February 6

Barsanuphius and John of Gaza (6th cent.) monks

Today the Orthodox churches commemorate Barsanuphius the Great and John the Prophet, monks who lived in the Gaza desert in the sixth century.
The elder of the two, Barsanuphius, was Egyptian by birth. As a young man he had suffered many illnesses and temptations, which had seasoned him. He went to Palestine and joined a cenobitic community guided by the igumen Seridos. After some time he became a hermit, and eventually he began to live as a recluse, acquiring a deep peace and solid personality, as can be seen in his Letters.
In the same epistolary we find the letters of John, Barsanuphius' companion in solitude. John was igumen of the monastery of Merasala. He followed the same path Barsanuphius had taken, and became a recluse not far from where Barsanuphius lived.
The fame of two elders was so great that hundreds of people sought their advice by letter. With the igumen Seridos as their only link to the outside world, the two desert fathers offered with their epistolary one of the most important collections of Christian writings on the value of humility and obedience. According to their teaching, humility and obedience guide those who practice them to the full expression of freedom and love. Illuminated by the Spirit, Barsanuphius and John introduced entire generations of Christians to the spiritual life without leaving the total seclusion in which they lived, thus showing that those who have reached the peace that derives from the discovery of the inner self can love all creatures, even if they live separated from everyone.

Paul Miki and His Companions (d. 1597) martyrs

In February 1597 the Japanese Jesuit Paul Miki and twenty-six other Christians were crucified on a hill near Nagasaki.
The missionary Francis Xavier had brought Christianity to Japan several decades earlier, and the efforts of Franciscans and Jesuits had soon brought into being a small but dynamic local church. The shogun (supreme military leader) Taikosama, who had been attempting to restore the country's unity by promoting a nationalist ideology and removing power from local lords, had barely tolerated the arrival of foreign powers in Japan, and now he began to consider the missionaries' presence unacceptable.
In 1587, tensions rose sharply. Missionaries were ordered to leave Japan, Christianity was prohibited, and the Church was forced to go underground.
Ten years later, violent persecution broke out. Paul Miki, the first Japanese Jesuit and an impassioned preacher, was arrested together with his companions. The authorities began to lead them from town to town as a warning to the population, but wherever they were led, they announced the Gospel and responded with songs of praise to the torture to which they were subjected. Paul Miki, after forgiving his executioners, went to his death singing, 'Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit.'
As Christians commemorate the first martyrs of Japan, they are invited to remember in the Lord's presence all of the Japanese churches, whose condition has always been that of a small minority, a little flock.

A READING

As the pagans were drawing near in order to kill the Christians on the king's orders, one of the fathers of the house of Nagasaki asked a fifteen-year-old boy, "What will you answer when they ask you if you have been baptized?" "I will answer that I am a Christian," said the boy. "And if they threaten to kill you because of this, what will you do?" "I will prepare to die." "But how?" asked the father. The boy, with admirable strength of will and mixing words with his tears, responded, "Until the last minute I will implore God's mercy."

from the *Acta Sanctorum*

BIBLICAL READINGS
Gal 2:19-20; Mt 28:16-20

Xenia of St. Petersburg (ca. 1720-ca. 1803) fool-for-Christ

Today the Russian Orthodox Church commemorates Xenia of St. Petersburg, a fool-for-Christ.
Xenia Grigorievna Petrova was married to an imperial army official. Her husband died when she was only twenty-six years old, leading her to question the value of the worldly life to which she was accustomed. She began to behave in increasingly strange ways, and was soon recognized as a fool-for-Christ, according to a form of witness to the Gospel that is dear to Orthodox Christians, particularly in Russia.
Dressed in her husband's clothing, which gradually fell into shreds, Xenia disguised herself as a beggar, thus hiding for forty-five years her total dedication to the poor of her city. She died in or near the year 1803, and is still one of the figures of holiness closest to the hearts of Russians.

LETTURE BIBLICHE
Gal 3:23-4:3; Mt 25:1-13

THE CHURCHES REMEMBER...

ANGLICANS:
The martyrs of Japan

WESTERN CATHOLICS:
Paul Miki and His Companions, martyrs (Roman and Ambrosian calendars)

COPTS AND ETHIOPIANS (28 tubah/terr):
The miracle of loaves
Kaw of al-Fayyum (3th-4th cent.), martyr (Coptic Orthodox Church)
Apollonia (d. 249), virgin of Alexandria (Coptic Catholic Church)

LUTHERANS:
Amandus (d. ca. 679), missionary and bishop of Flanders

MARONITES:
Proclus (1st cent.), disciple of the apostle John, martyr

ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS AND GREEK CATHOLICS:
Bucolos (1st cent.), bishop of Smyrna; *Photios the Confessor* (d. 891), patriarch of Constantinople, isapostle
Xenia of St. Petersburg, fool-for-Christ (Russian Church)

EAST SYRIAN ORTHODOX:
Titus, apostle (Malabar Church)