

GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH OF THE ASSUMPTION

Studies in the Faith

Theosis & Salvation



GREEK ORTHODOX
CHURCH
OF THE
ASSUMPTION

1804 Thirteenth Avenue
Seattle, Washington
98122-2515

Phone: (206) 323-8557
Fax: (206) 323-1205

Email: [officemanager@
assumptionseattle.org](mailto:officemanager@assumptionseattle.org)



Presented by

Rev. Fr. Dean W. Kouldukis

THEOSIS and SALVATION

“Theosis! What does this deep and profound word mean? It means the elevation of the human being to the divine sphere, to the atmosphere of God. It means the union of the human with the divine. That, in its essence, is the meaning of Theosis. Thus, human nature ought to be moving toward spiritualization, and in the process, its heavy materialism is to be broken down and dissolved...That is how the union of the human with the divine becomes a reality.”

(Partakers of Divine Nature by Archimandrite Christoforos Stavropoulos—p. 18)

READING ASSIGNMENTS

The Orthodox Church: by Timothy Ware, Pages 99-122.

Genesis 1:1–4:26

Romans 5:1–6:23

SUGGESTED READING

Partakers of Divine Nature by Archimandrite Christoforos Stavropoulos

AN ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE OF SALVATION

What is my purpose in life?

Have you ever asked yourself the question, “What is it that gives my life meaning?”

- A. People look for life’s meaning in a job, etc....so that there may be fulfillment in their life.
- B. If they don’t find meaning in life, they are lost.
- C. Often, an emptiness occurs, even leading at times to depression if we don’t have a purpose in life based on society’s standards (i.e., to be a success!!!)
- D. Maybe, at times, people feel this way not because they can’t find the perfect job, but because God is not in their lives.
- E. We, as Christians, have a purpose. Our purpose is to grow in the image and likeness of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This spiritual growth, this spiritual purpose, is called Theosis! The end result of Theosis is Holiness.

Justification, Sanctification and Glorification.

1. Justification:

- A. The key to our salvation lies in the creation narrative of mankind. This creation narrative comes from Genesis 1:26 which states, *“Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the Earth.”* We as human beings are made in the image and likeness of our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ. The “whole person” is made in God’s image and likeness and is therefore Holy. The “whole person” consists of both the soul and body.
- B. Prior to Adam and Eve having sinned, the image of God in man was a perfect reflection of God’s image. As a result, man had the ability to strive to the likeness of God. As St. Irenaeus states, “Adam was a child, not yet having his understanding perfected. It was necessary that

he should grow and so come to his perfection. " However, Adam sinned! As a consequence of Adam's sin the image of God in man was tarnished, not destroyed but tarnished. Therefore man's ability to attain God's likeness was destroyed.

- i. Image was tarnished
 - ii. As a result sin has the power over our souls and bodies, able to destroy our souls and bodies because we no longer were able to attain God's likeness and as a result,
 - iii. Death came into the world.
- C. That does not mean however, that the divine plan for the Theosis of mankind had been destroyed.
- D. Christ came into the world to save us! God came as man to save us from sin and death. Did He do this by abolishing sin altogether? No! Sin still exists in the world. Rather, God came to save us by making it possible for God's image in man to, once again, be perfected. How did our Lord accomplish this?
1. Restored the fallen image of God in man - Incarnation
 2. Died on the cross for the Remission of our Sins - Crucifixion
 3. Conquered the sting of death - Resurrection.
- E. We are Justified by faith through Christ's actions, through God's actions, since through these actions God bridges the chasm that had separated man and God until that time. We appropriate our Lord's Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection through the sacrament of baptism. In essence, it is through the sacrament of Baptism that God's tarnished image in man is once again perfected. The result, we are once again able to attain our Lord's likeness.

II. Sanctification:

What is Sanctification? Sanctification is a process of spiritual growth. Through spiritual growth, the likeness of God within us is developed. This spiritual growth is made possible because our Lord's image is once again perfected within us through the sacrament of Baptism.

This process of spiritual growth is called Theosis. Theosis leads us to holiness. Holiness is derived from a Greek word, ἅγιος, which literally means "different than the Earth".

Sanctification occurs when our focus is on God. When we continually turn to God in (1) prayer (both communal and private) and fasting, (2) through the sacramental life of the church and in (3) repentance, our bodies and souls are transformed. When we humble ourselves to Him in obedience and love, this transformation which results is the Theosis described above leading us to Holiness.

Remember, our Lord did not abolish evil in the world. We are still subject to the forces of evil even though we have been baptized. Our Lord gave us free will so that our response to His free gift of salvation would be a response reflective of our love for Him. Through our own free will we move daily toward Christ, through repentance and Christ's forgiveness of sins. A forgiveness which is mediated through the sacramental life of the church. (Baptism, Eucharist, Unction and Confession).

- A. Hence, Salvation for the Orthodox Christian is Synergetic.
 1. St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians 2:12 " Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."

2. WE CANNOT SAVE OURSELVES!
 3. Because God asks us to co-operate with Him does not mean that we must perform a certain work requirement or uphold our own end before He can save us.
 4. It is not as if God does half of the saving work and we do the other half. God alone saves us!
- B. If we are in communication with Christ it only make sense that we must respond to him in application of our faith. Therefore God saves us 100% but to experience His redemption we must be willing to respond to Him 100%. We respond to our Lord's free gift of Salvation by (1) prayer and fasting, (2) by participating in the Sacramental life of the Church and by living an life of (3) repentance.
- The good works issue: We are not saved by good works. Good works are our grateful response to God's love. Good works will come naturally and is an expression of the fact that we have salvation in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
 - For example, in James 2:14-17, St. James states that faith if it is does not show itself in good works is dead. Salvation, if it is not responded to will also die, or is dead.
- C. Our choice must be continually for God and if we continue to choose him, God is able to infuse our will with His presence and hence His likeness is fulfilled in us! The result is spiritual growth or Theosis leading to Holiness.
- D. Salvation then for us as Orthodox Christians is not only a question of where we will spend eternity (Heaven of Hell) but how we as Christians live in Christ, or express the love of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in the here and now!

V. Justification and Sanctification leads to Glorification in Christ.

In review, there are three stages in the process of salvation:

1. Past - Justification: We have been saved from sin and death through our baptism. "We have been saved."
2. Present - Sanctification: Through the daily work and growth in Jesus Christ and in the life of the spirit. "We are being saved."
3. Future - Glorification: When Christ comes at the end of time, "By God's Grace, we will be saved."

Once we realize that salvation is not a static process but a dynamic process, something that we never fully achieve in this life, we come to the realization that salvation occurs through a daily struggle to move toward God. That struggle to move toward God occurs mainly through repentance. We experience Theosis through a daily conversion that occurs through a constant repentance for our sins and through the sacramental life of the Church in which God dwells. Therefore sin in the life of the Christian is no longer a practice but an incident.

FAITH AND WORKS

Many believe that salvation comes through faith alone. All one has to do is to confess one's belief in Jesus Christ. If we confess our belief in Jesus Christ we have secured our salvation. Not only is this belief UN-Orthodox, but it is also UN-scriptural and therefore UN-Christian.

The Orthodox position on faith and works in regards to salvation can be summed up in three scripture verses.

Each scripture verse supports the other. Let's see how:

...we are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9)

...What does it profit my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food and one of you says to them, go in peace, be warmed and filled, without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has not works, is dead. (James 2:14-17)

...when you have done all that is commanded you, say, we are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty. (Luke 17:10)

In summary, our faith manifests itself in good works! The good works we do as a result of our faith do not earn us any special "merit points" with God. The Orthodox Church believes there is no way to earn salvation through good works. Our good works are a natural response to God's love and His gift of salvation which He has bestowed upon us and is an expression of the fact that we have appropriated our Lord's free gift of salvation in our lives.

GOOD WORKS DO NOT PRODUCE SALVATION. SALVATION PRODUCES GOOD WORKS!!!

Finally, good works must be done in Jesus' name. Only then do our works manifest Christ's love to others. Good works done by those who do not believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior are worthless in that they are not a manifestation of God's love. A work is only good insofar as it is done in Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

BIBLICAL TEXT FROM ST. PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS - CHAPTER 6

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

⁵ For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For he who has died is freed from sin. ⁸ But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. ⁹ For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰ The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹ So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

¹² Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. ¹³ Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

¹⁵ What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹ I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once yielded your members to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now yield your members to righteousness for sanctification.

²⁰ When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ But then what return did you get from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

REVIEW WORKSHEET ON SALVATION

1. Read Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7. What is sin?

2. Read Romans 5:12. What are the consequences of sin?

3. What did Christ do to save us?

Read Philippians 2:6-7 and Hebrews 2:14-15. What was the first thing God did to save us?

Read Colossians 2:13-15.

Read Romans 6:5.

4. How does all of the above become relevant to us?

5. Read Romans 6:19b-23. What does the word “sanctification” mean? What is the result of sanctification?

6. Read Philippians 2:12. What does it mean to work out our salvation?

Read Matthew 26:26-29 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-29.

Read John 20:22-23.

Read James 5:14-15

7. What do Justification and Sanctification lead to? Read Romans 6:22.

8. What then are the three elements of spiritual growth in the Orthodox Church?

A.

B.

C.

9. Read James 2:14-17. What does St. James say about faith and works?

10. Can we save ourselves through good works?

11. What is the Orthodox Church's teaching on faith and works?

12. What does the Greek word ἅγιος mean?

13. What is Theosis?

SESSION CHECK LIST

- Attended class
- Review worksheet on Salvation
- Read pages 99-122 of The Orthodox Church, by Timothy Ware.
- Read Genesis 1:1 - 4:26
- Read Romans 5:1 - 6:23

NOTES



HOW ARE WE SAVED?

By Fr. Theodore Stylianopoulos

Knowing that a man is not justified by works of the Law, but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the Law, because by works of the Law shall no one be justified . . . For through the Law I have died to the Law, that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me - Galatians 2:16-17, 19-20.

A large segment of Protestant Christians in the United States are known as Evangelicals. Evangelicals take the Bible seriously. They center their lives on the *evangelion* (the gospel)—the good news of salvation. They often talk about personal salvation, about “how you get saved,” and the familiar answer is: Accept Christ as your personal Savior in sincere prayer, ask Him to come into your heart and forgive your sins, and you are saved. You are then put right before God and enjoy a personal relationship with Christ. This event is called “justification by faith” or more generally “salvation by faith,” apart from good works. This teaching is based on texts especially from the letters of St. Paul, such as the above (Gal 2:16-20). Many Evangelicals recall the exact date and time of being “born again” and celebrate it as the foremost event in their lives.

We do not judge the sincere convictions of other Christians, lest we be judged, according to the words of the Lord (Mat 7:1). Justification by faith is an authentic teaching of the New Testament. It is also a part of Orthodox teaching because whatever the New Testament teaches as essential, the Orthodox Church teaches as well. The Bible belongs to the Church. Equally, the acts of penitent prayer, asking God for forgiveness, and inviting Christ and the Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts—these acts, too, are indispensable to Orthodox Christian life. But we must ask: is salvation a one-time event in life? What is the role of faith and works in the mystery of our salvation? What does Jesus say? What does St. Paul say? What do we teach about these issues as Orthodox Christians?

Let’s take a few examples from the life of Christ. We know that Jesus emphasized faith. To the woman with the issue of blood whom He healed, He said: “Your faith has made you well” (Mark 5:34). To the blind beggar He met on a street in Jericho and also healed, He said: “Your faith has made you well” (Mark 10:52). Jesus tied personal faith in Him to the efficacy of healings. But was faith the most critical factor behind these cures? Jesus perceived “power had gone forth from him” to heal the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:30). Sometimes Christ out of compassion healed people without asking for faith (Mark 1:34; 3:5). And so with all the acts of healing, it was above all Christ’s divine power that cured the sick, the lame, and the blind. The role of faith was significant but secondary to divine grace. God provided the grace, faith received the gift.

Jesus connected personal faith in Him to our eternal salvation. He declared: “Every one who acknowledges me before people, I also will acknowledge them before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before people, I also will deny them before my father in heaven” (Mat 10:32-33). The Gospel of John frequently connects faith in Christ to each person’s eternal destiny. We read: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). And again: “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:25-26). Christ further declared to Thomas: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (John 20:29). Jesus himself is the supreme example of faith. In the garden of Gethsemane, as He confronted the prospect of death by crucifixion, Christ prayed to God: “Not my will, by Thy will be done” (Mat 26:39). Without doubt, faith had a primary place in the life and teaching of Jesus.

But Jesus also demanded good works to go along with faith. A man came up to Him with a question about eternal salvation. “Teacher,” he asked, “what good deed (*ti agathon*) must I do, to have eternal life?” Jesus did not send him away or correct him. He didn’t say: “You are asking the wrong question; you need only to believe in

me and you will be saved.” Rather Jesus said to him: “Keep the commandments . . . You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself” (Mat 19:16-19). Rather than separate faith and works, Jesus closely united the two as being definitive to Christian life. That’s the undeniable implication of His great discourse we call “Sermon on the Mount.” The Sermon contains a vast amount of teachings and exhortations Christ expected His followers to learn and live by (Mat. chaps. 5-7). “Do not bear false witness . . . Love your enemies . . . Seek first God’s kingdom and His righteousness . . . Judge not, that you be not judged” (Mat 5:33, 44; 6:33; 7:1). Jesus set down these teachings as the necessary standards of moral righteousness. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount He denounced the kind of faith that is only lip service. He said those who relied only on faith risked the loss of eternal salvation. He warned: “On that day many will call out to me ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy and cast out demons in your name?’ And then I will declare to them: ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers’” (Mat 7:21-23).

Let us also recall the parable about the Last Judgment (Mat 25:31-46). When Christ comes in His glory with all the angels, He will gather all the nations before Him for universal judgment. Everyone will be divided into two groups—the sheep on the right and the goats on the left—before Christ the King. The ones on the right will be blessed and given the inheritance of the eternal kingdom. The ones on the left will be cursed and sent off to eternal fire. What will make the difference? What will be the criterion of judgment? Works of mercy! Feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the prisoner. Jesus declared: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mat 25:40).

On another occasion Jesus referred to faith as lifetime work. He urged a crowd not to “labor for the food that perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life.” They asked: “What must we do to be doing the works of God (*Ti poiomen ina ergazometha to erga tou Theou*)?” He replied: “This is the work of God (*to ergon tou Theou*): that you believe in Him whom God has sent” (John 6:27-29). The most pleasing work to God is the continuous exercise of faith in Christ as Savior and Lord throughout our lives. Christ promised us a continuous personal communion with Him, a continuous Easter experience, based on love, faith, and the keeping of His commandments. He said: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments . . . If a person loves me, He will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:15-17, 23). Our “new birth” is given to us in Baptism according to the words of the Lord: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). And if we lose our way, heartfelt prayer, repentance, Holy Confession and Holy Communion provide personal occasions for spiritual renewal throughout our lives. How important for salvation the Eucharist is, we know from the words of Christ: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:54). In these many ways, according to Christ, Orthodox Christians throughout their lives receive salvation and renewal through faith, works, and the sacraments of the Church.

Then there is St. Paul. The apostle is known as the foremost advocate of justification by faith. In the above text of Gal 2:16-20, St. Paul seems to say something very different than His Master about faith and works. These words of Paul reflect his conversion by which he left behind the Law of Moses and joined Christ wholeheartedly. Previously the Mosaic Law was the center of his life, but after Damascus Christ became the core of his being. Christ dwelt in St. Paul: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). From this transformed perspective Paul contrasted and opposed faith and works. He did so categorically: “A person is not justified by works of the Law but through faith in Jesus Christ; even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the Law, because by works of the Law shall no one be justified” (Gal 2:16). The key to this passage is to see that St. Paul is referring not to ethical works but to “works of the Law” (*erga tou nomou*), namely, the Mosaic Law.

What are the works of the Mosaic Law? Anyone who studies Galatians carefully will note the apostle is referring to the Jewish religious practices of circumcision, dietary laws, and festivals (Gal 2:2-5, 12; 4:9; 5:1-6, 12; 6:12-15). The same reference to “works of the Law” is also primary in the Letter to the Romans (Rom 3:19-20, 27-30). For Paul, such practices were no longer necessary for salvation. Christ had fulfilled their purpose and also terminated them at the same time (Rom 8:4; 10:4). For Paul, to adopt such religious practices as some Gentile Christians were doing, was nothing less that betrayal of the gospel (Gal 1:6-9). He declared: “I testify again to

every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole Law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the Law; you have fallen away from grace” (Gal 5:3-4). St. Paul is not opposing faith to ethical works but to the “works of the Law.”

But what does St. Paul say about ethical works? Do ethical works have a place in salvation? The answer is, most certainly, yes. In the same Letter to the Galatians, Paul uses a striking expression: “faith working through love” (Gal 5:6). Yes, faith is primary, but faith working through love—loving deeds. Good deeds are inseparable from and essential to the life of faith. Otherwise, according to Paul, those who commit sinful acts and do not repent of them—and he names them: fornication, idolatry, sorcery, selfishness, drunkenness, carousing, and the like—“will not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal 5:21; see also 1 Cor 6:9-11). In other words, those who do such things, including Christians to whom he is writing, will suffer ultimate loss of salvation. Toward the end of Galatians Paul pens the following admonition as well: “Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a person sows, that he will also reap . . . Let us not grow weary in doing good (*to agathon*), for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart . . . Let us do good to all, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith” (Gal 6:7, 9-10). We come to Christ as sinners and are justified by faith apart from good works. But once we connect with Christ and enjoy a saving relationship with Him, we ought to honor Him with good works because we love Christ and also because our final judgment will hinge in part on the criterion of good deeds. Paul states: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body” (2 Cor 5:10).

According to St. Paul, not only loving deeds but also the sacraments of Baptism (Rom 6:1-11) and the Eucharist (1 Cor 10:16-22; 11:23-32) are decisive to salvation. Read carefully Paul’s Letter to the Romans, chapters 1-6. Note how often in chapters 1-5 he speaks of faith, the importance of faith, and the blessings that come from faith. But when do all these blessings take place? What is the event at which salvation truly takes hold? Baptism! That’s the answer St. Paul gives in Romans, chapter 6. All of chapter 6 is about Baptism and life after Baptism. For Paul, it is in Baptism that the believer is united with Christ, dies to the power of sin, and receives new life in Christ (6:1-11). Baptized Christians ought to use their bodies no longer “as instruments of sin but as weapons of righteousness” (6:12-13). Life after Baptism, says Paul, includes the responsibility to live by the “standard of teaching” (*typon didaches*) which Christians have been taught (6:17). Otherwise, even for Christians, “the wages of sin is death” (6:23). Paul is clear-cut about the criterion of final judgment: “God will render to every person according to his works; to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, God will give eternal life; but for those who . . . obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury” (Rom 2:6-8).

Let us sum up the main points. The work of salvation belongs entirely to God. It is God through Christ and the Holy Spirit, who has the divine power to rescue us from the forces of sickness, evil, sin, death, and the devil. It is God through Christ and the Holy Spirit who alone provides justification, forgiveness, and new life to sinners who come to Him with faith. And God provides salvation as a most amazing and unceasing gift to all sincere seekers.

From our side, the question is about receiving and using the gift of salvation. The gift is offered, but if we do not receive it, we don’t have it, and certainly cannot use it. God offers the gift. We can choose to accept it or reject it. As Orthodox Christians we do not believe in predestination. Jesus said: “Whoever wants to come after me, let him take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). The gift and the challenge to follow Jesus through a life of faith and works coincide.

The reception of the gift of salvation is not a one-time event but a life-time process. St. Paul employs the verb “to save” (*sozesthai*) in the past tense (“we have been saved,” Rom 8:24; Eph 2:5); in the present tense (“we are being saved,” 1 Cor 1:18; 15:2), and in the future tense (“we will be saved,” Rom 5:10). He can think even of justification as a future event and part of the final judgment (Rom 2:13, 16). For Paul, Christians are involved in a lifetime covenant with God in which we work, planting and watering, but it is “only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor 3:7). We are “co-workers with God” (*synergoi Theou*, 1 Cor 3:9; 1 Thess 3:2). (Not “co-workers under God” as some translations would have it). The mystery of salvation is a duet, not a solo. It is a life-time engagement with God. It has ups and downs, twists and turns, with opportunities to grow in the love of

God, knowing that we can turn to Him again and again and receive forgiveness and a new birth. When we come to Christ as sinners, we have no works to offer to Him, but only faith and repentance. But once we come to Him and receive the gift of salvation, we enter into a sacred covenant to honor Him with good works. We read in Ephesians: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God . . . [We are] created in Christ Jesus for good works” (Eph 2:8-10).

The teaching of the New Testament is that God’s grace, our free will, and our faith and good works, are intimately connected. The Holy Spirit energizes in us both faith and good works as we thirst for and seek God’s grace. Neither faith nor good works can be presented as merit before God, but only as return gifts in humility, love, and thanksgiving. Let us not forget as well the sober words of James: “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead . . . Faith is completed by works . . . A person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:17, 22, 24). By free will, faith, and earnest labors, we work together with the grace of God in the awesome gift and mystery of salvation. As St. Paul puts it: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work His good pleasure” (Phil 2:12-13). To God Almighty, together with the Son and the Holy Spirit, be praise and worship forever. Amen. ■



“Let us commit ourselves and one another and our whole life to Christ our God”