

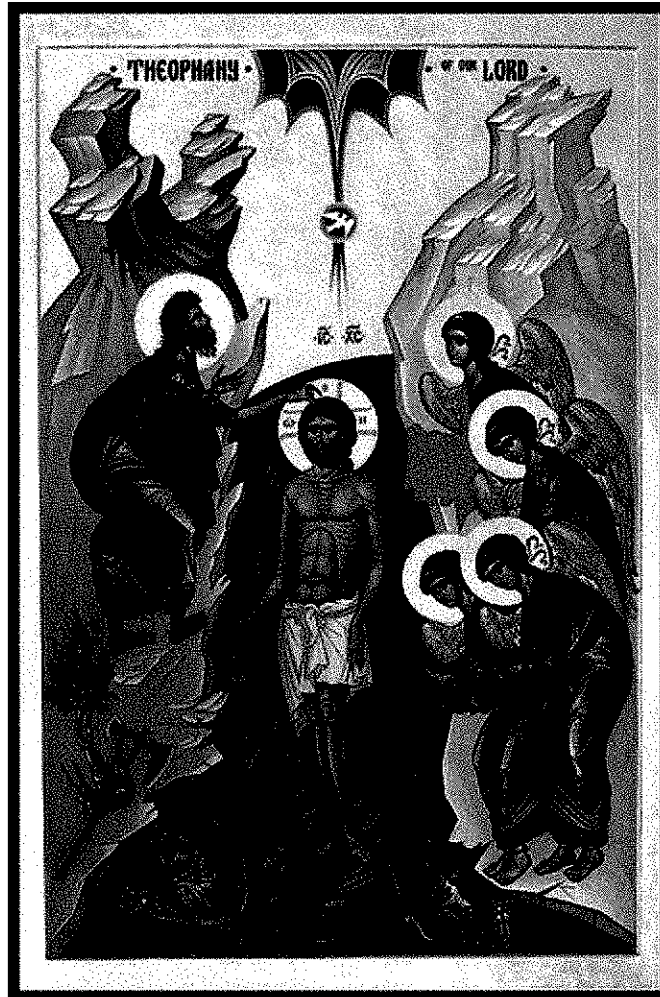
CHRIST, THE MODEL OF HUMILITY AND OBEDIENCE

On this Sunday that follows Holy Theophany, we hear the following Gospel reading according to St. Matthew (4:12-17):

Now when Jesus had heard that John was cast into prison, he departed into Galilee; And leaving Nazareth, he came and dwelt in Capernaum, which is upon the sea coast, in the borders of Zabulon and Nephthalim: That it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Esaias the prophet, saying, The land of Zabulon, and the land of Nephthalim, by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles; The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up. From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

First proclaimed by St. John the Forerunner, and then by Christ, this is the essential message of man's salvation: "Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." As repentance is the doorway, the means to eternal salvation, all of Christ's instructions, either by word or by example, are designed to lead man towards holy repentance. An important and essential tenet of such instruction is the acquisition of humility and obedience. "Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart" (Matthew 11:29).

There are innumerable examples in Holy Scripture in which humility is infused into important events of our Saviour's earthly life, beginning with the humble circumstances of His birth in a manger, to the extreme humility of His Passion. As we behold the icon of Holy Theophany, (which is profoundly instructive), we focus centrally on the figure of Christ:



What is striking is that the angels are bowing in reverence and adoration, yet our Saviour lowers Himself below the hand of His created man, St. John the Baptist. The sinless and spotless God-man Christ, accepts baptism in order to sanctify the waters, (necessary for man's salvific and soul-cleansing Baptism), and demonstrates profound humility and filial obedience to His Father, for all to behold.

In Holy Scripture, we are presented with a myriad of miracles, all of which Christ attributes to His Father, giving no credit to Himself. Our Saviour regularly prays to His Father, and offers a clear and instructive example of obedience. Our Saviour the God-man, Who shares the throne of the Triune God, having no need for cleansing, and Who shares in the majesty and power of the Trinity, finds it needful to present to enslaved mankind the example of self-sacrificing humility and obedience. Why?

To better understand the answer to this question, let us take note of the words of Bishop Nikolai Velimirovic in his homily on the Theophany:

...And of all prayers, God most readily hearkens to the prayer of the humble penitent, who prays for the forgiveness of his sin and his freeing from it. In this way, man becomes a *new creature*, beginning a new life – the life of a son in place of that of a slave. This is why all the prophets, from time immemorial, have sought repentance of men. This is why Saint John the Forerunner not only preaches repentance but performs the baptism of repentance, for men to set a visible seal on their repentance. The greater a man's repentance, the more fully he is freed from the world and brought to zeal for God; God giving His ready ear and obedience in answer to men's prayers.

And so man can never be as humble as God, nor as obedient as He. Through all His creation, in heaven and earth, God teaches men humility and obedience. God offers this message to mankind out of His great love for men and out of His burning desire that all men be saved, and that not one of them perish.

But God gave all this teaching on humility and obedience to men indirectly, either through created nature or through His prophets, chosen men and angels. Only in the Person of the Lord Jesus did God give this teaching directly, through Himself clothed in flesh. In every moment of His earthly life, from His birth in the cave to His death on the Cross, the Lord Jesus was living teaching to men on humility and obedience. He gave this living teaching also through His baptism in the Jordan.

Our Lord provides the necessary and salvific sequence of efforts required by man to be saved: "Let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23). Self-denial is an exercise that is meant to build humility, and pound away at the enslaving vice of pride. Our Saviour, in His first action before embarking on His earthly ministry, immerses Himself in prayer and fasting, providing, once again, by example, the means for man to be cleansed and brought to repentance, and be re-united with God. St. John of Kronstadt writes:

To what end do fasting and penitence lead? For what purpose is this trouble taken? They lead to the cleansing of the soul from sins, to peace of heart, to union with God; they fill us with devotion and sonship, and give us boldness before God. There are, indeed, very important reasons for fasting and for confession from the whole heart. There shall be an inestimable reward for conscientious labour.

Through the boundless love of our Saviour and His desire for the salvation and freeing from slavery of mankind, Christ humbly "empties himself" (kenosis) and presents the teachings and example necessary for our cleansing and salvation, demonstrating soul-saving humility and obedience (to God's will). In the only prayer that our Saviour directly teaches mankind, we hear: "Thy will be done." Is this not a call to

obedience? If we put our will ahead of God's will, we are succumbing to soul-paralyzing pride, (the opposite of humility). Adam fell and was distanced from God because of self-justifying pride and disobedience. The way back home (Luke 15:18) is through a "reverse course", through penitential cleansing, humility and obedience.

Through the intercessions of St. John the Baptist, our dear Theotokos, and all the saints, may we follow our Saviour by following the example He provides, Who lights a path through the darkness and deception of the world, bringing us from slavery to eternal sonship in Christ!

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