

Friday of Bright Week: THE LIFE GIVING SPRING

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

In Orthodox Christianity the Friday of Bright Week is dedicated to the Theotokos under the form of the "Life-Giving Spring," and this is also the feast day of a historic church and icon of that same near Constantinople.

The traditional account of this feast was recorded by Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, the last of the Greek ecclesiastical historians, who wrote around 1320. It all began in the 5th century with a miracle involving a soldier named Leo Marcellus, who would later become the Byzantine Emperor Leo I. While he was on his way to Constantinople he came across a blind man who asked him for water. Leo looked around, but couldn't find any water, when suddenly a woman's voice told the future Emperor that there was water nearby. Still, he could see nothing. Then he heard the voice again saying: "Emperor Leo, go into the deepest part of the woods, and you will find water there. Take some of the cloudy water in your hands and give it to the blind man to drink. Then take the clay and put it on his eyes. Then you shall know who I am."

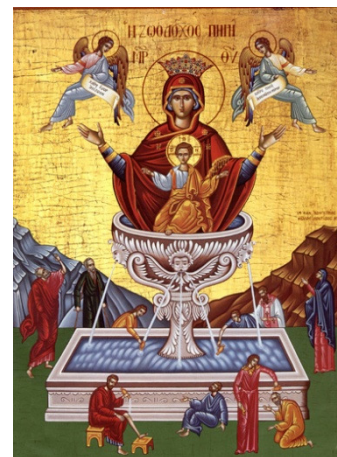


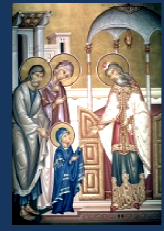
The same voice explained that she wished to be venerated on this spot and that he, Leo, would eventually become emperor of Byzantium. He obeyed her and the blind man recovered his sight. After he became emperor, Leo built a fine church on this land and the water from the spring continued to work miracles, for which reason it was called "The Life-Giving Spring."

The icon of this feast portrays the Virgin Theotokos embracing the Christ Child. She is surrounded by two angels, and sitting on an elevated basin, which represents the "living water" which is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

In some versions of this icon the Emperor Leo stands with his guard on one side and on the other is the Patriarch with his bishops. Under the basin a paralytic and a madman are being healed by the spring's water. All versions of the icon, however, have a wonderful and comforting appearance.

The fine church built on this site was razed to the ground after the Moslem conquest of Byzantium and the stones were used to build a mosque. Nothing remained of the original basilica-shrine except for a small and humble chapel with only one window. Even so, there was still access to the holy





spring, down 25 steps, and miracles continued. But in 1821 even that little remnant of the once great shrine was destroyed when the Greeks rose up against their oppressors, the Ottoman Moslems. The spring was filled in and disappeared completely.

But then, in 1833, during the more lenient days of reign of Sultan Mahmud, the Orthodox asked for permission to rebuild the chapel and this was granted. They excavated and found the old foundations and spring and reconstructed a new church upon. The Sultan allowed them to build a much larger and more elaborate temple, which was consecrated by Patriarch Constantine II together with 12 other bishops and many priests and deacons, as well as a



The Life Giving spring today in the crypt of the Church of Blachernae outside Istanbul

huge crowd of believers. And thus it remained until, sadly, September 6, 1955, when it was again destroyed by the Moslems. It has since been once again restored, but unfortunately not to its former splendor

The fountain is there, from which water is flowing, and above it the beautiful and mystical icon of the Life-giving Spring. Let me now say a few words about holy icons.

St. Paul teaches us that "Christ is the icon [or 'image'] of the invisible God." In other words, Christ is the image of the Father because He manifests or reveals the Father to us. And this is the underlying idea of an icon: it reveals or manifests something hidden and

supernatural. It is not a portrait or a "picture."

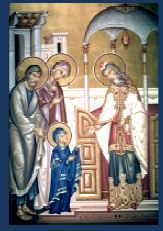
It is in this precise and exact sense that we must understand the theology of the image in Orthodoxy. An icon is not an aid to devotion, contrary to what many western Christians and uninformed Orthodox in the west believe. In our tradition an icon does not exist in order to help the imagination or bring to mind certain holy people or ideas. Yes, it is definitely helpful for prayers, but Metropolitan Seraphim explained the role of the icon in this way:

"If you stand before the Redeemer's icon or that of the Mother of God, stand as if you were before the Lord Jesus Christ Himself or before the Blessed Virgin Mary. Keep your intelligence without any representation, for there is a great difference between standing before the Lord in His very presence and representing Him to the imagination. In the latter case, attention is not given to prayer directly, but is held by traditional impressions which only skim the surface of our consciousness."

April 29, 2011

Friday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



Do you understand the difference? It's a critical one, for the icon is not a "picture", a painted representation meant to teach something or stimulate the imagination, such as we find in western sacred art. Rather, it is *grace*, and it is *life*, and its purpose is to elevate and exalt our minds and souls and also give us consolation and hope. St. John of Damascus called an icon a channel of divine grace, giving the icon sacramental character. This is the way in which we should stand before the beautiful icon of the Theotokos, the Life-giving Spring.

With this in mind, we can with joy and delight turn to this icon for today's feast and sing the hymn in its honor:

As a life-giving fount, thou didst conceive the Dew that is transcendent in essence, O Virgin Maid, and thou hast welled forth for our sakes the nectar of joy eternal, which doth pour forth from thy fount with the water that springeth up unto everlasting life in unending and mighty streams; wherein, taking delight, we all cry out:

Rejoice, O thou Spring of life for all men.

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