

Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:1-2).

In modern America many distractions hinder spiritual living in Christ. The lure of materialism surrounds us. Leisure time, entertainment, self-indulgence in vain and fleeting worldly pursuits hinder us. We too easily fall prey to the “eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die” philosophy which prevents us from assuming responsibility and being accountable to God. A workaholic life-style, over-indulgence in food, drugs and alcohol, obsession with youth and sex, greed, indifference to the things of God...these are but some of the areas that consume people’s time and lives to the exclusion of a spiritual orientation.

During Lent, the Church calls us all to repentance and invites us to re-examine our life-styles to determine whether they conform to Christ’s gospel or not.

Repentance (metanoia in Greek) literally means “a change of mind” and heading in a different direction towards God. It represents a necessary act in a Christian life. Lenten seasons provide an ideal time for us to center our attention on the teachings of the gospel. God always stands ready to receive our confession and lead us back to himself. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9) Once we feel God’s forgiveness, we become

new people. C.S. Lewis, the great 20th century Christian apologist, who lived the first half of his life as a confirmed atheist and the second half as a devout believer, mentions that joy and optimism replaced gloom and depression after he became a Christian. His worldview went from that of a pessimist to a hope-filled optimist with a positive attitude towards life. God became paramount in his life. He found himself loving and caring for people immensely more after his conversion. Christ’s dictum resonated completely with Lewis’s personal experience: “Whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

This brings us to another facet of repentance. Enter joy. Jesus said there “will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.” (Luke 15:7). Joy in heaven, but especially joy in the penitent believer! “Let all those rejoice who put their trust in You...Let those who love Your name be joyful in You. For You, O Lord, will bless the righteous,” writes the Psalmist (5:11-12). “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!” exclaims the Apostle Paul to the early Christians. Fr. Anthony Coniaris has recently published a marvelous book on *Holy Joy: The Heartbeat of Faith* which expounds on this reality of Christian faith.

Our Lord Jesus gives us this joy which the world cannot ever take away. The

promises of his gospel give us a spiritual worldview and a vision of eternity and heaven that supercede anything we enjoy in this earthly life. “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.” (John 15:11)

For whom is this infinite, supreme joy meant? For everyone who repents, “The Lord is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.” (1 Peter 3:9) And St. Paul adds, “God our Savior desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” (1 Timothy 2:3-4)

May each one of us enter the blessings of repentance, renewed faith, and the joy of Christ.

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“What do you do in a monastery everyday, anyway?” a curious young woman asked a pious monk. “All day long we fall down and get up, fall down and get up, fall down and get up.”

Ever since the fall of Adam and the advent of Jesus Christ, symbolically the new and second Adam, we humans have been falling down from our sins and rising up again in Christ Our Lord to new life and hope (1 Corinthians 15:21-22)

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel,” Jesus said as he began his public ministry (Mark 1:15). The gospel (“evangelion” in Greek) means “Good News”. It refers to the good news about God’s love for the world. When we turn to Christ and his gospel, we become the children of God (John 1:12). God both accepts us back and restores us to a place of honor when we repent and live according to the gospel.

The parable of the Prodigal Son and the Loving Father dramatizes this spiritual restoration. The memorable words we hear from the father in that

luminous story touches even strident cynics: “Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet.... for this my son was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found.” (Luke 15:23-24)

What distinguishes followers of Christ who become children of God? They die to sin and sinful desires by intent and practice. They are born anew from above. Our Lord told Nicodemus that a person who desires “to see the kingdom of God” needs to be born of water and the spirit. (John 3:1-5)

At baptism we renounce the Devil and acknowledge Christ as Lord. We receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. In so doing we also renounce sin. The Apostle Paul expresses this Christian experience well: “Reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive in God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6:11)

Yet despite our baptism and our promise and good intentions to follow Christ, we still sin. We betray our baptismal vows. We fall victims to the temptations of the flesh and the wiles of the Devil. We know what is right and good, but we do exactly the opposite, as St. Paul describes in his own experience. (Romans 7:13-25)

“O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” agonizes the Apostle when considering his tendency to sin (Romans 7:24). Not one to despair, however, he remembers his miraculous conversion on the road to Damascus and how Christ always

comes to his rescue. “I thank God--- through Jesus Christ our Lord!” He adds on another occasion, “If God is for us, who can be against us?”

In our struggle to follow the straight and narrow way that leads to a Christ-centered life, we turn to the saints to help us. The living tradition of the Church contains numerous models of faith. Beginning with the apostle Peter, leader of the twelve, we meet one who lived three years with Jesus, witnessed his miracles and perfection, acknowledged him first as the long-awaited for Messiah, yet at a crucial moment denied three times that he even knew him.

What saved Peter was his repentance. He repented with bitter tears for betraying his Lord. He then spent the rest of his life feeding the Lord’s sheep and bringing others to repentance and a saving knowledge of Christ.

“Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit,” he told the people of Jerusalem in his powerful sermon on Pentecost. (Acts 2:38)

Later Peter would advise the first Christians to “be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world”. (II Peter 1:4)

The Jesus Prayer, known as the prayer of the heart, is repeated often by Orthodox believers in their desire to repent regularly and live always under

God’s mercy: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me the sinner.”

We remember St. Mary of Egypt every Lent as another model of repentance. St. Mary spent the first part of her life living in lust and luxury as a harlot. Her encounter with God and the Theotokos in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem brought her to repentance. She spent the next 48 years of her life in the wilderness living in repentance and prayer and in extreme asceticism. Her brief and providential meeting with the Monk Priest Zossima in the final years of her life and her sudden death after confession and communion has provided the Church with a remarkable story of penitence, sorrow, faith, and spiritual renewal that gripes us annually during Lent.

Sorrow for sin is a blessing and necessary ingredient on the road to repentance. The Apostle Peter and St. Mary of Egypt, examples of two among many who manifested “holy sorrow” for sin, demonstrate this well, as does also the prodigal son. His contrite confession exhibits sorrow and a desire to transform his life: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.” (Luke 15:18-19)

The pathway to repentance does not end here. After repentance comes action. It is an action that leads to moral living, a deeper understanding of the two great biblical commandments

of loving God and loving others, prayerful life, and a desire to please God by deed and word.

For example, St. Paul the persecutor of Christians becomes an apostle to the nations and arguably the greatest missionary in history. St. John Chrysostom sells all and gives to the poor and becomes a charismatic preacher and teacher of the gospel, a social reformer, a prodigious expositor of Scripture, a champion of the underdog and a martyr for Christ. St. Xenia of St. Petersburg becomes a fool for Christ and miracle worker. St. Kassiani renounces the world and as a nun composes classical hymnology for the Church. Fr. John Veniaminov, married and father of six children, accepts the call of Christ to bring the gospel to pagan natives of Alaska. He goes down in history as St. Innocent of Alaska, Apostle to America, an accomplisher of tremendous feats of faith and action.

The saints provide us with a “cloud of witnesses” of sinners who repented and became new people in Christ. The writer of Hebrews comments on this rich legacy and exhorts believers as follows: “Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto