

1] Dating from around the middle of the third century, a fragment of Egyptian papyrus, discovered in 1917, contains an early prayer to the Theotokos. Written in Koine Greek, it is commonly known as 'Beneath Thy Protection' (Greek: Ὑπὸ τὴν σὴν εὐσπλαγχνίαν; Latin: Sub tuum praesidium). This early Christian hymn, discovered in a little piece of archaeology, is currently the oldest preserved prayer to the Theotokos known to scholars. It runs:

'Beneath your compassion,
We take refuge, O Theotokos:
do not despise our petitions in time of trouble:
but rescue us from dangers,
only pure, only blessed one.'

2] This prayer is still used in our liturgy: it occurs towards the end of weekday Vespers during Great Lent. It is an interesting feature of Lenten services, that in both the Byzantine and Latin traditions, older forms of worship are often preserved. Moreover, coming from around 250AD, we can be sure that such veneration of Our Lady certainly could not have begun any later than that date, and there is no reason to suppose that this little papyrus does not represent an even earlier tradition. Indeed, we have only to read St Luke's account of the Annunciation to realise when her veneration began, whom all generation called Blessed.

3] Today, the first Sunday after Pentecost, we commemorate the saints and martyrs, and in the following weeks, the saints especially commemorated in the local churches around the Orthodox world. It is entirely fitting, during the remembrance of what amounts to the nativity of the Church, the springtime of God's own people, that we call to mind the transforming power, the divine authorisation, the spiritual riches, poured out upon the apostles and saints in those early days. Not power, authority and wealth such as the world craves to use, but God the Holy Spirit Himself, the Treasury of Blessings and Giver of Life who sanctifies us, to fit us for the Kingdom of Heaven.

4] Our communion with the saints, like our communion with Christ, is not an optional extra; no mere appendage to our religious life.

Without the saints there is no Church, and this has been understood from the beginning. Because, far from being some strange accretion, drawn in from the pagan world, the veneration of the saints in the Church is rooted in God's first chosen people, the old Israel. In the Old Testament Book of Daniel, the Prayer of Azariah, calls on the righteous departed to praise the Lord: 'O ye spirits and souls of the righteous, bless ye the Lord: praise and exalt him above all for ever.' And the apostle Jude, in his epistle, quotes the apocryphal Jewish Book of Enoch, the parts of which were written, it is thought, somewhere between 300 and 100 BC. It contains a passage where the angels are called upon by men to bring their prayers before God: 'And now to you, the holy ones of heaven, the souls of men make their suit, saying, "Bring our cause before the Most High.'" [1 Enoch 9:1-3]

5] There is also the strange and fanciful Acts of Paul and Thecla, written in the first century AD. Tertullian, writing around the year 190AD, says it was written by a presbyter who was then deposed by the apostle John himself. Nevertheless, the text contains an episode where St Paul, just before his martyrdom, is shown praying to the Old Testament saints: 'Then Paul stood with his face to the east and lifted up his hands unto heaven and prayed a long time, and in his prayer he conversed with the fathers in the Hebrew tongue, and then stretched forth his neck without speaking.' Of course, this is an apocryphal text, but yet again, it is interesting that, around the end of the era of the apostles, addressing ones prayers and talking to the saints is seen as a normal practice.

6] The old enemy, of course, has always sought to break the bonds between us; not only to separate us from God but from one another as well. From the devil's perspective what better heresy might there be than spiritual individualism, the idea that we are alone before our god, whoever that might be, and that we must discover our own spiritual path, free from the constraints of ordered religion. No wonder that the Iconoclasts of the eighth century Byzantine Empire destroyed the holy images, removing the faithful's point of physical contact with the saints through these windows into heaven. No wonder then, that at the Reformation in this land, Henry the Eighth's Chancellor, Thomas Cromwell, sent out his commissioners all over the country to

remove from the churches any trace of the honouring of the saints; burning holy relics, whitewashing the wall paintings and pulling down statues, inadvertently opening the way for a secular Britain and the godless nation that it has become. But God and the saints have not abandoned us. For here in this county of Dorset, we can thank God that the relics of St Wite evaded the inspections of the commissioners, and her holy bones are with us to this day, as we know.

7] Plenty of us here today know what it is to live within the fellowship and communion of the saints in Christ. I, for one, cannot reflect back on all that has happened here: the acquiring of this building, the growth of the congregation, the expansion of our mission and the restoration of this building that proceeds as at this time, without being aware, without being thankful, for the intercessions of St Dunstan. Looking back, I cannot but bear witness and give testimony to the fact that all is grace, even down to acquiring of the original copy of his own icon, here in the church!

8] This commemoration today was originally in honour of the martyrs who shed their own blood rather than deny the Christ who had saved them. We stand on the eve of the Fast of St Peter and St Paul before their feast on 29th June. During the persecutions of the mid-third century AD, the relics of the Peter and Paul were hidden in the Catacomb of St Sebastian in Rome. Down there, in the depths of the eternal city, have been found some six hundred pieces of graffiti, all requesting the intercessions of the two apostles.

9] In today's gospel, Peter, who says he has left all to follow Christ, asks Our Lord, 'What then shall we have?' He is told, 'Truly, I say to you, in the New World, when the Son of Man shall sit on His glorious throne, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.' And we too, who struggle to detach ourselves from this world; to give up all for the sake of Christ, we too are promised a hundredfold in eternal life. For we live under that throne of the apostolic faith; we are judged as the tribes of the New Israel, the authority to bind and loose, given by Christ to His Church. That is, an authority not only to loose and absolve from sins, but also place under a ban for a time, to allow for real repentance. It

is also to bind into or loose from, the communion of the saints; to teach the Faith and to expel the heretical.

10] Let us then enter into this fast. It is not arduous, just some foods left aside for Christ's Name's sake. As pastors and people of the Orthodox-Catholic Church of Jesus Christ, we have bound this obligation upon ourselves, and we shall loose it again when the feast comes round. And in as much as we pray for one another, how much more may we seek the intercession of the two apostles, like those in the Catacomb of St Sebastian. And as we heard St Paul wrote to the Hebrews, 'let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfection of our faith.'