

GOD IS PRESENT!



We always wonder how and when God is present in our lives! We know that He was present in the events of the Old Testament from the miracles and powerful things He did for the Hebrew people. We know that He was present in the person of Jesus from the miracles He did, from His life, death and resurrection. We know that He was also present with the Apostles. But how is He present in our times, is the question. Can we know that He is present today for us?

The answer is, "Yes, indeed"! He has opened windows into His realm for us through the lives of the Saints and many times even through their holy relics. Once in a while, His presence is made manifest also through holy icons. Certain

icons stand out as miracle-working Icons. There are a few that stand out more than others!

We had the great blessing to receive at our church this past Saturday (February 13) the holy icon of the Panagia of Kursk. This miracle-working icon had made its way out of Kursk, Russia, in the middle of the Communist revolution as the communists destroyed the monastery and the church of Kursk and now resides in New York. Many miracles are recorded relating to this icon. It has been said that God's presence is felt wherever the icon is taken. 200,000 Russians gathered to venerate it when it was brought back to Russia a few years ago. I was very excited when it was offered to us to have this holy icon visit our parish even for a few hours.

The service on Saturday morning was very beautiful. The church filled with people each seeking their own gift from the Lord. We sang the Salutation to the Theotokos and then the Paraklesis (Supplication). At the end of the services all three priests commemorated the names of people given to us, praying for their salvation, the healing of their souls and bodies, while the chantors sang "Kyrie Eleison".

As we were finishing, I placed my face on the icon and prayed for our parish, for specific people who I know need prayers, for my family, all the people that were present and also for those who were unable to attend. In the end, I asked God for a sign of His presence, a sign that He heard our prayers.

I know that many times holy icons and holy relics exhume a very beautiful fragrance. I have experienced that in many places. So, I breathed in as I kissed the Icon of Kursk wondering if I will have the same experience here, but there was nothing. I continued to pray for a sign of God's presence for our parish as we move forward with our new buildings and the many new ministries that we are hoping to implement in the near future. I then lifted up the icon to bring it to the Parish Hall to bless the new building and proceeded to exit the church. I held the icon up in front of my face, and as I came closer to the Narthex, suddenly a cloud of fragrance filled the ear and surrounded my face. It was the same beautiful fragrance I had experienced when I venerated holy relics on Mount Athos and Cyprus. It was the answer to my prayer. Just like in the case of Elijah the Lord came as a small little breeze, so also for us at Holy Transfiguration, He visited us in the beautiful fragrance. He is blessing the works of our hands. He is encouraging us to do everything we can to bring people to salvation. "The Lord is with us!"

I spoke about this on Sunday during my sermon and several people came up to me later to tell me that they had the same experience. This was not only my gift alone, but the gift to the parish. God is indeed present in our lives. It is true that the Icon of Panagia of Kursk is one of those windows of God's presence.

Glory be to God for His gift and reassurance for us all!

Fr. Panayiotis