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ST. BARBARA MONASTERY

NEWSLETTER

AUGUST 2020

A bumblebee asleep on a lavender stem



Dear Friends of St. Barbara Monastery,

Starting with this issue, we are changing somewhat the form and content of our Newsletter. Because for five months already we have had to cancel our Friends' Gatherings along with the talks we had hoped to hear at them, we are asking each of our intended speakers to write a short piece giving us at least a taste of the content they would have presented. Back in March, at the first Friends' Gathering to be cancelled, the speaker was slated to be Father Jacques Jude Lepine, the priest who has been serving our monastery now for just short of a year. Thus, he is the first whom we have asked to do this. Father Jude, as he likes to be called, holds a Master of Theology degree from St. Vladimir's Seminary and a PhD from Stanford University. Before coming to California, he was a missionary priest in the OCA's Archdiocese of Canada.

The Icon of the Dormition of the Theotokos

V. Rev. Jacques Jude Lepine, Priest of St. Barbara Monastery

At the forefront of the icon, is the Theotokos, laid down on her deathbed. She is an old person, her body frail and almost flat, her expression is tired, possibly sorrowful, definitely peaceful. Around her body are the apostles, bishops, including St James of Jerusalem, and women of the first Church of Jerusalem, where the Dormition took place.

Behind her deathbed, we see the Lord Jesus holding in his arms an infant wrapped in swaddles. Reinforcing His centrality, the proportions of his body are larger than those of all the other people on some icons. This is called the epic perspective, where the size of a character is relative to his/her importance. The infant wrapped in swaddles is the soul of the Theotokos. This representation transforms the event of her being raised from death by Her Son into a new birth. The Lord is holding His mother's infant-like soul in the same position in which she holds Him on icons of the type called *Eleousia* (in Greek, *Tenderness*) and *Hodigitria* (in Greek: *the one who shows the way*). The similarity of their body positions between these icons also indicates the reciprocity of tender love between them.

At the head and foot of the Theotokos' bed, we see Saint Peter and Saint Paul. Like the



other people present, their expression is sorrowful.

Taking a few steps back, the most striking feature of this icon is the almond-shaped mandorla surrounding Christ (“mandorla” comes from the Italian for “almond”). This mandorla has a unique design: it is populated with transparent angels on a blue or dark background which traditionally means, while veiling it, the divine world. The angels are all turned toward the soul of the Theotokos, their hands covered with a cloth. This was a Byzantine expression of respect. Moreover, this crowd of angels is crowned at its top by a seraph. Above the seraph, at the top center, there is the traditional black or dark blue half-circle representing the invisible God.

We see a horizontal axis traced by the deathbed of the Theotokos, and a vertical axis which is intensely ascendant due to the shape of the mandorla. Together these two axes form an invisible cross. The whole composition of the icon is symmetrically distributed along this vertical axis: the two crowds of apostles, bishops and holy women, including the position of the bodies of the closest ones to the Mother of God, sorrowfully inclined over her body. The two parts of the mandorla with the angels are also symmetrical. Likewise, the two buildings in the background mirror each other on each side of the icon. The wings of the seraph are also symmetrical in a looser fashion, both vertically and horizontally. At the top of some icons, the dark half circle features two gates wide open, signifying the introduction of the Theotokos into the fullness of heavenly life by Her Son.

The overall result of this symmetrical composition is an effect of calm and stability.

The presence of the angels and the respect they are showing to the Mother of God, along with the seraph, evoke the hymn sung during many of our liturgical services:

It is truly meet to bless you, O Theotokos, ever-blessed and most pure, and the Mother of our God. More honorable than the Cherubim, and more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim, without corruption you gave birth to God the Word. True Theotokos we magnify you!

In fact, the falling asleep of the Theotokos, inseparable from her ascent into Heaven, is the very moment when she is being acknowledged and magnified as *more honorable than the cherubim...*

There are at least three variations of this icon. On some of them, we see the apostles both on earth, mourning the Theotokos, and on clouds, being held by angels. This is a reference to the tradition according to which angels brought the apostles from all parts of the earth to surround her at her falling asleep. As it often happens in iconography, different moments of time are being contemplated together.

Another variation is a circle, a second mandorla held by two angels, in the upper part of the icon. In this second mandorla, the Theotokos is sitting on a throne and slightly bending over an unidentifiable object, as if she was concentrating on it. As the seat is a throne, it indicates her final glorious state. Maybe her preoccupied position suggests that, while on her throne, she is busy interceding for all of us.

THE LAVENDER HARVEST IS ENDING!

The lavender harvest for this year is almost complete. The honeybees and bumblebees had their share and, gratefully, they let us have ours. In 2018, the year after the Thomas Fire, so few bushes had survived that the honeybees placed guard bees to buzz us off. The sisters would sneak up to a bush, harvest a handful of lavender and then make a bee-line for cover! The bees did not want to share that year!



This year, with plenty of lavender to go around, we have been at peace with the bees. August 4th and 11th saw us out in the fields before sunrise, harvesting before the bee populations became active. These two harvests were for distillation, from which we get the lavender oil and the hydrosol, which is the water part of the process. We use both, for different purposes. A neighboring lavender farm does the actual distillation for us. This year, we had a good yield—almost two and a half liters of oil and about 5 gallons of hydrosol.

One of the things that makes having lavender growing at the monastery a joy is the bees. Honeybees are gentle, but the black bumblebees that we have had in abundance this year in our fields seem even more calm. Interestingly, as pictured on our cover, the bumble bees sleep right on the bushes, so we had to be careful not to harvest them as well. When we would remove them from a bush to get them out of harm's way, they either remained asleep or did the bee equivalent of a yawn and stretch and went back to sleep! Even while harvesting when they are awake, they tend to just move over to another flower rather than fly away. Their refreshing peacefulness has a calming effect on the harvesters.

TRANSFIGURATION: LITURGY, BLESSING OF FRUIT

Five months after the Sunday of Orthodoxy, when we had our last Divine Liturgy before entering “lockdown,” Fr. Jude Lepine returned to the monastery to celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration and bless our baskets of fruit. As unusual as it was to keep the doors and windows open on a hot day and to see the priest masked at certain points, we celebrated with gusto. The fruits blessed were not only store-bought but also from our neighbor. They included mulberries, almonds, apples, and plums. Next year, we hope to offer some of our own fruit.

DORMITION: BLESSING OF HERBS

A week and a half later, due to another spike in coronavirus cases, we could not have Divine Liturgy for the Feast of the Dormition. Instead, we had the festal Matins as a reader's service and blessed bundles of homegrown herbs: mint, basil, oregano, lemon balm, and, of course, lavender.