

Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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✠ **April 14, 2013** ✠

Fourth Sunday of Lent

St. John of the Ladder

St. Martin the Confessor, Pope of Rome (655)

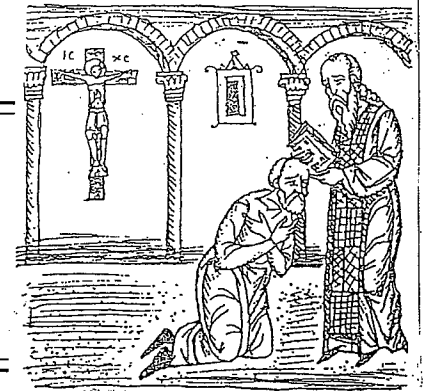


The "Ladder" of St. John Climacus

Many Years! Newly Illumined Child Jesse Potts!

Fifth Week of Great Lent

- ✠ **Wednesday, April 17, 6:30pm Presanctified Liturgy**
- ✠ **Thursday, April 18, 6:30pm Great Canon of St. Andrew**
- ✠ **Friday, April 19, 6:30pm Akathist Hymn to the Theotokos**



The Ladder of Divine Ascent, is a sure guide to the ascetic life, written by a great man of prayer experienced in all forms of the monastic life. It teaches the seeker after salvation how to lay a sound foundation for his struggles, how to detect and war against each of the passions, how to avoid the snares laid by the demons, and how to rise from the rudimental virtues to the heights of God-like love and humility. It is held in such high esteem that it is universally read in its entirety in monasteries during the Great Fast. What is the lesson that we can take from St John Climacus? First of all, our spiritual progress is both a journey and a destination, undertaken in a spirit of repentance and humility.

From St. John:

✠ Do not be surprised that you fall every day; do not give up, but stand your ground courageously. And assuredly, the angel who guards you will honor your patience. While a wound is still fresh and warm, it is easy to heal; but old, neglected and festering ones are hard to cure, and require for their care much treatment, cutting, plastering and cauterization. Many from long neglect become incurable, but with God all things are possible.

✠ Do all the good you can; do not speak evil of anyone; do not steal from anyone; do not lie to anyone; do not be arrogant towards anyone; do not hate anyone; do not be absent from the divine services; be compassionate to the needy; do not offend anyone; do not wreck another man's domestic happiness, and be content with what your own wives can give you. If you behave in this way, you will not be far from the Kingdom of Heaven.

St. John Climacus

Double Wings – Prayer and Fasting

✠ He that prays with fasting hath his wings double, and lighter than the very winds. ... For nothing is mightier than a man who prays sincerely. ... But if thy body be too weak to fast continually, still it is not too weak for prayer, nor without vigor for contempt of the belly. For although thou canst not fast, yet canst thou avoid luxurious living.

St. John Chrysostom

If We Confess...

"If you wish to defeat the Devil, when he brings you shame, say first of all that sin which causes you the greatest embarrassment. ~ St. Nikodemus of the Holy Mt. (1809)

Lovers of Slander and Gossip

"A single good word made the Thief pure and holy, despite all his previous crimes, and brought him into Paradise (cf. Luke 23:42-43). A single ill-advised word prevented Moses from entering the Promised Land (cf. Num. 20:12). We should not suppose, then, that talkativeness is only a minor disease. Lovers of slander and gossip shut themselves out of the Kingdom of Heaven."

St. John of Karpathos

On Blessed Talkativeness... Confession

"You see that it is good to make confession... Ahab... the King of Samaria, became a most wicked idolator, an outrageous man, the murderer of the Prophets (cf. I Kgs. 18:4), a stranger to godliness, a coveter of other men's fields and vineyards. Yet when by Jezebel's means he had slain Naboth, and the Prophet Elijah came and merely threatened him, he rent his garments and put on sackcloth. And what said the merciful God to Elijah? 'Have you seen how Ahab is pricked in the heart before Me?' (I Kgs. 21:29) as if almost He would persuade the fiery zeal of the Prophet to condescend to the penitent. For He says, 'I will not bring evil in his days'. And though after this forgiveness he was sure not to depart from his wickedness, nevertheless the forgiving God forgave him, not as being ignorant of the future, but as granting a forgiveness corresponding to the present season of repentance. For it is the part of a righteous judge to give sentence according to each case that has occurred."

St. Cyril of Jerusalem

Some Counsels About Confession

An Instruction of St. Theophan the Recluse (+1894)

The Fear Factor

There are some people that fear Confession. But why? The priest is merely the witness, the Lord accepts the sins. It is He who commands the priest to give absolution to the person who confesses. It is the Lord Who is merciful. He is just waiting for a person to confess his sins, and as soon as he does, the Lord immediately forgives him. What is there to fear from such a Lord?

The Misgiving Factor

A reason that some people feel uneasy about Confession is because they go too infrequently. If they were to confess more often, they would be more at ease. And yet, another misgiving that others have is because they are not sure what should be said at Confession. Write down everything you find you need to say at Confession, and when you go to the priest, tell him everything with the help of your notes. A true Confession must indeed be your own; that is, the person who confesses must himself tell everything in which he has sinned without expecting the priest to ask him. You yourself are to tell everything that is on your conscience. It is possible to remember everything without notes, just make sure that you yourself tell everything.

Forgiveness

✘ The drunkard, the fornicator, the proud - he will receive God's mercy. But he who *does not want* to forgive, to excuse, to justify consciously, intentionally ... that person closes himself to eternal life before God, and even more so in the present life. He is turned away and not heard.

Elder Sampson of Russia (20th C)

The Sunday of St. John of the Ladder

On this day, the fourth Sunday of Great Lent, we commemorate our venerable Father among the saints, Saint John of Sinai, the author of *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*.

No one knows the birthplace or parentage of our venerable Father John of Sinai. In his youth, at the age of sixteen, he came to the wilderness of Sinai and dwelt under the guidance of Abba Martyrius.

When Abba Martyrius tonsured our venerable Father John at the age of twenty, he took him and went to that pillar of the wilderness, Abba John the Sabbaite in the wilderness of Gouda where he had with him his disciple Stephen the Cappadocian. When the Sabbaite elder saw them, he arose and took water, poured it into a small basin, washed the feet of the disciple (the young John) and kissed his hand; but he did not wash the feet of Abba Martyrius his superior. Abba Stephen was scandalized by the situation. After the departure of Abba Martyrius and his disciple, Abba John noticed that his own disciple was greatly perplexed and said to him, "Why are you so troubled? Believe me, I do not know who the boy is, but today I received the abbot of Sinai and washed his feet." After forty years, he did indeed become the abbot according to the prophecy of the elder. After the passing of his spiritual father, Saint John continued alone in the wilderness in a cave in Wadi Thola. He traveled from time to time, going at least once as far as Alexandria. He records in *The Ladder* his visit to a large monastic community there and the marvels of repentance, obedience, and humility which he observed. In his humility, he counted our venerable George the Wonderworker of Arselaou as his master. In all, he spent some forty years in solitude and stillness. He guided the monks who dwelt in that desert since he was a most excellent and nurturing spiritual father — for in those days there were innumerable ascetics living in cells all through the mountains and valleys of Sinai. From time to time, he received visitors from farther away. At one point, some other monks, prompted to jealousy by the adversary who hates all good, complained of Abba John's fame and teaching. In response, he humbly kept strict silence for over a year, until the same fathers who had complained came, asking him to speak again for the benefit of all.

After he had spent forty years in the wilderness, the monks of Sinai asked him to become abbot of the great monastery built by the emperor Justinian beside the Burning Bush of Moses, the Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine. In obedience to the fathers, he left his blessed solitude to take up the responsibilities of abbot. It is told that on the very day on which he assumed the office of abbot, there came a group of about six hundred pilgrims. When they were seated, our venerable Father John saw someone in the crowd with short hair and wearing a Jewish tunic. This person was going about like someone with authority, directing the cooks, the stewards, the storekeepers, and other workers. After the people left, when the servers all sat down to eat, they sought everywhere for the one who had been going about supervising, but did not find him. Then the servant of God, our venerable Father John, said, "Let him go. The lord Moses did nothing strange in this same place where he served before and which belongs to him." O, the wonder! It had been the Holy Prophet and Lawgiver Moses who had served the guests.

At the request of Abba John, Abbot of Raitho near the shore of the Red Sea, our venerable Father wrote his wonderful book, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, in which he sets out the whole of Christian life as a divine ascent of thirty rungs to Christ. This book has been a treasure, a pearl beyond price, to this day. It is useful not only to monastics but to all devout Christians. He also wrote, for Abba John, a shorter exhortation, "To the Shepherd," in which he set out the stature and work of the father and shepherd of souls who must guide, not so much by words but by the light of holiness in which he lives.

Saint John was a true physician of souls and had great spiritual insight into men's behavior. He made detailed observations of the symptoms of men's sin-sick souls, diagnosed their spiritual diseases, and prescribed the appropriate medicine for their recovery and salvation. He showed how one can ascend the "ladder of the virtues" step by step and reach the Promised Land, fleeing the Egypt of the passions. Yet, his success was due only to his own life of constant watchfulness, fasting, vigils, and prayer.

The monastic community he shepherded continues to this day beside the Burning Bush, and his teachings guide and direct monastics throughout the world. During Great Lent, The Ladder is read aloud in monasteries during meals so the monastics may receive his edifying spiritual counsels for their souls' sustenance, as they simultaneously receive physical nourishment for their bodies.

Today, the cave in which he dwelt in the wilderness of Sinai can still be seen, but his resting place is unknown except to the angels. He fell asleep in the Lord in the seventh century. Saint John is also commemorated on March 30, the day of his repose.

O Christ our God, through the intercessions of our venerable Father John of The Ladder, have mercy on us and save us! Amen.

How Do The Bodies Of Saints Become God's Instruments For healings And Other Miracles? *St. Symeon the New Theologian*

A soul that has been sanctified has been accounted worthy of becoming a partaker of divine grace; this soul necessarily sanctifies its whole body, since the soul holds the body together and is present in all its parts. For this reason the grace of the Holy Spirit, just as it appropriates to itself the soul, so too it appropriates to itself the body. However, as long as the soul is united with the body, the All-Holy Spirit does not bring all of the body fully to its own glory, because it is necessary that the soul show its will until the end of life. But when the end comes, and the soul separates from the body, then, as the struggle has ceased and the soul has won and departs from the body with the wreath of incorruptibility, then I say, the grace of the Holy Spirit appropriates to itself and sanctifies fully the body of such a soul. And for this reason the bare bones and bodies of Saints emit remedies and cure diseases.

It makes no difference what it is that has soiled the purity of the soul; the time comes and one must clean it and wash away the uncleanness with repentance.

-- New Hieromartyr Archbishop Barlaam

Not Three Times a Year

“Wounds displayed in public will not grow worse, but will be healed” (St. John Climacus).

To the extent, then, my brother and fellow-sinner, that the Grace of the All-Compassionate God has helped you to perceive your sinfulness, to repent and make the great decision to confess, I give you one further piece of advice: do not postpone it even for a minute! You should be reconciled immediately with your Creator, Whom you have so greatly grieved and scorned. When a man happens to be with you and is troubled and scandalized, and does not speak to you, but has an aversion to you, you immediately run to him to reconcile with him. You get others to act as go-betweens, and many times you send some gift in order to restore the love and peace between you. You cannot sleep from the disquiet. If, then, it happens thus with people, how can you rest nonchalantly the moment you have so grieved our Heavenly Father and God? If, again, you suffer from a serious illness and they inform you that there is a chance that you may die, do you remain carefree? Certainly not! You run to doctors, you spend money, you leave aside your tasks, however pressing they may be, and you ask in agony: “What will become of me? Am I at risk? Am I seriously ill?” etc.

But there is also something very important that you should know. If you succeed in confessing and being washed of the uncleanness of your sins with the Grace of the Holy Spirit do not think that they are all now at an end, that “this is as far as they went.” No, do not ever believe this! It is precisely now that the great journey, the great struggle, begins. With your Confession you made an agreement with God in some way and promised that you would now belong to His army, to His followers, to His faithful children. And this army is in a continuous war and consequently you will be at war non-stop, albeit a spiritual war. Be sure you understand this.

When a villager sits quietly and humbly and works on his land, and looks after his animals and does not bother anyone, then no one is afraid of him, no one disturbs him. But if this villager becomes rebellious and gathers other men together, and they take up weapons and head for the hills, terrorizing the world and threatening the state and the government, then what happens? The authorities are aroused and the army comes to reinforce them, and a continuous war is brought about, until the rebels are annihilated. So it is with repentance and spiritual warfare. As long as man is a slave of the Devil with his sin and unbelief, the evil one does not disturb him. But when he rebels, that is, repents (for repentance in essence is a spiritual uprising to separate oneself from the slavery of sin), then the Devil disturbs him and is afraid of losing his slave, and for this reason “turns every stone” in order to stave off the redemption of mankind by devising temptations and unbearable difficulties. In this way, then, does the good and spiritual army of God—His Church Militant, as She is typically called—fight as a whole and resist the Devil and his minions.

However, as you know, war is not without bloodshed. Many are killed, and more are wounded. So also, after Confession, you can be wounded and injured. This is why you must always run again immediately to the spiritual surgery, to find the Priest, to show him your wound, and to tell him how you were wounded, and he, with the enlightenment of God, will wash your wound and put the appropriate remedies on it, and give you the spiritual prescription that you must apply in order to get well.

Every time, that is, when you fall - out of the envy of the Devil and out of your infirmity and inexperience - do not despair. Run quickly! Do not postpone it! Do not let the wound putrefy and create other wounds, which will gradually bring on your death. Do not go to Confession only on the Great Feasts, as the majority of people are accustomed—quite wrongly—to doing. On Pascha, Nativity and during the Dormition Fast one sees them running (and particularly at the last minute, after they have prepared everything in the house) in great haste, without awareness and true repentance, to tell the confessor some of those sins which in their opinion should be mentioned.

They say with a clear conscience, "That's over with," and return to their homes, without any change in their lives or their ideas, since the Life-giving Grace of the Holy Spirit did not fill their hearts and did not give them spiritual power. They remain as they were before: dead.

But I ask you: When your head is hurting, do you not take an aspirin to get rid of it? Can it be that you wait three times a year to take it? Is it not irrational that while we look after the body, and quite excessively at that (the body which will be buried in the earth in a few years and eaten by worms), on the other hand we leave our soul vacant and unprotected against the onslaughts of the Devil, who makes it his slave and after death takes it with him to Hell forever?

We should confess, therefore, on a very regular basis. Let us ask forgiveness of God, through the confessor, even for the smallest sins, which, however small they may appear, gradually become entire mountains that close our path to the Kingdom of Heaven. When a certain wayfarer was asked where his stride was most impeded, he replied that he was hindered to an unimaginable degree in the wilderness, because his shoes gradually filled with sand and he could not walk. Let us not forget, furthermore, that however large a ship may be, not much is needed for it to sink: a hole that is small, but will not be closed in a timely manner, is enough to become the problem. And a sheet that is completely white does not need much dirt on it for you to call it filthy; a single smudge is sufficient for it to become dirty.

St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite, in examining the subject of small (forgivable) and great (deadly) sins, reaches the following conclusions:

- (1) "... Many small sins make a big one..., when a man despises the small as small."
- (2) "... All sins are condemned equally, because the Lord said: 'whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin' (St. John 8:34)."
- (3) "... Both the small sin and the great are equally a transgression of the law, according to St. John: 'sin is the transgression of the law' (I John 3:4) and disobedience to the Son: 'he that believeth not the Son shall not see life' (St John 3:36)."
- (4) "... And the small sin becomes great when it dominates the one who commits it: 'for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage' (II Peter 2:19)."
- (5) "... The beam and the mote, that is, the great sin and the small, differ insofar as they do not receive the same punishment, but they do not differ insofar as they cast those who commit them out of the Kingdom of Heaven."

So then, my brother, do not confess three times a year, even for form's sake. Do not let so much time pass, for who knows when death will find you before you have relieved your soul of the weight of your sins? Death is something about which no one knows when it will come. It could be now, it could be after a short while, it could be tomorrow. Will you be given time, I wonder, before you die to say what burdens you, or will you go with your sins to Hell forever?

Do not leave sin inside you, my brother, lest it "takes root" and becomes a tree, which is subsequently uprooted only with difficulty. While your sins are still a small plant, extract them immediately, for that is easy. Do not put it off. Cast out at once whatever evil the Devil sows in you, and destroy it lest it lingers. In this case the Demon will take fright and fall into despair, and he will leave you in peace, because he knows that you will uproot with Confession everything he is going to plant, and so what reason does he have for bothering?

St. Nicodemos writes very charmingly: "Storks have a custom of not returning to the place where they have destroyed their nests. So it is with the demons: they withdraw from one who confesses frequently, because by frequent Confession he destroys their nests and nets, as the demons

themselves said to a virtuous man, how they have no power over one who confesses frequently, nor any place in him."

When you are accustomed to confessing regularly, then you will learn also to pay more attention to your soul. You will learn to look after it and cleanse it so that the Triune God may be united with it. Your heart will always be pure and you will see God noetically and taste Paradise even from earth, because the Lord said: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (St Matthew 5:8).

I tell you again, my brother, do not be like those unfortunate Christians who, when the Great Feasts arrive (Pascha, Nativity, etc.), see to it that for many days they prepare the house and pastries, procure different foods, new clothes, etc., and who run on the final day, for form's sake, to find a confessor, become impatient when they cannot accomplish this quickly, and get agitated, only to end up telling some of their sins in a hasty and impromptu manner, without repentance, and leave with their conscience supposedly clear that "it's over and done with." If Confession were like that, then alas and woe for us! Where is the concentration? Where is the repentance? Where is the shocking realization that we have grieved our Creator and Father by our sins? Where is the contrition and compunction? Where is the self-examination? There cannot be a worse blasphemy against the Holy Spirit! {Metropolitan Cyprian of Oropos & Fili, Greece, *Do You Have a Ticket?* Ch. 11, 1994}

On our need to accept all afflictions without grumbling:

Blessed Elder Nikon of Russia (+1963):

"We should not fall victims to despondency, grumbling about our illness and sorrows, for God has established a law firmer than heaven and earth: that only through many trials is it possible to enter the Kingdom of God. We have now come to such a period in the history of humanity when one is saved exclusively through enduring sorrows without a murmur --- with faith in God and hope in his mercy. Today, there are no other paths by which to attain salvation. For our times, one path alone is left to us: the patient endurance of sorrows. Saint Isaac the Syrian writes: ***'More precious to God than any sacrifice are the sorrows endured because of Him and for His sake.'*** We should accept every affliction without argument, with the thought of the wise thief: that we receive these sorrows justly for our sins --- for the cleansing and salvation of our souls. With this attitude, every sorrow takes on a quality of sorrow for the Lord's sake, and our personal cross is transformed into the Cross of Christ; and through it we find salvation. ***'If we suffer with Christ, we shall also reign with Him (II Timothy 2:12)'***, says the Apostle Paul.

Christian Values by St. Nikolai Velimirovich

The Christian Faith is the only Faith in the world that has one determined and never changing standard of values. About how it [Christianity] measures and classifies its values, St. John Chrysostom speaks clearly.

He says, "Things have a three-fold distinction: the first are good and cannot be evil, for example: wisdom, charity and the like; the second are evil and can never be good, for example: perversion, inhumanity and cruelty. The third, at times becomes this or at times becomes that, whenever, according to the disposition of those who make use of it."

This divine teacher explains, "how riches and poverty, and freedom and slavery, and power and disease and even death itself fall into the neutral distinction which, are neither good nor evil by themselves, but become either this or that according to the disposition of men and according to the use which men make of them. For example, if riches were good and poverty evil, then all rich men would be good and all the poor would be evil. However, we are daily convinced that as there are good and evil rich men, so also are there good and evil poor men. The same can be applied to the healthy and the sick, to the free and the enslaved, to the satiated and the hungry, to those who are in authority and to those under subjugation. Even death is not evil, for the martyrs, through death, became more fortunate than all."

LENT: A TIME FOR CONFESSION

Did you know that Christ himself instituted Confession? Christ breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive ye the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if ye retain the sins of any, they are retained. (John 20:22-23)

Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matt. 18:17-18; 16:19)

Priests are the instrument of God's mercy. Sins are remitted not on their authority, but in the name of the Holy Trinity through the office of the Priesthood.

Do you know how the early Christians did Confession?

Early Christians confessed to the entire congregation. Why do people now do it in private to a pastor? The body of Christians is weaker now. To confess publicly might lead others into temptation rather than inspire prayerful compassion and sympathetic collaboration in fulfilling the Commandments.

Confessing to the Priest is the same as if it were said to all as he is the head of the community.

Is it true that we need God's help to overcome our sinfulness?

We cannot overcome our sinfulness on our own power. We need the grace of God. The Sacrament of Confession is a renewal of our baptism cleansing us of our past sinfulness and making a new commitment to change.

Have you been to Confession recently?

It is not enough to know our sins and hate them. We must also confess them before God and man. Some say there is not a need for this because I can confess directly to God. This is nonsense. Confession to God in secret is not confession at all. By definition it is open and public. If not, it is not confession. St. James commands: "Confess your sins to one another!" (Jas 5:16)

Great Lent is a time for confession. One who fails to do so is hardly a Christian, certainly not Orthodox.

~ Fr. Thomas Hopko

REFLECTION – Works, by the Power and Will of God

"No good works are accomplished by our efforts alone but by the power and will of God. Nevertheless, God demands effort on our part in conforming to His will." These are the words of Saints Barsanuphius and John. Few words but much said. We are obliged to labor, to cultivate and to prepare every good thing, and if some good will take root, grow and bring forth fruit, that is up to the power and will of God. We plow the furrows and God sows, if He wills it. We cleanse the vessels of the Spirit and God pours the Spirit into these vessels, if He wills it. He can do anything if He wills it. And He will do everything that responds to the highest wisdom and suitability, that is, to His plan of man's salvation. In interpreting the words of our Lord, "So be shrewd as serpents and simple as doves" (St. Matthew 10:16), St. John Chrysostom writes that our Lord gave this commandment to His disciples that "they themselves should cooperate in some way, so that it will not appear that all effort is of Grace alone and for them not to think that they received the wreaths of glory for nothing." And so, both of them are indispensable for our salvation: our effort and the power of God's Grace.

~ St. Nikolai, the Prologue