



# *The Next Five Years*

A VISION FOR ST GREGORY PALAMAS CHURCH

# *Archpastoral Letter*

Dear Father Leonid and Beloved Faithful:

*Christ is in our midst! – He is and ever shall be!*

It affords me special joy to extend my encouragement and support to you and all your parishioners on the forthcoming “The Next Five Years – A Vision For Saint Gregory Palamas Church,” which you have shared with me.

This bold initiative in Christ’s Name: focusing on youth ministry, outreach to the community, and a long-term building program – highlighting the beautiful worship of our Church, strengthening the spiritual life of each parishioner, and committed efforts at parish growth through evangelization – clearly marks the beginning of a new chapter in the history of your parish.

This program is testimony that the material progress of your parish is keeping pace with its spiritual growth. While moderate in size, our Glen Gardner faithful have accomplished superior goals in recent years, and this vision simply continues to set the standards – forever forward and heavenward. In making these giant strides over the next several years, your parish will at the same time take its rightful place as one of the fine, growing churches in the New Jersey Deanery and in our Diocese.

As a church with its own resident pastor, the parish now takes on new stature and new responsibilities. I urge you to adopt and accomplish the lofty goals of gaining three new families, renovating the downstairs hall for a classroom, a library and increased kitchen space, and offering Moliebens and Bible studies each week to members of the parish and to the neighboring community. And I pray that future years will give ample testimony to even greater growth in spirit, in love and in faith.

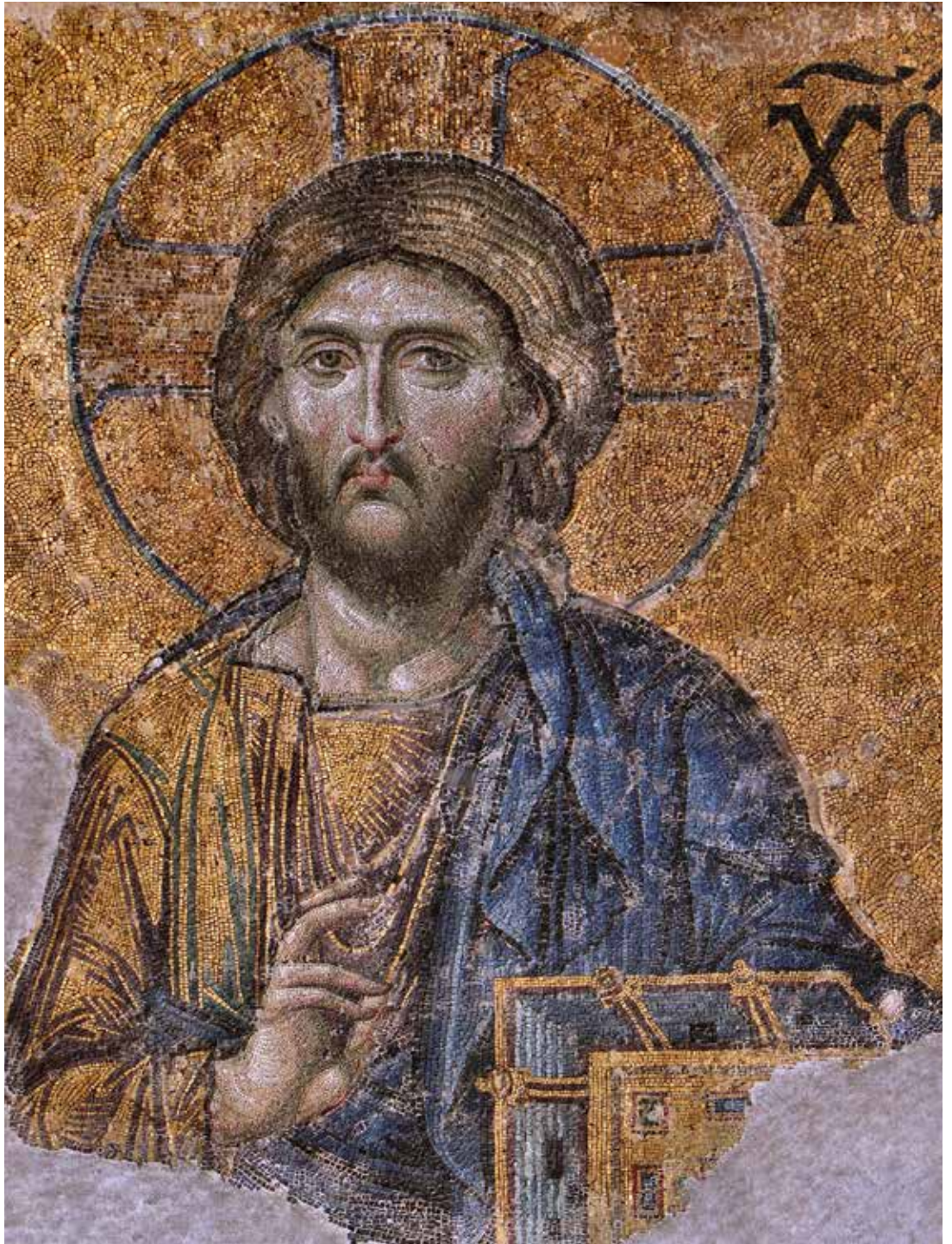
In extending my best wishes and imparting my archpastoral blessing to all our faithful in Glen Gardner, I ask God to reward all of you for the dedicated labors, the sacrifice and the enthusiasm which you have manifested in His Name and to His Glory.

Devotedly yours in His service,

**+MICHAEL**

Bishop of New York and the  
Diocese of New York and New Jersey





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# *The Vision of Christ In Glory*

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"Where there is no vision, the people perish." (*Proverbs 29.18*) The history recorded in the Old Testament is sufficient to prove this proverb, for when Israel possessed an inspired love for God, She grew from strength to strength. When that love waned, however, the people became complacent and turned to false gods: "What injustice have your fathers found in Me, that they have gone far from Me and followed idols?" (*Jeremiah 2.5*) In order to bring them to repentance, the Lord allowed them to reap the bitter fruits of their infidelity.

**T**O UNDERSTAND THIS PROVERB – “WHERE there is no vision, the people perish” – we must first see that the vision of which it speaks is unique. It is not the vision of 21st-century corporate culture, nor is it a strategy to attract people to our organization so that it can grow, so that it can increase its activity, so that it can grow more, and so on. It is not an end in itself, and we are not selling anything to anyone. We are not one organization among many, competing for new customers and their loyalty, compromising our faith in order to fill pews. God forbid!

The “vision” that guides us must be THE VISION OF CHRIST IN GLORY – He must be our desire and our goal. St Paul tells Timothy that the “crown of righteousness” is given “to all those who loved His appearing.” (2 Timothy 4.8) As Christians, we must be characterized by a desire to see Christ, for He alone can bring peace to a broken and fallen world.

Only if we struggle to see and love Christ can we show our precious Lord and the Church He has established to a world that is often hostile or indifferent. We cannot pretend to see the deep heart of our fellow man, nor do we presume to have the ability to change it. But what will a visitor encounter when he comes to St Gregory’s? Will he experience the fullness of faith? Will he see “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church?” Will he meet people characterized by Christian love?

How can we make sure that he does? What kind of parish do we want? How will it be a witness to the Lord?

### **FIDELITY TO FAITH, TRADITION, AND TRADITIONS**

Every time we go to the grocery store and see the words “organic,” “natural,” or “artisanal,” any time we see products advertised as “original,” “hand-crafted,” “antique,” or “vintage” – we should realize that people are deeply disappointed with the promises of the modern world. Mass production, global communications, and a life of comfort, free from want or need, has not given people happiness. They are looking for something real, something authentic.

The Church has seen an influx of converts from

Protestant and Evangelical denominations – and even converts from an atheistic background – because She does not cater to our wants, but to our needs. The Church is the hospital that offers us healing, even in the depths of our heart. Unlike most things in our world, what She has is not for sale.

Converts find their way to the Church and cradle Orthodox stay in the Church because she has preserved the Faith of the Apostles: unadulterated, uncompromised, undiluted. Many converts left denominations that changed, minimized, ignored or even mocked traditional Christian teachings – even the reality of the Resurrection, on which, as St Paul says, our entire faith rests. (1 Corinthians 15.12–19)

And yet, for all of the pandering, those denominations are still losing members. They are doubling down on this approach, even as they find out: when the church is whatever “I” want it to be, the god worshipped there is no bigger than I am.

In addition to being given the Faith of the Apostles, we have another precious gift in Holy Tradition. This is expressed in the writings of the saints, iconography, hymnography, the services, and more. It is the “incarnate” presence of Christ in the Church. When we make the effort to celebrate the services as beautifully as we are able; when we sacrifice our time to attend Vespers and the other daily services offered in the church; when we read not only the Bible, but the lives of the saints and their writings – when we do these things, we show our love for Holy Tradition: “Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.” (2 Timothy 2.15)

Yet there is more. When we celebrate the *slava* with a Serbian family, or bless the *vasilopita* (“Billy Bread”) on New Year’s Day in honor of St Basil, when we offer *kolyvva* at a memorial, or hold a feast of *bliny* before the beginning of the Great Fast, or honor the Nativity with a *yolka* and *kolyadki*, we show our love for the cultural traditions that help to make our faith real in everyday life.

What would our visitor’s reaction be when he found such a place? He would see a community that was invigorated by faith – and not a generic faith, but a specific one, rooted in 2000 years of experience



and tradition. He would see worship that was holy and God-centered, not emotional and man-centered. He would see a group of people willing to sacrifice for their faith, and unwilling to compromise it in order to gain new members. He would encounter something very rare, indeed.

#### **A FAMILY CENTERED IN CHRIST**

Many of us remember a time when our home parish was the center of life for our ethnic community. Every baptism, wedding, and funeral was a communal event. Children regularly attended classes to learn the mother tongue and cherished cultural traditions. Volunteers worked tirelessly to pinch pirohi or bake nut rolls to support the parish.

Though St Gregory's was not founded as an ethnic parish, the "golden years" of our parish history were characterized by this communal spirit. Perhaps the best indicator of this spirit is found in the photographs of the St Nicholas Day celebrations, where children participated in the Christmas play and shared their musical talent. The parish was filled with young families who made the parish the center of their life.

The qualities that made St Gregory's a wonderful community are still here. Visitors are always greeted with hospitality. Parishioners volunteer to care for almost every single aspect of parish life. We always connect parish events with fellowship and food. This is why former parishioners who have moved out of the area are still fond of St Gregory's!

Now, more than ever, people are looking for this kind of community. While they may be able to find this in clubs or organizations, the community we can offer them at St Gregory's is centered in Christ: it is characterized by Christian love, forgiveness, the "bearing of one another's burdens," and the courageous struggle to find salvation together. (*Galatians 6.2*)

While many large parishes can boast of incredible participation in their events, nevertheless, St Gregory's is in a unique position to be a communal center. Our size means that newcomers will develop lasting personal relationships here. We cannot change a society in which people are becoming more and more isolated than ever before. But we can offer a respite, a sanctuary, a home.

## **AN AUTHENTIC WITNESS**

The “true faith” we have been given is truly a gift to us; we have done nothing to deserve it. Instead, we have been given charge over it, to preserve and hand it down to the next generation of Orthodox Christians.

Practically speaking, this means that we do not have to invent new ways to reach people. For most of our neighbors, Orthodox Christianity is already new. We simply need to be who we are – the Church – in our community.

One small example of this was our visit to the VFW Hall for their Veteran’s Day breakfast. We did not have to invent a new prayer for the occasion, nor did we have to act or speak differently in order to make a connection. The cards offered by our parishioners and Sunday School students showed that we care about the sacrifices they made for our country. But the most touching moment of our visit was when we sang “Many Years” for them and “Memory Eternal” for their fallen comrades. Perhaps they had never heard anyone pray to God on their behalf. Perhaps they never had any reason to hope that their loved ones could be remembered by the Creator of all.

This will be our inspiration in the coming years as we try to turn towards the community. We hope to serve Akathists or Moliebens at local hospitals and halfway homes. We plan to give a concert of the hymns of Holy Week and Pascha. And each year, as we focus on a different town in our area, we will pick one or two community events to participate in.

No matter how we try to reach outside the parish community, we can be encouraged knowing that we have an authentic, Christ-centered tradition to turn to in order to be faithful witnesses to His Holy Church.

## **SEEK FIRST THE KINGDOM**

For our work to be blessed by God, we must constantly return to this basic premise of the Christian life: THE VISION OF ST GREGORY’S MUST BE THE VISION OF CHRIST IN GLORY. He must be the beginning, middle and end, the entire content of our life: “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.” (*Matthew*

6.33) Then St Gregory’s will be a vision of Christ to everyone in our community – even to those who never set foot in its doors.

The community of St Gregory’s is young enough to remember the energy and enthusiasm that characterized the mission based in Flemington. Truly, it is remarkable that the parish was able to grow and bring in new members in an area that is not known for ethnic Orthodox communities. The memories of the a-frame building overflowing at the Paschal Vigil are a testament to the fact that growth and excitement are possible.

The characteristics that made St Gregory’s a successful mission live on today. We have a reputation for hospitality and a family atmosphere. Everyone involved in our small parish contributes in some way to its care. We have genuine relationships with our brothers and sisters in Christ; no one who comes to St Gregory’s remains a “face in the crowd” for long.

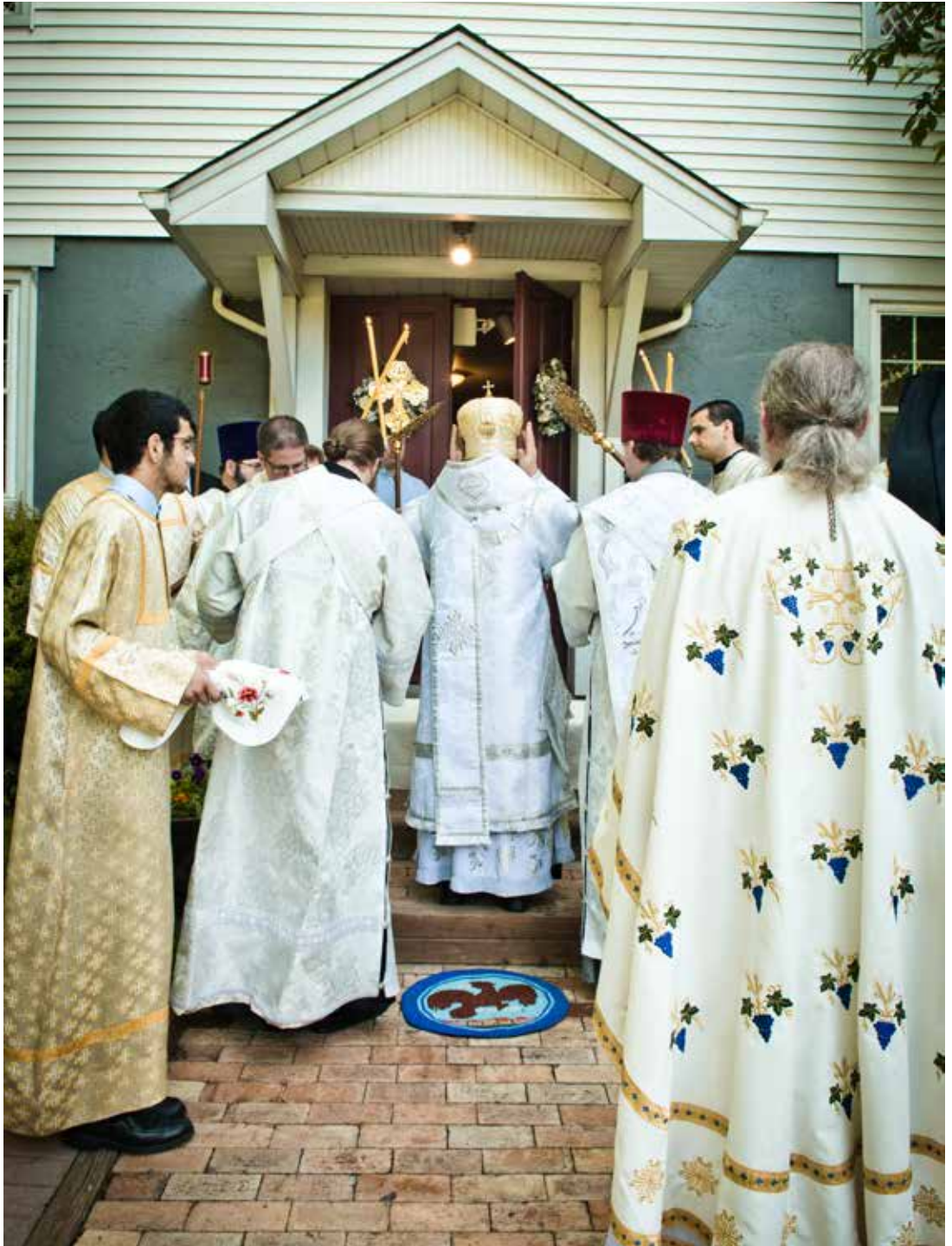
Many people long for this kind of community but don’t know where to find it. Many young families, too often separated from their extended family, are looking for a spiritual home. So many would love to have what we have – to find the faith that we have been given – but don’t even know it exists.

Our outreach efforts and activities over the next five years will focus on young families, first in Glen Gardner, then Flemington, then other major centers in Hunterdon County. We are planning on a modest net growth of three families per year. Along the way, we hope to improve our facilities, expand our church school program, and develop regular ministries to the sick and the needy.

If we can accomplish these goals, St Gregory’s will be in a position to acquire new land – either for a rectory or a parking lot and playground.

As in all things, we must ask that the Lord’s will be done. We will face challenges in the coming years, and we may be reprimanded – perhaps harshly – if we begin to seek our own will: “Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.” (*Psalms 127.1*) May the Lord remove every obstacle; may He purify our offering of any selfishness, delusion or idolatry. May the Lord upbuild our household of faith! ☪





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# Year 1

JANUARY 2015–DECEMBER 2015

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## **GOAL**

Net growth of three families

## **FOCUS**

Glen Gardner

## **WORSHIP**

We will continue to focus on serving Vespers as completely and beautifully as possible.

## **TEMPLE AND FACILITIES**

Our major project for this year is a renovation of our downstairs hall. The renovations will create storage space and beautify our fellowship area. We also hope to add a changing table and rocking chair to welcome families with young children.

## **OUTREACH**

### **New website**

Father Joel Wilson is hard at work on a logo and a new parish website that will be accessible on multiple platforms. It will allow us to keep in touch, post photos, and reach out to the community.

### **Parish Family Night each Wednesday**

Invitations will be sent out to everyone in the town of Glen Gardner to join us for a Molieben followed by an informal meal and a Bible Study. The invitations will encourage our neighbors to list the names of those who need prayer. Our hope is to show that they can come to our parish when they have a spiritual need.

### **Prayer for those struggling with addiction**

We hope to serve the Akathist “Glory to God For All Things” at the recovery house in Glen Gardner.

### **Signage**

The Parish Council will assign a committee to investigate better signage for the parish, preferably on Route 31.

## **PARTICIPATION IN TOWN EVENTS**

### **Fall Festival**

We will participate in the Glen Gardner Fall Festival by providing a children’s activity.

### **Garage Sale and Food Festival**

The town-wide garage sale will be back on this year, and our parish will draw on our love of cooking and hospitality to put on a food festival for the shoppers.

## **CHURCH SCHOOL**

### **Charity project**

During Lent, students will do chores around their house and neighborhood to raise money for a family in need.

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# Year 2

JANUARY 2016–DECEMBER 2016

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## **GOAL**

Net growth of three families

## **FOCUS**

Flemington

## **WORSHIP**

We hope to build on the success of our rehearsals for Vepsers and add regular choir rehearsals for Liturgy. In addition, we will compile one- and two-part music that can be sung at weekday services.

## **TEMPLE AND FACILITIES**

We hope to acquire a new black-and-white copier to help our Church School, Choir, and Parish Council. We will also install an icon stand to hold the icons of St Nicholas of Myra and St Nikolai of Zhica which were recently donated to the parish.

## **OUTREACH**

We will participate in one to two events in Flemington while maintaining our presence at events in Glen Gardner.

## **Concert**

We will host a choir concert to showcase the hymns of Holy Week and Pascha. While it is difficult for many parishioners to come to choir practice, we can choose music appropriate for 2, 3 or 4 voices. The concert can be combined with an icon exhibit and an educational program on the liturgical arts.

## **Prayer for those struggling with illness**

We hope to serve the Akathist to the Mother of God, “Healer of Cancer” at Hunterdon Medical Center.

## **CHURCH SCHOOL**

### **More classes**

Our priority for year two is our Church School program. We will recruit another teacher in order to provide an additional grade-level of instruction.

### **Camp scholarship**

St Andrew’s Camp has been a place for diocesan youth to pray, learn, and play together for over thirty years. We hope to provide a scholarship for one Church School student to attend St Andrew’s Camp for one week.



# *On Relations With One's Neighbor*

BY SAINT AMBROSE OF OPTINA

1. The Lord nowhere wishes to compel man against his will, but everywhere makes use of our good will; it is through their own will that people are either good or evil. Therefore it is in vain that we accuse those living with us and surrounding us of hindering and impeding, as it were, our salvation or our spiritual perfection.
2. We receive profit from people only when we do not condemn them.
3. You complain about people's unfairness in relation to you. But if you are striving to reign with Christ the Lord, then have a look at Him, how He acted towards the enemies surrounding Him who were demanding His death. It appears that He never complained about how His enemies behaved unfairly towards Him but, in all the horrible afflictions brought upon Him by His enemies, He saw only the will of His Heavenly Father.
4. You are upset that everyone is trying to humiliate you. If they are trying to humiliate you, that means they want to humble you; and you yourself are asking God for humility. Then why, after all this, do you let people upset?
5. Instruction and edification for one's own life should be taken more from the example of Christ the Savior than from the example of people, in whom it is not possible to find full perfection, due to human weakness. Therefore we should not be upset, under a seemingly good pretext, when certain people do not give us the edifying example that we would have liked.
6. The Lord has the power to protect and defend those forcing themselves to live according to His holy commandments, if only they are not being careless in striving for mutual peace. Then the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace, and joy in life is found in mutual harmony, and every good success is achieved through peace according to God.
7. Seeing someone's unfair action, rather than become irritated out of resentment, you must use wisdom to attain your purpose – if not in everything, then at least in that which is most important, or in whatever is possible.
8. Denunciations should take the middle way: one should neither wholly trust them nor entirely reject them, but await how the matter turns out.
9. We should not think that we can make somebody happy or successful. This belongs only to God and a person's own will, if he abides prudently before his Creator.
10. Just as one pot bumps up against another pot, how much more does it happen that people living together bump up against one another. This comes about especially when people have different viewpoints about things: one thinks about one thing one way, while another thinks another way; one is convinced in his own ideas, which seem solid and fundamental to him, while another believes in his own understandings.

11. People look at the visible, but the Lord sees the inner arrangement of man and the actions of his conscience, both in relation to others and in relation to himself. When we cannot bring benefit to others for some reason, then let us at least work for our own spiritual benefit.

12. Although it is difficult and very insulting to suffer unfair opposition from people who should be defending the truth – not little people, but great and elevated ones – we will take comfort in the unprejudiced judgment of the One Judge of the living and the dead.

13. He who gives way receives three ounces and a half, but he who insists on his rights receives only one ounce, and sometimes not even one, when he gets upset and upsets another.

14. In the spiritual life it is an altogether good thing to explain oneself punctually and prudently, and to ask forgiveness punctually, so as to bring peace to one's soul and give occasion for others to do the same.

15. Each of us ought to work more on himself, on his own soul, and for his own spiritual benefit, because, according to the words of the Apostle, each of us will give account of ourselves to God. We are confused by the fact that we are more inclined to chastise others, striving not only to convince but also to dissuade, and to make a demonstration by many different arguments.

16. When we are reproached and blamed for that of which we are entirely innocent, then we must turn our thoughts to those occasions when we were guilty before God or before people, and for the attainment of forgiveness of our sins we must forgive the unfairness and offences inflicted on us by our neighbors.

17. I will say this briefly. Contrive to acquire life and avoid death, living with those with whom one is living, and trying to have that which the Apostle commands: i.e., goodness, mercy, compassion, and love, which is the fulfillment of the law. How? Listen to the same Apostle: Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2). ☞





# God Will Not Abandon You!

THE LAST WORDS OF ARCHIMANDRITE ILIA (KARTOZIA)

**A** RCHIMANDRITE ILIA (KARTOZIA) SAVED the lives of a Greek lady and her little daughter on the Norman Atlantic ferry at the cost of his own life. The Italian La Repubblica newspaper relates the details of the incident.

The eyewitnesses recounted how the Georgian monk had saved their lives at the cost of his own. Archimandrite Ilia, Abbot of the Monastery of Saint David the Builder in Mtskheta, headed the rescuing team from among the passengers who evacuated people from the burning ferry.

One of the catastrophe survivors named Irakli has said that Father Ilia (Kartozia) consoled him in his moment of despair and gave him the strength to rescue his 9-year-old son, wife and other relatives. “It was he who saved me and gave me strength,” said Irakli to the Italian daily.

When the fire broke out Irakli seized his child and took to his heels but was overcome by fear. “Father Ilia told me to calm down, to think about God and believe that our lives would be saved.”

“He told me that God would not abandon us and showed us which direction we should go.” When it was his turn to take a lifeboat, Father Ilia saw a woman with a little girl, who were probably Greek, and gave them his place, himself remaining on the vessel which was ablaze. But when he left the ferry the rope

broke off and the priest fell into the raging sea.

According to the eyewitnesses’ evidence, the archimandrite could not reach the life jacket that had been thrown to him and thus drowned. Father Ilia was on the Norman Atlantic ferry as he was making a pilgrimage to Bari to venerate the relics of Saint Nicholas. He was carrying icons with him.

According to the Rai 2 Italian TV channel, later the priest’s body together with his rucksack with icons were found on the shore at Lecce, Italy.

The heroic deed of the priest has already provoked a broad public response in Georgia and he is compared by many with the great Georgian theologian, historian and ecclesiastical figure, Archimandrite Grigol Peradze (1899–1942), who helped Jews during World War II and thus was captured and taken to Germany. He was martyred in the Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz, when he entered a gas-chamber in place of another man. The New Martyr Grigol was canonized by the Georgian Orthodox Church in 1995.

Eyewitnesses report that Archimandrite Ilia remained side by side with the captain and was praying till the last minute of his life.

The remains of Father Ilia will be returned to Georgia this Saturday. ☞