‘land which like a newly-born babe does not yet have the strength for knowledge or understanding ... I, the most humble servant of these people, and their nurse, stand before you in their behalf and write this petition in tears of blood ... Wipe away the tears of the defenceless orphans, cool the hearts melting away in the fire of sorrow. Help us to know what consolation means.’<sup>6</sup>

It is reported that when Father Herman was dying, his face shone and the room was filled with a pleasant scent. A Russian merchant, Nicolai Motovilov, recorded a similar phenomenon around St Seraphim while he was still alive. In the course of a conversation with the saint,

Motovilov asked to recognize when people were in the Spirit of God. Seraphim told him to look at him, and Motovilov reports seeing ‘a blinding light’, and as ‘in the centre of the sun, in the dazzling light of its midday rays, the face of a man talking to you’. At the same time, he felt ‘extraordinarily well’, ‘such calmness and peace in my soul that no words can express’, ‘an extraordinary sweetness’, ‘extraordinary joy’, a sensation of ‘warmth’ which nevertheless did not melt the snow around, and ‘a fragrance like nothing on earth’.<sup>7</sup>

The saint had been ‘transfigured’, as was reported of Jesus on Mount Tabor in the Gospels, and of numerous holy men and women since. His earthly body was transformed into a heavenly body by the in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit. We also, ordinary Christians, aim by our prayers and our actions to call the Spirit of Christ to inhabit us, and to turn us, and through us the world around us, into the Kingdom of Heaven. Finally, at the second coming of Christ, there will be an end of conflict, of the wearisome commuting between two different worlds. We shall experience what the Book of Revelation prophesies: ‘The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever’ (Revelation 11:15).



## Visual Aid 12: The Transfiguration

David Frost, Christine Mangala Frost

© THE WAY: Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies 2004, 2010

- 1 St Basil, Letter 139, ‘To the Alexandrians’, *Saint Basil: Letters*, Vol. I, *The Fathers of the Church*, (Catholic University Press of America: Washington, 1951), p. 284.
- 2 *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, translated by Sister Benedicta Ward SLG (A.R. Mowbrays: London, 1975), p. 81.
- 3 St Basil, ‘Letter to Gregory’, *Letters*, Vol. I, pp. 8-9.
- 4 ‘From the teachings of St Seraphim of Sarov’, *In Communion*, website of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship.
- 5 *St Seraphim of Sarov: Concerning the Aims of Christian Life*, translated by A.F. Dobbie-Bateman, (SPCK: London, 1936), p. 28.
- 6 *The Life of St Herman of Alaska*, [www.pravoslavie.ru/english/st.herman.alaska.htm](http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/st.herman.alaska.htm)
- 7 See Timothy Ware (Metropolitan Kallistos), *The Orthodox Church* (Penguin: London, revised edition, 1993), pp. 119-120.