

August 28,
2011

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



FEAST OF THE HONORABLE SASH OF THE THEOTOKOS

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Brothers and Sisters, we have two important feasts this week. Tomorrow, the Feast of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist, and, on Wednesday, the Feast of Honorable Sash or Belt of the Theotokos. (It is our plan to have Divine Liturgy on both of those days, in honor of those feasts.)

I have often, throughout my 32 years as a priest, preached about the Beheading of St. John, and it is of course a very familiar feast for Orthodox Christians but, important as it is, on this morning I will speak instead about the Feast of the Sash or Belt of the Mother of God, which is a less known feast, especially perhaps among converts, though it is very dear to monastics and, because our Skete here is dedicated to the Mother of God, we have a special interest in all of her feasts throughout the Liturgical year.

The following information is taken from several on-line sites, including a guide to the Holy Monastery of Vatopedi on Mount Athos. This tells about a great treasure of Orthodoxy that has survived to our days: the Holy *Zoni* of the Theotokos (translated commonly as "Belt", "Sash", "Cincture" or "Girdle").

The Belt of the Blessed Virgin Mary, today divided into three pieces, is one of only two—possibly three--



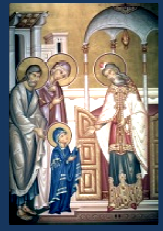
remaining relics of her earthly life. According to tradition, the girdle was made out of camel hair by the Virgin Mary herself, and after her Dormition, at her Assumption, she gave it to the Apostle Thomas. During the early centuries of the Christian era it was kept at Jerusalem by the pious early Christians; in the 4th century we hear of it in Cappadocia. In the same century, the Emperor Theodosius the Great brought it back to Jerusalem, and from there his son Arcadius took it to Constantinople. During the reign of Leo VI 'the Wise' (886-912), it was taken to the Palace, where it cured his sick wife, the Empress Zoe.

You see, the empress had a vision that she would be healed of her infirmity if the Belt of the Mother of God were placed upon her. The emperor then asked the Patriarch to open the coffer. The Patriarch removed the seal and opened the coffer in which the relic was kept, and the Belt of the Mother of God appeared completely whole and undamaged by time. The Patriarch placed the Belt on the sick empress, and immediately she was freed from her infirmity. They sang hymns of thanksgiving to the Most Holy Theotokos, and then they placed the venerable Belt back into the coffer and resealed it. She, as an act of thanksgiving to the Mother of God, embroidered the whole girdle with gold thread, giving it the appearance which it bears today.

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In the 12th century, in the reign of Manuel I Comnenus, the Feast of the Holy Girdle on August 31 was officially introduced; previously it had shared the Feast of the Vesture or Tunic of the Virgin on 1 July. The Girdle itself remained in Constantinople until the 12th century, when it was stolen and taken to Bulgaria, and from there it later came into the hands of the Serbs. It was presented to Vatopaidi monastery on Mount Athos by the Serbian Prince Lazarus I (1372-1389), together with a large piece of the True Cross. Since then it has been kept in the sanctuary of the *katholikon* or cathedral of the monastery.



The miracles performed by the Holy Sash throughout the ages are innumerable. I will just mention here the following miracle:

In 1864, the Holy Belt was taken to Constantinople, since there was a cholera epidemic among the inhabitants. As soon as the ship bearing it approached the harbor, the cholera ceased and none of those already suffering from it died. This strange miracle excited the curiosity of the Sultan, who had the Girdle brought to the Palace so that he could reverence it and then, thank God, he returned it to the safekeeping of the Church.

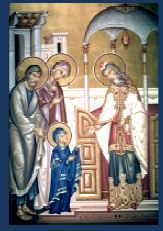
But down to our own times, the Holy Belt has continued to work many miracles, particularly in the case of infertile women, who, when they request it, are given a piece of cord from the case holding the Girdle and, if they have faith, become pregnant. But the miracles are not limited to just this.

The Holy Sash maintains, unaltered and without diminishment, the grace of the Most Holy Theotokos, received in plenitude from her Divine Son, because it became connected with her person and her life and because saints are grace carriers not only during their life, but also after their death. The same phenomenon is mentioned in the Holy Scriptures when objects that the Prophet Elias and the holy Apostles wore actually performed miracles, because they had the grace of the saints. For this reason the Church venerates this relic, as it does to the Holy Wood of the Cross of the Lord.

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The two beautiful and special hymns for this Feast are as follows:

Tropar -Dismissal Hymn- of the Mother of God.

O EVER-VIRGIN Theotokos, shelter of mankind, thou hast bestowed upon thy people a mighty vestment, even thine immaculate body's raiment and sash, which by thy seedless childbirth have remained incorrupt; for in thee nature and time are made new. Wherefore, we implore thee to grant peace to the world, and great mercy to our souls

And:

THY precious sash, O Theotokos, which encompassed thy God-receiving womb, is an invincible force for thy flock, and an unfailing treasury of every good, O only Ever-virgin Mother.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.