

VITALITIES OF THE VIBRANT ORTHODOX PARISH (Part 8):  
AUTHENTIC WORSHIP AND PRAYER

by Father Frank Marangos

*“Today godly David is filled with joy; Joseph and James offer praise.  
The glorious crown of their kinship with Christ fills them with great joy.  
They sing praises to the One ineffably born on earth, and they cry out:  
‘O Compassionate One, save those who honor You!’”*

Troparion from Sunday After the Nativity

“Kallikantzaros” is the name of a malevolent demon described in European and Anatolian folklore. Stories about the “kallikantzaros” and its equivalents can be found in Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Turkey. “Kallikantzaroi” are believed to dwell underground, sawing the world tree so that it will collapse, along with the Earth. However, according to folklore, during the Twelve Days of Christmas (December 25 – January 6), they come to the surface to trouble mortals. On Epiphany (6 January), “kallikantzaroi” return underground to continue their sawing. Fortunately, during their absence, the world tree has healed itself, so they must start working all over again.

Scripture is replete with “kallikantzaroi” intent on “cutting down” the tree of mankind’s faith. Stories of serpents, pagan nations, evil kings, lions, and giants portray an eternal struggle that can only be successfully secured with authentic worship and prayer. In order to commemorate the decisive action that was taken to protect the infant Jesus from the evil intent of the “kallikantzaros” Herod, Joseph, the Betrothed, and James, the Brother of the Lord, are commemorated on the Sunday after the Nativity. Because Joseph was of the lineage of King David, at an early date churches in the East began to also commemorate King David and other important figures of the Old and New Testaments on the Sunday following the Nativity of Christ.

King David was a forefather of our Lord Jesus Christ according to the flesh. The youngest son of Jesse, David shepherded a flock of sheep belonging to his father. He was distinguished by his deep faith, and he zealously fulfilled the will of God. During a battle with the Philistine Nation, he vanquished Goliath, a giant “kallikantzaros,” in single combat that decided the outcome of the war in favor of the Israelites.

To confront Goliath, the “kallikantzaros” that menaced the Nation of Israel, David selected five smooth stones from a riverbed. While he required only one to slay the giant, the additional stones may be understood as predictors of Goliath’s four brothers that would later attempt to vindicate his unexpected demise (II Samuel 21:15-22).

After Saul and his son perished, David was proclaimed king of Israel. He built a new capital, Jerusalem (“the City of Peace”), a new tabernacle, and foretold that his son Solomon would build the Temple. King David died in great old age with steadfast faith in the coming of the promised Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ. Most importantly, his divinely-inspired Psalter is widely used in the worship and in personal prayers.

The commemoration of King David, on the Sunday following our Lord’s Nativity, provides a wonderful opportunity for Orthodox Christian parishes to assess the vitality of their community’s worship. Like David, the vibrant parish, utilizes the five cycles of Orthodox worship (daily, weekly, annual, paschal, and personal) to defeat the “kallikantzaroi” that seek its collapse by sawing through its adoration of God.

Prayer is the eighth and most important pillar of the vibrant Orthodox Christian parish. In addition to the pillars of (1) hospitality, (2) love of Holy Scripture, (3) catechesis, (4) liturgical participation, (5) vision, and (6) mutual encouragement, and (7) giving, healthy communities strive to provide opportunities for authentic worship where the faithful can gather and garner the spiritual resources for defeating our respective “kallikantzaroi.”

As the Greek Orthodox parish of the Annunciation celebrates Holy Epiphany and concludes its commemoration of the Twelve Days of Christ’s Holy Nativity, let our “leave-taking” resemble the prayer-inspired actions of Joseph, James, and King David.