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On December 9th the Church celebrates an icon of the Mother of God called "Unexpected Joy." It shows the Theotokos holding the child Jesus Christ, and one other figure.

The third figure is a young man kneeling in prayer and turned pleadingly toward the Theotokos. His story is told in the writings of Saint Dimitri of Rostov, and in some versions of the icon part of that story appears in words below the figures of the Theotokos and Christ.

This man prayed every day to the icon of the Virgin, and often repeated the memorable words of Gabriel at the time of the Annunciation: "Rejoice, O Virgin Full of Grace!" But despite having the habit of praying regularly, the young man didn't keep himself from sin. It might often happen that after offering his prayer, he would go out and do something that wasn't at all in keeping with the life of a faithful Christian.

One day the young man had a startling experience. As he was planning to go out, he glanced toward the icon and was stunned to see the Theotokos standing in person before him. She was holding her Son, whose body showed the same wounds He had suffered on the cross: His hands and feet were pierced, and blood was flowing from a wound in His side.

The young man fell to his knees, at first so horrified that he was unable to speak. Finally he managed to ask the Theotokos, "O Lady, who has done this terrible thing?"

Her answer came in a soft but firm voice: "You have done it—you and all the others who sin, over and over again. Each time you sin, you crucify Him again."

Realizing the truth of her words, the young man begged forgiveness. But she answered that though he showed her the respect of daily prayer before her icon, he continued to hurt her by continuing to sin.

He cried out, "O holy Lady, may my wrong deeds never outweigh your merciful kindness! Please pray to your Son on my behalf."

The Mother of God, seeing his real repentance, did intercede for the young man, and for the sake of His Mother, Christ forgave him. Having received the unexpected joy of divine forgiveness, he was able to live a God-pleasing life for the rest of his days.

On this same day, the Church remembers two mothers: Hannah, the mother of Samuel the Prophet, and Anna the mother of the Theotokos. Both of them wanted children; both suffered through long years of childlessness before conceiving and giving birth.

These two women experienced a different kind of "unexpected joy" when they finally became mothers after waiting so long. But, like the young man in the icon, the thing they wanted most came to them as God's mercy and love.

Whether we hope to be forgiven, hope to have children, or hope for something else that will change our lives, we can be sure that God knows about it, and will respond to our hope in some way—perhaps with unexpected joy.