

SOBORNOST

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American Carpatho-Russian Orthodox Diocese

*ECUMENICAL PATRIARCHATE
OF CONSTANTINOPLE*

SERVICES

**Wednesdays in Great Lent: Liturgy of
Presanctified Gifts 6:30 PM**

Friday: Moleben to the Cross 6:00 AM

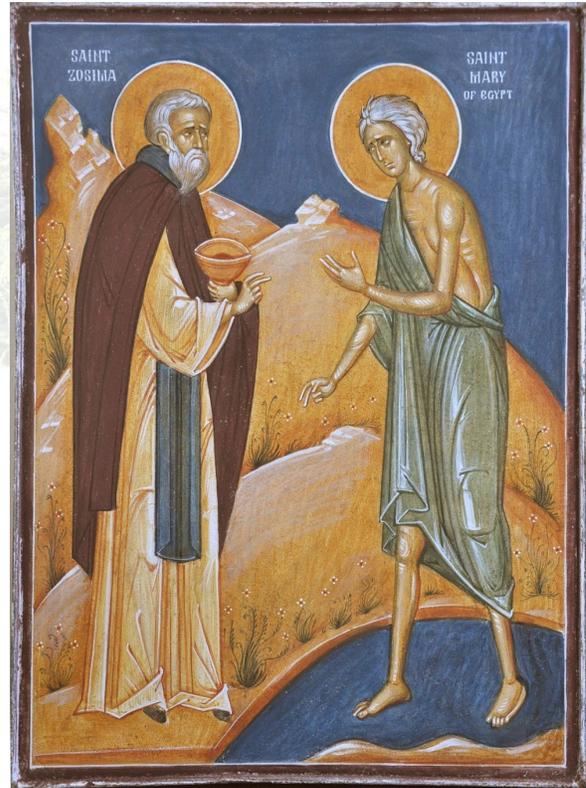
Saturday: Confession 4:30 PM

Great Vespers 5:00 PM

Sunday: Matins (Orthros) 8:45 AM

Sunday School 9:30 AM

Divine Liturgy 10:00 AM



April 10, 2022 – 5th Sunday in Great Lent | St. Mary of Egypt

What is the gate of repentance which leads to divine and eternal life in God? The awareness of our sinfulness before Him. Such an awareness of sin came to St. Mary whom all Orthodox Christians commemorate today as a lofty standard of true, life-transforming repentance. However, as we see from her life, an awareness of our sins is often brought about by a seeming misfortune, or impasse, or perplexity in our life.

St. Mary was caught in the deep pit of fleshly passion and carnal sins—fornication, gluttony, drunkenness and every sensual pleasure. Yet, when she saw many running to the Church to behold the most holy and precious Cross of Christ being exalted, she also ran with them. She does not tell us *why* she ran with the rest of the people. Maybe she was still gripped by lawless passion, and desired to be with the crowd where she could find more lovers to satisfy her unquenchable passion.

Maybe she ran because of curiosity; she may have been caught up by the great zeal of the crowd, and so strongly influenced by them that she too wanted to share in the commonly-perceived expected joy of all.

Maybe she ran to see the Cross because there was still a small spark of piety hidden within the depths of her soul which was planted since childhood, but greatly buried and stifled from 17 years of godlessness and filthiness. As she relates about her life, after her conversion, she straightway received the Holy Mysteries, showing that she must have been baptized as an infant, having the divine and irrevocable grace of the Holy Spirit implanted within her soul.

This small spark planted within her, though unfed, was enough for her to have it fanned by the piety of the crowd and to be transformed into a great, heaven-reaching flame of unconquerable divine love which even to this day illumines us by its purity and beauty.

St. Mary stands with the choir of the pure virgins as is depicted in many of the icons of All Saints. She is seen as a dark-skinned and half-clothed body amidst a choir of white-robed virgins; she alone stands distinguished from them. The hymns praise her as having been graced with the purity of angels—and this is no poetic flourish, but a glorious and wondrous revelation of the great power of God to transform souls so much. In her are fulfilled the words of the Morning Prayer: “O Lord, grant me to love You as much as I once loved sin itself.” She confesses that in her sinful life she had an insatiable and burning lust for sin. But later on, she confesses to Abba Zosimas that she has an irrepressible thirst for Holy Communion, for Christ!

But this transformation did not happen so easily, as she confesses:

Having repeated my attempt 3 or 4 times [to enter the Church], at last I felt exhausted and had no more strength to push and to be pushed, so I went aside and stood in a corner of the porch. And only then with great difficulty it began to dawn on me, and I began to understand the reason why I was prevented from being admitted to see the life-giving Cross. The Word of salvation gently touched the eyes of my heart and revealed to me that it was my unclean life which barred the entrance to me. I began to weep and lament and beat my breast, and to sigh from the depths of my heart. And so I stood weeping when I saw above me the icon of the Most Holy Mother of God.

The awareness of her sins came about by a divine dispensation: she could not enter the Church. For us, we do not have to look very far in order to find some seeming misfortune or difficult occasion in our own life which makes us more aware of how much we do not have love, or patience, or mercy, or prayer, or humility, or some other virtue.

Like St. Mary, these occasions will not be necessarily easy to come to grips with. She confessed that it was only “*with great difficulty*” that she realized why this

hindrance was occurring. Nonetheless, she humbled herself, and this is the secret. After she humbled herself interiorly, and came to grips with the fact that *she herself* was the cause of her difficulty, only then did Christ the “*Word of salvation gently touch the eyes of [her] heart and revealed to [her] that it was [her] unclean life which barred the entrance to [her].*”

So it is with us: when adversity comes upon us, we must—maybe with great difficulty—always understand that the cause ultimately lies within us, but not in despair, not in self-hatred, not in self-destructive frustration with ourselves. Yes, truly, we must despair in ourselves, in *our own* power; but we must never despair of God’s power. By such a two-fold acknowledgment and confession—both of our weakness and God’s power—Christ will grant us the grace to perceive more clearly the *exact* reasons for our adversities. He will illumine us and show us a certain sin that we have, or an unrepented disposition, or a certain amount of self-trust of which we were unaware. Yet, He will not just show us, but heal us.

Most beautiful are those words which express the most-merciful action of Christ’s grace: St. Mary says that He “*gently touched the eyes of [her] heart*” and granted her the perception of how sinful she actually was. Maybe only St. Mary noticed her inability to enter the Church. She says that the crowd was very pressed and full. So maybe no one else really noticed her humiliating situation.

See again how merciful God is in His dealings with us. He is able to humble us and to bring us to our senses so that we might find His gift of repentance even without being humiliated in the eyes of all—although this awareness is so powerful that we might truly feel our sinful soul to be nakedly exposed to all; and this is a great grace: it is the experience of the shame which will be known at the Last Judgment. If we embrace it now, we will not know it then. Even so, sometimes God sees that we must in actual deed be humiliated in the eyes of all in order for a serious sickness of soul to be rooted out by pain, awareness and humility. God alone knows.

Nonetheless, in whatever manner it comes about, when we find ourselves in humiliating circumstances, we must meet this *humiliation* with *humility*. We must realize that God is not trying to rub in our face in a shaming way, our sins, our weaknesses, our defects, our brokenness. He is not trying to make us feel absolute disgust with our uselessness. But He is seeking to translate all of our self-reliance into a dependence on Him.

Let us remember the blind man in the Gospel. Why was he blind from birth? Two answers were given by the Apostles and the Pharisees: either this man sinned, or his parents did. But what does Christ God the Truth Himself declare? So that the glory of God might be made manifest!

These are wondrous words for us! Here is the key to all of our life's failures, all of our inherited weaknesses and passions, of all our bad habits and dispositions cultivated over a life-time involuntarily and unconsciously. Here is the answer: we are maimed that we might be made whole; we are blind that we might be gifted with true sight; we are paralyzed that we might be resurrected! We are speaking now of spiritual healing.

Here is the answer to why there is allowed so much pain, so much evil, so much suffering and human misery on this earth—that God's glory might be made all the more manifest, as a bright gold streak painted across a gloomy black and white picture. Without pain and suffering, failures, risings, falling down again; without ceaseless efforts which seem unrewarded and unfruitful; and without being suddenly transformed by God's grace; without all the variations of this fallen and unstable life, we will never securely and firmly hold onto God's immortal gifts; we will never experience the great contrast of human weakness and divine power.

O mankind: what is this mystery concerning us? What is this grace of which the Apostle Peter testifies about, when he declares, with heavenly and angelic wisdom, the fact that the grace of Christ which has dawned forth for us men of dust and ash is an unfathomable gift which even the angels greatly desire to peer into, to understand, to comprehend, to experience, to taste? What is this grace that he speaks of? What could we lowly sinners possess which is the object of envy for the angels?

Those angels who have fallen are solidified in their pride and unrepentance; and they will never taste the mercy of forgiveness because of their stubborn refusal of God's mercy; they are bereft of saving humility. Those angels who have never fallen, on the other hand, neither will they comprehend the great grace of forgiveness; for without sin, there is no need for it; without corruption there is no experience of restoration; without suffering death, there is no resurrection.

What then? We who fall countless times in the day, we are given great and enviable gifts: the taste of mercy, the experience of divine compassion, the underserved embrace of divine love, the humble joy of transformation, the wondrous translation from the bottomless pit of the hell of sin and agony to the wondrous heights of heavenly joy; the conscious experience of that saying of the Psalmist: "This change has been wrought by the Right Hand of the Most High Himself," and Him alone; not by my own power; not by my own cunning; not by my own virtue; not by my own worth; but by Him Who loves mankind ineffably, incomprehensibly, unconditionally!

Let all of us who are stuck in sin, take heart! Let all of us who are subject to the slavery of sin look up! Let all of us who are deadened in sin, obliterated by

passion, imprisoned within the hades of spiritual lifelessness and darkness, let us await our Redeemer, let us expect our Resurrection Himself, let us trust in the unfailing mercy of Life Himself.

Who asked Him to create us before all things existed? Certainly not angels, for they did not yet exist. Certainly it was His devising. Who asked Him to will us forth into existence, that we might be conscious, free, rational images of His glory, alone of all earthly beings endowed with the capacity to experience His divine and uncreated life? Who begged Him, after we fell, to become incarnate? What man dared to venture upon such a wild-seeming dream: that God would become Man, would suffer with us, taste our death, dive into hades after us who have fallen, and raise us up beyond even the unfallen and spotless angels, setting our human nature upon the throne of His Father? Who dared to pray such a thing? Only His mercy, only His wisdom, only His love, only His fatherly compassion could intercede for us, could design such unfathomable things for lowly men of dust and ash.

Let no one, let absolutely no one despair now! For, the Father has given us His Only-Begotten Son, and He will give us the Holy Spirit if we constantly and humbly beg Him. These things we have been told by Christ Himself. If God the Father has given us the other Two Persons of the Holy Trinity Themselves, and Himself with Them, what will we lack? What else can we beg of Him that He will not give? If we beg repentance, shall He withhold? If we cast ourselves down and ask for life, shall He turn away? If we ask for complete transformation, shall He forsake us? No! Be sure of this! For God cannot lie; His gifts are irrevocable! His unfailing love can never be offended beyond the point of no return.

He only asks the turning of the heart, a humble casting of ourselves down onto the earth, a confession of our weakness, an honesty of our spiritual poverty—all of this is the very accessible rule of repentance given to us in the life of St. Mary, along with—a long-suffering patience and hope which rests in the fervent expectation of His coming to save us, to lift us up, to renew us, to transform us, to conform us to Himself, to make us human again, to make us angelic, to make us divine, to make us sons of God, to make us gods of the only God of gods, and Lord of lords.

To Him, our Intercession, our Boldness, our Life, our Hope, our Prayer, our Salvation, our Purity, our Renewal—to Him, Christ our God, together with His Father and the All-Holy Spirit, let us constantly offer thanks for such unutterable gifts and works on our behalf. Let us constantly beg of Him the change He wrought in St. Mary, and made manifest to us for our hope. Let us fall down in worship and prayer, and let us glorify Him and He shall not put us to shame in the age to come; and He shall number us with the repentant St. Mary, and with all the angels and saints, and with the Mother of God, the constant guide and intercession of St. Mary and ourselves. Amen. (*from holycross.org*)

The Mystical Journey of the Christian, Through the Desert, Towards the Resurrection and Pentecost (5 of 5)

By Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos and Agiou Vlasiou

(continued from Part 4) **8. "Grace and Consequent Dogmatic Consciousness"**

The ascetic after a great struggle against the passions, but also from the coming and the hiding of divine Grace, acquires the so-called "dogmatic consciousness". As is understood from the above, "dogmatic consciousness" is not a mental knowledge of the doctrines of faith, but an inner spiritual experience that God offers in the heart of man.

The Orthodox monk feels that Divine Grace, from a theological point of view, "is God's good gift, or a gift of God's goodness - the uncreated supra-human and meta-cosmic energy of Divinity." "When it is God's good pleasure to unite with the human being, man perceives within himself the action of a Divine force which transfigures him and makes him no longer just potentially godlike - in the image of God - but actually godlike in likeness of being. The grace that is Divinity hallows man, divinizes him, makes him into a god."

The assimilation of divine Grace, after many visits and observations, offers a "form of spiritual knowledge" and this is characterized as "dogmatic consciousness". This "dogmatic consciousness" "is the result of a long experience of grace and not a mental work", it is the spiritual knowledge connected with the "genuine life in God" that is possible only "when God dwells within us".

Thus, we understand what is the essential difference between a thinker and a theologian, between a philosophical heretic and an empirical theologian, or a Father, between "scholastic dissertations" and hesychastic charismatic theology, but we also understand the manner by which the Fathers of the Church of the Ecumenical Synods theologized and do theology. A characteristic feature of the Holy Fathers is the "dogmatic consciousness".

9. "On Clairvoyance and its Different Forms"

The ascetic in the course of his spiritual life acquires the gift of clairvoyance that comes from his struggle against thoughts, the imagination and the passions, from the influence of demons, but also from the absence of Divine Grace. Thus, "the ascetic encounters three aspects of clairvoyance."

"The first, the devout and humble man may find useful and good, since it connects with a more sensitive keeping of Christ's commandments concerning one's neighbor. It will be harmful to the proud and passionate individual as it affords opportunities for the passions and opens up further possibilities for their satisfaction.

The second, the work of demons, is extraordinarily dangerous for anyone susceptible to it, since sooner or later it will lead to painful violation of man's whole psychological and spiritual strength, distorting his very personality.

The third, the gift of grace, entails the utmost responsibility and is the source of great spiritual suffering. It is in no wise accorded to the proud man.

All three of these types of clairvoyance cause suffering. With the first - natural intuition - suffering follows as the consequence of increased sensibility of the nervous system. With the second, it is the destructive, on the whole ruinous nature of demonic action that not seldom becomes apparent only in the long run. Though this intuition may sometimes enable one to read someone else's mind, his inner self still remains inaccessible. Clairvoyance may be more reliable where outside events are concerned. It affords occasions for self-conceit to those who adopt it."

This shows the great gift of the existence of spiritual fathers, of high spiritual standards, as compiled by the Grace of God, who guide their spiritual children without error through various wicked situations in deification and "the exalted luminosity".

10. "On the Purport of Prayer for the World" and "Love for Enemies"

Consistent and in continuity with all the above, the ascetic who goes through these situations prays for the whole world. Experiencing "Christ's love", participating in eternity in the vision of uncreated Light, but also going through the trials, and in fact the charismatic pain of hell, he naturally begins to pray for the whole world, according to the example of Christ.

Usually, "prayer for the whole world, for all Adam, in many instances distracts the monk from putting himself at the service of individuals," because man in this state cannot reconcile this prayer with pastoral action in the world, so he withdraws to the wilderness and prays day and night to God for the people, living and reposed, for all of Adam. "To pray for people means to shed blood."

Such a prayer leads him to love for his enemies, because this love is "the criterion of genuine communion with God, the attribute of the energy of grace." Thus, the hesychast participates in the mystery of the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ.

This shows "the way of the Church". Saint Silouan said: "It is given to our Orthodox Church through the Holy Spirit to fathom the mysteries of God, and she is strong in the holiness of her thought and her patience." And Saint Sophrony points out: "The mystery of God which the Church understands in the Holy Spirit is the love of Christ. The holy thought of the Church is that all men should be saved. And the path she treads towards this holy end is the path of patience - that is, of sacrifice."

"In preaching the love of Christ to the world, the Church calls all men to the fullness of Divine life but people do not understand her call, and repudiate it. When she bids men keep Christ's commandment and love their enemies, the Church finds herself caught between conflicting forces who naturally vent their anger upon her when she crosses their course. But the Church, actualizing Christ's mission on earth - the salvation of the whole world - purposely takes upon herself the world's anger, just as Christ took upon Himself the sins of the world. And as Christ was persecuted in this world of sin, and had to suffer, so the true Church of Christ must also be persecuted and suffer." This will be done with the real children of the Church who are the Saints.

One must go through all the previous charismatic stages of the spiritual life, in order to acquire this pure and charismatic love for the whole world and for enemies, which shows the pinnacle of the spiritual life of a great empirical theologian and Father of our Church.

The ten points mentioned above, and for their analysis the very words of Saint Sophrony were used, show the course of the true ascetic and hesychast, but also of the true Christian in a more moderate form, with a corresponding adjustment for his salvation. The word of God, as an energy enters him and begins to activate the mystery of salvation, activates the image that is within him and then he ascends the steps of the spiritual heavenly altar.

This means that by the energy of the word of God which is revealed in the heart, the ascetic and the Christian ascends the steps of the spiritual life, that is: with watchfulness he stops the development of intrusive thoughts; he struggles against the passions and the imagination; he practices mental silence and pure prayer; if it is God's will he comes to the vision of the uncreated Light; he goes through various trials when this great divine vision of Grace decreases; he acquires dogmatic consciousness; with the gift of clairvoyance he distinguishes between that which is created and that which is uncreated, the divine from the demonic; and lastly he prays for the whole world and even prays for his enemies.

This is the "Way of the Church", the Way of Holiness, these are the steps where the Saints ascend. And of course these steps were first ascended by Saint Silouan and then by Saint Sophrony. Thus, what has been mentioned above is, on the one hand, a theological analysis of the writings of Saint Silouan, and, on the other hand, an autobiography of Saint Sophrony himself.

This is how all the saints lived Holy and Great Lent, this glorious journey to the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ and then to Pentecost.

- Translated by John Sanidopoulos. (*from johnsanidopoulos.com*)

Today's Epistle Lesson – St. Paul's Letter to the Hebrews 9:11-14

Brethren, Christ came *as* High Priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Today's Gospel Lesson – Saint Mark 10:32-45

At that time, they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was going before them; and they were amazed. And as they followed they were afraid. Then He took the twelve aside again and began to tell them the things that would happen to Him: "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles; and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again." Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him, saying, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask." And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?" They said to Him, "Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory." But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" They said to Him, "We are able." So Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink the cup that I drink, and with the baptism I am baptized with you will be baptized; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but *it is for those* for whom it is prepared." And when the ten heard *it*, they began to be greatly displeased with James and John. But Jesus called them to *Himself* and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

A Word From the Holy Fathers

Brethren and fathers, because winter has passed and spring has arrived, we see creation flourishing again; the plants are flowering, the earth is growing green, the birds are singing and everything else is being renewed; and we take pleasure in all this and we glorify God the master craftsman who transforms and changes creation

year by year, and it is reasonable to do so. *Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made* [Rom. 1:20]. It is our duty not just to stay where we are, but to advance further and to examine carefully for ourselves the logic of creation. How? Because this renewal has winter as its cause. It would not have reached its prime had it not first undergone snows and rains and winds. And so it is with the soul; unless it is first snowed on by afflictions, troubles and difficulties, it will not flower, it will not fruit; but by enduring, it bears fruit and partakes in a blessing from God, as it is written: *Ground that drinks up the rain falling on it repeatedly, and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated, partakes in a blessing from God* [Heb. 6:7]. Therefore, brethren, let us also endure every affliction, every trouble, every trial which assails us both visibly and invisibly, the fast we are drawing out as we hunger and thirst and are otherwise made wretched, so that we may bear fruit and partake of God's blessing; and not only that, but that we may nourish and welcome Jesus as our guest. For just as we enjoy the sight of creation, so he too enjoys the ripe beauty of our souls. What are the fruits? *Love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-mastery* [Gal. 5:22]. By these he is nourished, by these he is entertained. And blest the one who nourishes him, because he will be nourished by him with eternal good things; and blest the one who receives him as his guest, because he will be received by him as his guest in the kingdom of heaven! Indeed! So if someone is to receive a king as his house guest, he rejoices and is extremely glad; hoe much more then someone who receives the King of kings and Lord of lords as his house guest. That he is received is clear from what he himself has said: *I and my Father will come and make our abode with him* [John 14:23]. And again: *One who has my commandments and keeps them, is the one who loves me; the one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I shall love him and manifest myself to him* [John 14:21]. Therefore, since such are the promises, let us not only bear, but let us endure with joy all things, both those that are present, those that are whispered about and those that are expected, as we listen to the Apostle when he says: *Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the Church* [Col. 1:24]. And again Saint James who says: *My brethren, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing* [James 1:2-4]. Do you see then that in trials there is joy, and in tribulations gladness? For these are the things that are exchanged where God is concerned; and this is how the saints led their lives; this too how we, by doing violence to ourselves and yet greater violence, and by living our life in their footsteps, shall inherit the kingdom of heaven, in Christ Jesus our

Lord, to whom be glory and might, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and always and to the ages of ages. Amen.

– St. Theodore the Studite, Catechesis 68, on the 5th Sunday of Lent

An Interpretation of the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian: On Idleness

By St. Luke the Surgeon, Archbishop of Simferopol and All Crimea

"O Lord and Master of my life, take from me the spirit of despondency...."

"Lord and Master of my life, give me not a spirit of despondency (or despair)." What is the spirit of despondency? This is what is called discouragement. People who do not understand Christianity at all, who do not understand our spiritual life, think that the entire Christian religion is full of a spirit of despondency. Looking at the monks walking around in black clothes with downcast eyes and turning the prayer rope, they think that the whole religion is dull, like the monks. This is not so at all. This is contrary to the spirit that permeates all of Christianity, for tell me, can a person with a spirit of despondency have the spiritual strength, spiritual vigor necessary to walk along the narrow path, tirelessly struggling with demons? Of course not.

Our religion is not a religion of despondency, on the contrary, it is a religion of cheerfulness, energy, willpower, strength of character. Our religion does not have despondency as its fruit, but something completely opposite, what the Apostle Paul says: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance. There is no law against such" (Gal. 5:22-23). This is the true spirit, the essence of our religion: not despondency at all, but righteousness, peaceful joy in the Holy Spirit. Can one who possesses this joy be despondent? Of course not.

People often make mistakes when judging a person's appearance. A true Christian does not look like people who indulge in the joys of life. He is always peaceful, often appears to be deeply thoughtful, walks with his head down, indulging in his thoughts. Does this mean that he is despondent, discouraged? This means that the joys of the world, which other people appreciate, are far from Christian, alien to him, just as children's games and amusements are alien to an adult.

The thoughts of a Christian are focused on the eternal, on the Kingdom of God, turning to the Lord Jesus Christ, therefore he is always serious and thoughtful. Sometimes it happens that even Christians become despondent, there comes a decline in spirit. They, having already gone far along the path of Christ, the path of renunciation of the world, sometimes return in their thoughts to their former path; it seems to them that they have strayed from this path in vain, that it would be good to follow the wide beaten path along which most people go. Then they fall into despair.

This is the state of those people who have come to know the great mysteries of Christ, have left the wide path of the temptations of the world, have followed the path of suffering for Christ. They are seduced by the devil, stopped by legions of demons, prevented from walking along the path of Christ, presenting pictures of the joyful life that they left, a picture of family happiness, the bliss of friendship, they are pulled away from the great path to go back to this path.

And often demons manage to achieve their goal: a person falls into despondency, loses his spirit, loses his zeal for the Lord Jesus Christ, and this despondency is a great danger that lies in wait for every Christian on his path for Christ, this is a devilish temptation. All the saints were subjected to these slanders of the spirits of darkness, and in the vast majority of cases, by prayer, fasting, and vigil, Christians defeated the spirit of despondency cast by the devil. But there were also those in whose souls the spirit of despondency grew and grew, and they left the path of Christ. And when they left, they felt abandoned by God, the emptiness and heaviness of life became unbearable for them, and they often ended their lives by suicide. That is why all the saints considered despondency to be a great danger, a great misfortune, and directed all their powers to the struggle against the spirit of despondency.

Even saints can fall into despondency. Why, where? No longer from Satan, nor from the spirits of darkness. Despondency arises when they are temporarily abandoned by God's grace. This happened to all the saints; this is a necessary test for everyone who strives in piety. It is necessary that a person does not attribute to himself, to his strengths, to his merits, everything that he has already achieved. He needs to be reminded that he did not achieve this on his own, but only by God's grace.

When a person reaches a high spiritual life, he sometimes thinks about himself, and God's grace leaves him for a while. Then he falls into a heavy, unbearable state of mind, his heart immediately becomes empty. Instead of the warmth sent from God, cold settles in the heart; instead of light, impenetrable darkness sets in; instead of joy, deep despondency. The Lord does this in order to remind the ascetic that he walks the path of Christ not by his own strength, but by the grace of God.

This is one source of discouragement. What other sources are there? I spoke to you about idleness, you should understand that idleness is one of the mothers of despondency. Idle people, not working and completely secure, drowning in luxury, people who are satiated with the blessings of life, lose their taste for life, they get bored with everything, everything becomes uninteresting, boring, they do not find joy in anything, their hearts are filled with despondency - this heavy and dangerous enemy of our salvation.

Another source of discouragement: there are people who tend to see everything in a gloomy light, they are called pessimists. They tend to be in such a mood, to focus their thoughts on the dark, the sinful. They raise the question: where is the justice of God, where is the truth, if the poor but pious suffers, and the unbeliever is rich, walking on crooked paths, blessed? If a person is inclined to notice in life only the dark, only the bad, the despondency that seizes him grows and grows, it comes to the point that the person does not see anything good and commits suicide. So strong is the spirit of despondency. This is the second time I said how it can bring to suicide.

There is another source of despondency, the most frequent source. These are sorrows, unfortunate cases that we experience in life. A loved one will die, a child, a husband, a mother will die. The person falls into despair. The world is not dear to him, he thinks only of his dear one who has died, and the poor man wanders in thought near the grave, imagines his loved one lying in a coffin and decomposing. Despondency becomes deeper and deeper. What is the remedy for this despondency? No need to wander around the grave with your thoughts, remember the past and shed tears. It is necessary to fly away to where the dear one, beloved with all the power of thought, has gone. Know that his soul is before God and the angels, rejoicing in his liberation. If you focus not on the dark, but on the light, not on the perishable, but on the eternal, the spirit of despondency will go away.

Serious bodily illnesses sometimes plunge into despondency. There are many people who impatiently bear diseases. And there were saints who lay bedridden with illness all their lives and praised God for it. It is necessary to remember such people and be able to accept the illnesses sent from God. There is no need to refuse the help of a doctor, for the wise son of Sirach says: "God created the physician to help people" (Sir. 38:1-12). A doctor is a servant of God who can relieve suffering and drive away the spirit of despondency.

These are the sources and causes of discouragement. The main means of dealing with them is prayer. This is a remedy that has been tested by all the saints for many, many centuries. There is no more effective means than prayer, a constant request to God for help.

When you enter into a conversation with God, He comforts you, drives away the spirit of despondency. When you come to the temple of God, where everything is so far from worldly fuss, listen carefully to the hymns, and your spirit will leave the dark region of despondency and soar. And if you proceed to the powerful means of combating despondency, which the Lord Jesus Christ gave, if at confession you open your heart before the pastor of the Church, and if after that you partake of the Body and Blood of Christ, you will feel relief and joy, and then the spirit of despondency will be driven out of you. Do not focus your thoughts on

the gloomy, on the sinful, on the heavy, but, lifting up the spirit of grief, with your heart abide with God, in the halls of heaven, where there is no access for dark spirits that bring despondency. This is what every Christian needs to know about despondency.

And what can be said about people who hardly know Christ, who follow the path of the world, who seek joy and consolation from the world? In appearance they often seem contented, cheerful, happy, as if they have no despondency. Don't think that it is like this in reality, don't be tempted by how they appear, but consider avoiding this path. If only they knew what was going on in the depths of their hearts. In the depths of their souls, the denunciation of conscience never ceases. No one can hear the conscience. The inner man raises his head at times and begins to yell. This is the constant suffering of those who pursue worldly prosperity. The Apostle Paul says: "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2 Cor. 7:10).

If you do not turn from sorrow for the world to sorrow for God, you will perish. Remember the severity of despondency, remember that the heart of a Christian should be filled with joy in the Holy Spirit, the joy of striving for the light, should be alien to the sorrow that fills the hearts of sinners. Always remember this, and may the Lord God have mercy on you, and may Saint Ephraim assist you with his prayers. Amen. *(from johnsanidopoulos.com)*

Also Commemorated Today: Martyr Terence and 40 Companions Beheaded at Carthage

The Holy Martyr Terence and his companions suffered under the emperor Decius (249-251). The emperor issued an edict commanding all subjects to offer sacrifice to the pagan idols. When the governor of Africa Fortunianus received this edict, he gathered the people into the city square, set out cruel instruments of torture and declared that everyone without exception had to offer the sacrifice to the idols. Many, afraid of torture, complied. However, Saint Terence and forty other Christians bravely affirmed their faith in the Savior and ridiculed the idols. Fortunianus was amazed at their boldness and he asked how they as rational people, could confess as God, One Whom the Jews crucified as a malefactor.

Saint Terence answered that their belief was in the Savior, Who voluntarily endured death on the Cross and rose on the third day. Fortunianus saw that Terence inspired the others by his example, and so he ordered him to be isolated in prison with his three closest companions: Africanus, Maximus, and Pompeius. Fortunianus was determined to force the rest of the martyrs, including Zeno, Alexander and Theodore, to renounce Christ. Neither threats nor terrible tortures could sway the holy martyrs. They burned them with red-hot iron, they poured vinegar on the wounds, they sprinkled on salt, and they raked them with iron

claws. In spite of their sufferings, the saints did not weaken in their confession of Christ, and the Lord gave them strength.

Fortunianus gave orders to lead the martyrs into the pagan temple, and once again he urged them to offer sacrifice to the idols. The valiant warriors of Christ cried out, “O Almighty God, Who once sent down fire on Sodom for its iniquity, destroy this impious temple of idolatry.” The idols fell down with a crash, and then the temple lay in ruins. The enraged governor gave orders to execute them, and the martyrs, glorifying God, bowed their necks beneath the executioner’s sword. After the execution of the thirty-six martyrs, Fortunianus summoned Terence, Maximus, Africanus and Pompeius before him. He showed them the martyrs’ bodies and again urged them to offer sacrifice to the idols. The martyrs refused. The governor put heavy chains on them, and gave orders to starve them to death. By night, an angel of the Lord removed the martyrs’ chains and fed them.

In the morning, the guards found the saints cheerful and strong. Then Fortunianus ordered sorcerers and conjurers to carry snakes and all kinds of poisonous creatures into the prison. The guards looked into the cell through an opening in the ceiling and saw the martyrs unharmed, praying, and the snakes crawling at their feet. When the sorcerers opened the door of the prison cell, the snakes bit them. The furious Fortunianus gave orders to behead the holy martyrs. Christians took up their holy bodies and buried them with reverence outside the city. (*from oca.org*)

Social Team for April 17

Team 6 is up next week - Cooper, M. Blaydoe, Roberta Corson, Mary V. Thank you!

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In Your Prayers – Please Remember... His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch BARTHOLOMEW, His Eminence Metropolitan GREGORY, Fr. Joseph & Family, His Grace Bishop Neofitos of Nyeri & Mt. Kenya, Tatyana & Slava Chumak & family, Luke & Marlena Cooper, Roberta Corson, Jon Church, Tina Crull, Mary Diane David, Howl family, Andrew Kinn, Kopan family, Valentina Makowelski, Susan Matula, Anna Meinhold, David & Kathryn Newman, John Reece, Mary Reed, Rose Song, Dcn. Nectarios & Ia, Mother Virginia Marie & the Carmelite Nuns of Port Tobacco, the suffering people of Ukraine, and those in need of our prayers. (Please advise Fr. Joseph of changes.)