

SUNDAY OF THE PRODIGAL SON



Icon of the Prodigal Son

A REFLECTION ON OUR READINGS FOR THIS WEEKEND

On this third weekend of the preparation period for the Great Fast, the Church would have us remember the Parable of the Prodigal Son as shared with us in Luke's Gospel. She has paired with this parable a reading from Paul's first letter to the Christian community in Corinth. It is a very interesting pairing of readings.

In the passage from Paul's letter we hear these words: *You must know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is within - the Spirit you have received from God. You are not your own.* This is taken from a section of the sixth chapter of Paul's letter wherein he addresses the topic of sexual immorality.

Perhaps this passage was chosen because the Parable from the Gospel suggests that one of the things that the Prodigal Son did was spend his father's inheritance on "loose women," according to the older son. I don't really think, however, that this is the real message of this Parable. Nevertheless, the Church has paired these two readings together.

Many Eastern Christian writers have interpreted the Parable of the Prodigal Son as relating to the essential characteristic of *metanoia* as a: "Return from Exile". This emphasizes the reality that in order for us to personally transform ourselves, we have to realize that we humans are born not "fully" in communion with God and that the journey of life is to grow in our communion with Him.

I truly believe that there are multiple interpretations of this Parable. One of the interpretations that I fully embrace is that



it is a parable about a "Loving Father" which includes the fact that neither the older or younger son understood how very much their father loved them.

We have to discover God's love for us. To do this we have to develop a true and real trust in God our Father that He will always forgive us and that His love is truly unconditional.

Unfortunately I think that most of Western Christianity emphasizes God's willingness to "punish" us for things we have done out of weakness or human stupidity and therefore influence us to dismiss how absolutely great God's love is for us. Think about it. If we are the *temples of God's Spirit*, as Paul says, then His love and forgiveness is infinite. We only need to return to Him and ask forgiveness.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF EASTERN SPIRITUALITY



In the last issue of this article, I completed thoughts on the *scriptural element* of our Eastern Spirituality. The second element is the *contemplative element*.

The pseudo-Dionysius coined the term “mystical theology” and evolved a theory of contemplation. But it was in the course of the Byzantine Middle Ages that contemplation developed with the Eastern Church as a special discipline and technique. This is mainly due to the movement called *Hesychasm* (from the Greek *Hesychia*, meaning “quiet” - one of an Eastern Church’s ascetical practices that originated among the monks of Mount Athos in the 14th century which practiced a quietistic method of contemplation for the purpose of attaining a beatific vision or similar mystical experience).

The tradition of the *hesychasts* goes back to the very great mystic St. Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022) who was the hegumen or abbot

of St. Mamas of Xylokerkos, author of the Hymns of Divine Love and his disciple Nicetas Stethatos (c. 1050). Mt. Athos afterwards became the center of Hesychasm and, of course, influenced the Eastern Church. During the 14th century, Hesychasm was identified with the theories of St. Gregory Palamas on the “uncreated light”, conceptions disputed by Barlaam and Gregory the Sinaite (*Gregory is still not widely accepted among Western Christians partly because he is very difficult to understand*). In order to understand and estimate Hesychasm, it is advisable to disentangle it from the violent polemics which “Palamism” has raised and which interest dogmatic theology more than spirituality. Four characteristics of the hesychast method are important:

- the striving towards a state of total rest or quiet, which excludes reading, psalmody, meditation;
- the repetition of the “Jesus Prayer”;
- practices designed to help the concentration of the mind, such as physical immobility, control or suspension of breathing, fixation of the eyes on the heart in order to let the mind go back into the heart; and
- the feeling of an inner warmth and physical perception of a “divine light” or “light of Tabor”.

In the next issue I will continue to expand on contemplation as a part of Eastern Spirituality.

LIFE'S PILGRIMAGE: GROWING IN THE LIKENESS OF JESUS

As I have been exploring with you the idea of “Growing in the Likeness of Jesus”, I have been also quoting Maximus the Confessor, one of the great Fathers of the Eastern Church. Many have told me that he is hard to understand. While that may be true, I feel it is truly rewarding to reflect upon what he has to say.

In his view, God will recognize and divinize His own, that is, those who willfully employ their true nature. An intense yearning or desire for a relationship with the Creator, as well as an ability to fulfill it, was bestowed upon the human race by God Himself, Who ever moves His creation toward its end in Himself: “He sets in movement in us an insatiable desire for Himself Who is the Bread of life, wisdom, knowledge and justice.” Unceasingly, God transposes willing humanity “from the lower to the greater,” “from glory to glory,” to what we know as divinization. Maximus writes:

He leads us finally in the supreme ascent in divine realities to the Father of lights wherein he makes us sharers in the divine nature by participating in the grace of the Spirit, through which we receive the title of God’s children and become clothed entirely with the complete person who is the author of this grace, without limiting or defiling him who is Son of God by nature.

What this is all saying is that God had a purpose in mind when He created us and all things. He didn’t just create things for His own amusement, especially humans. He created us to grow in our relationship with Him - a growth that is accomplished by us freely making every attempt to grow in our likeness of Jesus,

Accordingly, to know God is to seek His face without ceasing, to attain progressively to the divine vision which penetrates the luminous



darkness. Still, Maximus does make an ontological distinction between Christ and creature: in the former, “there dwells in bodily form the complete fullness of deity by essence,” while “in us the fullness of deity dwells by grace whenever we have formed in ourselves every virtue and wisdom...in faithful reproduction of the one archetype of a human being, namely Jesus.

So we must ask ourselves several questions:

- *Do I believe that I have been created to grow in my likeness of Jesus?*
 - *Do I believe that my salvation is a cooperative act between God and me?*
- Try to answer these questions.**



Holy Ascension Community News

An Eastern Catholic Church in Plymouth Michigan

PRE-LENTEN MESSAGE



How do I truly allow myself to believe in the LOVE that God has for me? There are things that we can do that will help us come to a deeper understanding of the love that God has for us. Unlike the two

brothers in today's Gospel parable, I can come to this understanding if I

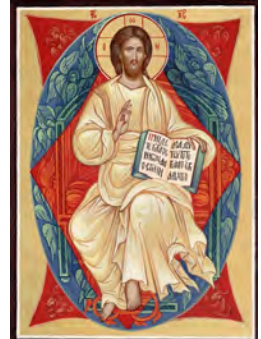
- Trust Jesus Christ today ...
- Admit that I am a sinner and that I need God's help ...
- Am willing to change my mind - the way I think - and heart ...
- Believe that Jesus is the model of how I am to live ...
- Invite Jesus into my heart ... and
- Pray.

Use this first period of the Tridion to think about what you can do during the Great Fast to encourage your spiritual growth. If you truly desire to change, you have to make plans on what you will do.

***You must live in the present,
launch yourself on every wave, find
your eternity in each moment***

CALLED TO HOLINESS

As I have repeatedly shared in this article, the call to holiness is a call to voluntary personal change or transformation. This is the true work of this earthly life. We are given this earthly existence to effect



this personal change so that we can grow in our relationship with God.

Instead of seeing this as a chore, it can be seen as a wonderful and delightful experience or opportunity. Consider this. What will our lives be like if we become more and more like Jesus Christ - if we become more and more like the persons that our God created us to be? Wouldn't life truly be better?

I think that many fear personal change because they believe that life will be more difficult and they can't imagine what it will be like if they change.

Would it not be better if we came to a deeper understanding of the meaning and purpose of life and a deeper and truer understanding of who we are in God's universe? I truly believe that

(Continued on page 8)

HOW TO BE A SINNER

So life is this journey which involves self-discovery - the discovery that we are all sinners, that is persons who will make mistakes and are fallible. Accepting this fact and accepting the idea that God still loves us and does not have unrealistic expectations about us, is truly a step along the way of personal transformation.

One of the potential landmarks along this route of self-discovery is a **big failure**. Suddenly we wake up to the realization that by saying something (or not), by taking a course of action (or not), we have done great damage either to ourselves, to someone else or to the world. The mistake might have taken one second, perhaps when we impulsively press “send” on a really bad email. It might have taken years of festering in a toxic relationship. But suddenly we realize that we have totally blundered, and are filled with regret. Such failures can lead us into vain a replaying of our mental tape-loops, about how stupid I sounded when I made that remark about my colleague. But compunction over our serious errors can sometimes serve as a promising lead-in to a more thorough and constructive inventory of our lives.



Another entry can come from contemplating **the fallenness of the world**. We can observe society’s subtle failures and mediocrities, or dwell on especially horrible events, and find inklings of those tragedies in the depths of our own hearts. Sometimes we step into a realization that - because we are all so thoroughly interconnected - something exists within each of us that contributes to the disastrous state of affairs. Whether we like it or not, we are all part of humankind and therefore, at some level, have to bear the guilt of what humankind does. This doesn’t always sit well with people. We always want to say, “I am not one of those bigoted or prejudiced people who do horrible things.’

A final entry point to consider is **the thought of our mortality**. We’re going to die. The older we get, the idea of our death arrives more frequently as the years speed up and our bodies and minds begin failing us more. We may have to confront it after a near-death experience, an accident, a heart attack, preparation for serious surgery or the purchase of a burial plot. The realization that we will inevitable die has a way of cutting through some of our self-justification.

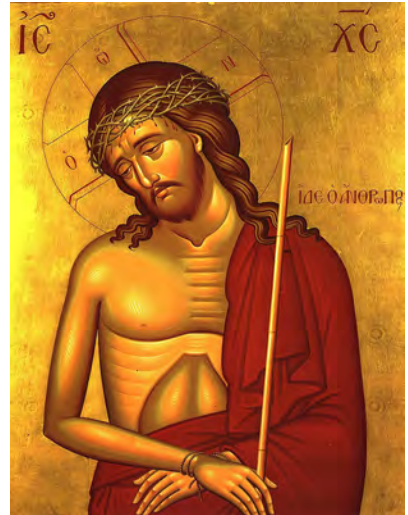
THE LENTEN TRIODION

Since we have entered into the period of our Liturgical Year which is called the TRIODION, I have decided to temporarily suspend the article THE HOLY TRINITY: STRUCTURE OF SUPREME LOVE and share more information about this important period in our Liturgical Year.

Before the festival of Easter there has developed a long preparatory season of repentance and fasting, extending in present usage over ten weeks. First come 22 days (four successive weekends) of preliminary observance; then the six weeks or forty days of the great Fast of Lent; and finally Holy Week. Balancing the seven weeks of Lent and Holy Week, there follows a corresponding season of 50 days of thanksgiving, concluding with Pentecost.

Each of these seasons has its own liturgical book. For the time of preparation there is the Lenten Triodion. For the time of thanksgiving there is the Pentekostarion, known in Slav usage as the Festal Triodion.

The Lenten Triodion can most briefly be described as *the book of the fast*. Just as the children of Israel ate the 'bread of affliction' in preparation for the Great Passover, so Christians prepare themselves for the celebration of the New Passover by observing a fast. But what is meant by this word 'fast.' Here the utmost care is needed, so as to preserve a proper balance between the outward and the inward. On the outward level fasting involves physical abstinence from food and drink, and without such exterior abstinence a full and true fast cannot be kept. Yet the rules about eating and drinking must never be treated as an end in themselves, for ascetic fasting has always an inward and unseen purpose. Man is a unity of



body and soul, a *living creature fashioned from natures visible and invisible*, in the words of the Triodion. Our ascetic fasting should therefore involve both these natures at once. The tendency to over-emphasize external rules about food in a legalistic way, and the opposite tendency to scorn these rules as outdated and unnecessary, are both alike to be deplored as a betrayal of true Christianity. In both cases the proper balance between the outward and the inward has been impaired.

I shall continue this information to truly prepare us for the Great Fast.

Schedule of Services

Holy Ascension
Eastern Catholic Church
1062 Church Street
Plymouth, MI 48170

Rev Wayne J. Ruchgy PhD
Serving Priest

Rectory: (313) 582-1424
Emergency: (313) 580-4412
WRuchgy@gmail.com

LITURGY SCHEDULE

Saturdays

5:30 PM English

Lenten Services

Wednesdays @ 7:45 PM

Religious Education

September-June

SACRAMENTS

Penance

By Appointment

Baptism & Matrimony

*Six-month membership
required*

Funerals

*Membership of an
immediate
family member required*

Saturday, February 16 - Weekend of the Prodigal Son - Tone 6

5:30 PM - Special Intention

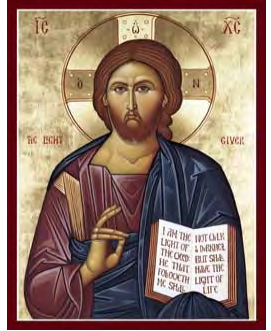
Saturday, February 23 - Weekend of Meatfare - Tone 7

5:30 PM - Special Intention

(Continued from page 5 - Called to Holiness)

the more we know about the true meaning of life, the more really contented we become.

Of course the objection can always be raised about whether we can ever know the meaning and purpose of life. It is all a matter of **BELIEF!** We must always remember that we can never truly "prove" anything. We can not more prove that life is "a bitter experience which only results in death" than we can prove that 'life is the wonderful gift from God given to us out of love for the sake of our spiritual growth'. It is all a matter of belief and our personal perspective. Is your glass half-full or half-empty? It is all how we look at things. I, for one, believe, because I have the witness of Jesus, that life is a wonderful and exciting experience.



Prayer Request

Please remember in your prayers.

Loretta Simon
Larry Tailard

Life's Journey is an ascension to the Heavenly Father that is made

through personal attitudinal change and spiritual

Promote Holy Ascension by sharing our website

<http://www.holyascensionugcc.com>

EVERYDAY FUND-RAISING FOR HOLY ASCENSION

Here are several ways to help raise funds for Holy Ascension.

KROGER CARD: Register your name and number

GOOD SEARCH: Use this Internet search engine to gain credit for Holy Ascension. Use *Good Shop* to shop online.

GIFT CARDS

Holy Ascension offers gift cards for a variety of stores in the community. Use them and help Holy Ascension.

BUSCH'S

Re-loadable gift cards available for these stores.

USED CANS: Holy Ascension recycles eligible cans

Involvement in these programs is not limited to Holy Ascension members. Family members, neighbors and friends can help.

MORE ABOUT JESUS CHRIST

The notion that humankind was created according to the image of God found an enormous resonance in the hearts and minds of the Fathers, especially the Eastern Fathers, who provided the foundation for our Eastern spirituality. There seem to be several converging reasons for this. First, the importance of the doctrine of creation. We are what we are because God created us. He created us out of nothing; everything that we are is from God. Then, as many of the Fathers remark, there seems to be something special about the creation of humankind: for the rest of creation, God simply said, let something happen - 'Let there be light,' and so on - but in the case of humankind, God seems to consider: 'Let us make humankind' in verse 26 of Genesis and then in the next verse, 'And God made humankind. There seems some special act of deliberation about the creation of humankind. Not only that, the human is made 'according to God's image, according to his likeness': being in God's image and likeness is at the heart of what it is to be human - the human is 'according to his image', he is like God in some way, he reflects in who he is something of what God is.

I truly believe that it is absolutely critical that we reflect upon this statement, namely that we have been created in God's image and according to His likeness. Once we can truly embrace this idea to its fullest, life changes. We begin to see more clearly the meaning and purpose of life.

The Greek Fathers read Genesis in Greek and the Greek, to an educated ear, makes two further suggestions. First, 'according to the image' is quite a strong preposition; it would suggest the question, According to what image? The English 'in the image' just suggests that man was created as the image of God; the Greek raises the possibility of



something much more complex: man created according to the image of God. Who is? The New Testament suggests Christ, the image of God, the one who images forth God in his incarnate state. So maybe there is here, for the Christian Greek ear, the idea that humankind was created according to Christ, who is the image of the Father.

The same can be true about the phrase of being creating unto the likeness of God, which I will write about in the next issue. The Greek is much more nuanced than English and opens a portal to real and true meaning about humankind.

MORE ABOUT HOLY SCRIPTURES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

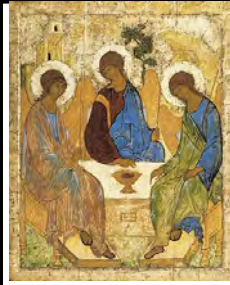
In the fresh material Luke found by personal enquiry, it is possible to see what Luke's preferences were and to see the way his mind worked. Or, to put it more theologically, the Holy Spirit used Luke as his instrument to put the Gospel into a completely new shape, packed with doctrine. The originality of Luke is not in his key ideas (they are identical with those of Mark and of Matthew) but in his religious mentality which, apart from slight traces of Paul's influence, is overwhelmingly distinctive of Luke's personal temperament. Luke, in Dante's phrase, is the 'scriba mansuetudinis Christi', the faithful recorder of Christ's lovingkindness. He is anxious to stress his Master's love of sinners (15:1f,7,10); to record his acts of forgiveness (7:36-50; 15:11-32; 19:1-10; 23:34,39-43); and to contrast his tenderness for the lowly and the poor with his severity towards the proud and towards those who abuse their wealth (1:51-53; 6:20-26; 12:13-21; 14:7-11; 16:15, 19-31; 18:9-14). But in spite of this severity, the wicked however deserving of punishment will not be condemned till the period set aside for mercy has come to an end (13:6-9; see Mk 11:12-14). The one thing necessary is repentance, abdication of self, and on this the gentle, tolerant Luke takes a firm stand, insisting on unflinching and complete detachment (14:25-34), especially from riches (6:34f; 12:33; 14:12-14; 16:9-13).

Another group of passages which are also found only in the third Gospel is on the necessity of prayer (11:5-8; 18:1-8), of which Jesus set the example (3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:28). Finally, Luke is the only one of the Synoptics to give the Holy Spirit the prominence we find in Paul and in Acts (Lk 1:15,35,41,67; 2:25-27; 4:1,14,18; 10:21; 11:13; 24:49). These qualities, combined with that joy in God and that gratitude to him for his gifts which fill the third Gospel (2:14; 5:26; 10:17; 13:17; 18:43; 19:37; 24:51f), are the ones



that go to make Luke's achievement the warm and human thing it is. Mark's Greek is rough, strongly Aramaic, and often faulty; but it is fresh, lively and appealing. Matthew's Greek is also rather Aramaic but smoother than Mark's as well as less picturesque and more correct. Luke's is mixed: when writing independently it is excellent but out of respect for his sources he incorporates their imperfections—after polishing them a little. Occasionally he goes out of his way to give a good imitation of Septuagint Greek

Hopefully this has given my readers a sense of Luke.



THE EASTERN HERALD

СХІДНИЙ ВІСНИК

The Weekly Newsletter of Very Reverend Canon Wayne J. Ruchgy, Ph.D.

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Weekend of the Prodigal Son

February 16-17, 2019

THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE CHRISTIAN EAST

The theological background to the prominence of the idea of deification in Eastern salvation theology is the emphasis of the Eastern Fathers on the Incarnation and the role of the Spirit who communicates the grace that deifies humans and makes them sharers of divine life. They believed that through the Incarnation the mortal had been changed into immortal and the passible into impassible. The great Eastern teachers, Athanasius, both Gregorys and Cyril of Alexandria insisted that it was by the Incarnation of Christ that humanity was anointed by the Holy Spirit. According to Cyril, *Christ filled his whole body with the life-giving power of the Spirit. It was not the flesh that gave life to the Spirit, but the power of the Spirit that gave life to the flesh.*

With regard to *Theosis*, the two patristic texts most often cited are from Irenaeus and Athanasius. Irenaeus: *“The word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ...did through His transcendent Love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.”* Athanasius: *He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God.* Still another early text from Origen is a favored one: according to him, when we transcend the material realm the contemplation of God is brought to *its proper fulfillment* which fulfillment is the spirit to be deified by that which it contemplates. Many other examples from the Eastern Fathers could be added, for example,



Life's Journey is an Ascension to the Heavenly Father

from Gregory of Nyssa who said: *God united Himself to our nature in order that our nature might be made divine through union with God.* Gregory Nazianzus echoes this by saying that as God became incarnate, man become divinized, and that to the extent that Christ became a real man, so we become real gods. This is our religious heritage and tradition!

Who Art in Heaven

These words I think have a very deep meaning. They remind us of the homeland we have abandoned, of the citizenship we have lost. In the parable of the young man who left his father's house, went off the rails and was reduced to living with pigs, the Word of God shows us human wretchedness. That young man did not find his one-time happiness again until he had realized his moral degradation, had looked into his own heart and had pronounced the words of confession. These words almost agree with the Lord's Prayer, because the prodigal son says: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." [Luke 15:21] He would not confess himself to be a sinner against heaven

if he were not convinced that the homeland he had left at the time of his going astray were not in actual fact heaven.

By this confession of his he makes himself worthy once again to stand in the presence of his father who runs towards him, embraces him, and kisses him. The conclusion is this. To return to heaven there is only one route and that is to admit one's sinfulness and seek to avoid it. To make the decision to avoid it is already to be perfecting one's likeness to God.

*St. Gregory of Nyssa
On the Lord's Prayer*