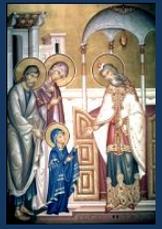


October 28, 2012

# Sunday Sermon

*Fr Ambrose Young*  
*Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple Skete*



Protection of the Mother of God Feast Day

Hebrews 9:1-7

Luke 8:41-56

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

In the Greek Orthodox Church the Feast of the Protection of the Mother of God is on October 28 and it happens that, this year, this falls on a Sunday—today. (In the Russian Church this Feast, which is called “Prokrov”, or Protection, is observed on October 1.)

This Feast, and the icon which illustrates it, is one of the most beloved among all Orthodox Christians. It commemorates a specific miracle, the historic appearance of the Theotokos at a church in a suburb of Constantinople in the 800’s A.D. during a time when barbarian pagan Russians had approached by sea to attack and pillage the city. This event is recorded in the life of St. Andrew of Constantinople.

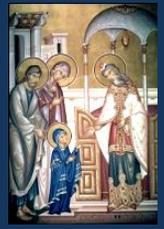
St. Andrew was a slave of a sword bearer to the Byzantine Emperor, Leo VI, the Great, and his parish was the great basilica of Hagia Sophia, Holy Wisdom, which still stands in Constantinople (now Istanbul) today as a museum, having been used for some centuries by the Muslims as a mosque. With the blessing of his spiritual father, St. Andrew took upon himself the heavy cross of holy foolishness in order to hide his extraordinary spiritual gifts of clairvoyance, prophecy, and healing. As has often been the case in history, St. Andrew was considered insane and so he was taken to the church of St. Anastasia, which was a refuge or hospice for the mentally ill. But the officials there soon realized that he was not insane at all and that his madness was fakery. So then he took up residence on the streets of the capital city, hungry and half naked, enduring mockery and insults and sometimes beatings, praying for those who mistreated him and begging for alms which he immediately gave away to the poor, not considering himself to be a beggar, though he was the poorest of the poor. Only with his spiritual father and with his one disciple did he remove his mask of foolishness.

One evening St. Andrew and his disciple, St. Epiphanius, and a number of other people witnessed the miraculous descent into the church of the all-holy Panagia, St. John the Baptist, and numerous other saints and angels during a vigil service being held in the Church of Blachernae. This, by the way, was a church where several important relics of the Virgin Mary had been enshrined for many centuries: her robe and veil and part of her belt or cincture.

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The Virgin and her heavenly court, having descended into the center of the church nave near the front, knelt in prayer, weeping copiously. Seeing this, St. Andrew turned to his disciple and said, “Do you see the Mother of God praying for us?” And he answered,

”I do see, Father, and am in awe.” They then watched as the Theotokos walked into the altar through the Royal Doors, ascended up a ways so that she could be seen above the icon screen, and then removed her veil—which they said shone more brightly than the rays of the sun—lifting and spreading it over all the people present as a sign of protection and praying the following all the while: “O Heavenly King, accept all those who pray to Thee and call on my name for help. Do not let them not go away from my icon unheard.”

Needless to say, all those present could not in any way forget such a supernatural visitation from the heavenly world and from that day this event began to be celebrated each year, especially when the enemy fleet which had approached the city was defeated the next day, and many churches, especially in Russia after her conversion to Orthodoxy, began to be named for this Feast. Among them is one of the most famous churches in Russia, which we generally know as St. Basil’s Cathedral in Moscow, at one end of Red Square—probably the most photographed church in the whole country. It is popularly called “St. Basil” because St. Basil, a holy Fool for Christ, was buried there. But actually the cathedral is dedicated to the Protection, or “Pokrov.”

In the Greek tradition this Feast is also associated with the deliverance of Greece from the armies of Mussolini in 1940, when many devout persons saw the Mother of God appear in the skies above Athens, protecting it with her veil. Among Greeks this is also known as “Ochi Day” or “No Day” because the Greek people said “No” to the ultimatum that had been given by Mussolini on this day, October 28.

The icon of the Feast, which we have before us in our temple this morning, is quite interesting because it combines two different events that occurred about four hundred years apart, both events happening in the same church in Constantinople. The saints, Andrew and Epiphanius, as well as bishops and priests and laity, are all depicted, as in the first apparition, but below the Theotokos you will see a young man, a deacon, who is usually shown holding a scroll, and this has to do with the second apparition. This scroll contains the text for the hymnography used in the Church for the Nativity of Christ and this young man is St. Romanus the Melodist, sometime called the hymnographer. He is often shown with the Emperor Leo the Wise and his Empress and the patriarch of that time. St. Romanus had been instructed to compose the hymns for the Feast of the Nativity that year but could think of nothing. Then the Panagia appeared to him and handed him a scroll, saying, “Eat this.” The next day, when it was time for the service, he opened



his mouth and out of it came those incredible hymns that are still used in the divine services for the Nativity of Christ to this day.

In the fourteenth century a wandering Russian pilgrim in Constantinople went to the Church of the Blachernae and saw the icon depicting this event. It was he who brought a copy of the icon back with him to Russia. (Some scholars say that the icon may also be somehow related to a 13<sup>th</sup> century image first known in Italy, which depicted the Virgin Mary spreading her cloak to cover and protect her kneeling supplicants, but we don't know.)

Of course we Orthodox Christians do not worship the Virgin, but we honor her above all other human beings and above even the angels, for which reason she is mentioned over and over in the services of the Church, and we sing the following to her: "More honorable than the cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the seraphim, thee true Mother of God do we magnify." Why does she receive such honor from us? Because, more than anyone else, she became completely "Christ-like"—that is, sinless. She was the perfect disciple of her own Son. And, as St. Maximos the Confessor wrote, just as she gave birth to Christ, so must each one of us give birth to him in our hearts and then, imitating Mary, become "Christ-like", as she herself did.

This icon of the Feast and its icon, speak to all of us today of the loving protection the Mother of the Lord still has for those who turn to her, and that is why the Feast is so beloved. Of course, this is only one of the many instances when the Theotokos has appeared since her death. Other saints, as well as angels, have also appeared, but the Virgin Mary is the most common one to come from the other world, specifically in order to comfort and console, to warn and chastise us, always directing us again and again and over and over to her divine Son, who we, sadly, mostly ignore.

Therefore on this day, let us meekly, like little children, seek to crawl under the protecting veil of this great Lady and accept her invitation to now, every day and always, love her Son, obey Him, and seek to do his will in all things, becoming "Christ-like."

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