



**Orthodox Mission of the
Entrance of the Theotokos
into the Temple**

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Slavery and Freedom
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. (John 8:21, 31-34)

The words of this passage from John chapter 8 have been on my mind and in my heart recently. We say a great deal about freedom as Americans, but freedom in our time, 250 years after we spoke of it in terms of our political freedom from the British Empire, has come to mean something quite different. I have seen the changes in my own life when I grew out of childhood in the late 1950s into adolescence in the early 1960s. Then, the word began to be applied to our *individual* freedom, freedom to do what we want, when we want and how we want. The redefinition of the word freedom has continued into our own time; one only needs to hear the nonsense of some of those running for political office to understand how corrupt the definition of freedom has become. Now, freedom seems to mean freedom from all social and corporate responsibility. To be an American would seem to mean in the radical right the same thing it means in the radical left: freedom to have, to be and to do whatever we want, however we want, the way we want, regardless of the cost to others.

Of course, we who are disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ understand freedom quite differently. For us, freedom as we heard in the passage I read, is freedom from sin – sin in its broadest definition as anything that is opposed to God’s will and that leads us to actions that separate us from Him. Freedom from sin means freedom from our own selfish desires and wants; for, if we are propelled by our own passions, our own selfish desires and wants, then we are no longer free to do God’s will; we are slaves. St. Paul liked this situation to being held bondage under Pharaoh. We become slaves to our own self-will the same way that the Jews in bondage in Egypt were slaves to Pharaoh. The thrust of the Christian life, therefore, is freedom to turn in all things to Him, to follow Him, to do as He wills, for what He wills is always, ultimately and penultimately, for our benefit.

But what happens when we fall back into slavery, even after repeated attempts to be free? What happens if we sin after we are united to Christ in Baptism and Chrismation? How can we be restored to the joy and fulfillment of our Baptismal freedom again?

This was not an easy question for the Church in its early days to answer. It was widely considered unacceptable for those who were Baptized in the first centuries to sin in any manner. Often, people put off Holy Baptism until their death beds, just as a monastic today might put off being elevated to the Great Schema until the final, last moment of life. St. Constantine the Great was one who did this. He took away the stigma of Christian discipleship in the Roman Empire by decreeing that Christians were no longer to be persecuted. Glory to God! But he himself waited until the last, final moments of his life to be Baptized, realizing in truth that one’s Baptism denoted a new and radical commitment to God and His Will. This understanding was thrust into the spotlight of early Christian life during the times of persecution. Of course, many were faithful unto death; the Holy Martyrs fought the good fight and were obedient to their Faith unto death, just as was our Savior Jesus Christ. But some believers, in particularly difficult circumstances, were not. Some faltered, even some leaders, some bishops. And when that happened, what was to be done with those who faltered, those who were referred to as “the lapsed?” After considerable struggle and debate, it was eventually realized that God in His mercy would accept even those who had lapsed, if they repented of their sin. And thus, after some time, the practice of Penance, the Sacrament of Confession and Absolution, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, became a regular cornerstone of Church life.

We find it somewhat difficult to understand the strong feelings of believers in the early Church and wonder why it took so long to understand that God calls all of us to repentance and that He mercifully accepts them back in true reconciliation. After all, that is what we do, is it not, when we come to confession ourselves? But there is still a reluctance among many of us to deal with those whose sin is public and hurtful to others. What do we do with a brother or sister in Christ who has fallen back into slavery, turned away from walking the path of righteousness and fallen into grievous sin – especially when that sin is public, resulting in prison or public legal action? Do we do as some Protestants do and shun them? Do we forget about them? Do we pretend it has not happened?

What we should do, Brothers and Sisters, is to pray with our whole soul and our whole mind that they, whoever they might be and whatever their public sin has been, may indeed walk the path of eternal repentance and salvation with us. There are indeed times when sin is carried out by those who are addicted or psychologically ill in such a way that they cannot help themselves. Such people are in special need of our love and our prayers. Who will pray for them if we do not? And is it not one of our primary activities as disciples of the Lord, to intercede for them?

The fact of the matter is that every congregation must come to an understanding of its role in this

situation. A brother or a sister who has fallen, publicly, and who sits in prison awaiting justice as defined by the law, is no different than each and every one of us who has sinned ourselves. Like us, he or she is a slave to sin and can be freed only when brought to repentance through the Grace of the Holy Spirit. And understand this: there are times when repentance means, or at least begins, with the prayer and the desire to be made well and to be as all of us are called to be – one with the One Who Alone Is Our Salvation.

Let us therefore pray, Brothers and Sisters, for the repentance of all who have fallen, even as we pray for ourselves! Let us pray that they, like we, may walk the eternal path of repentance and salvation, for only thus, can we ourselves understand the true nature of God's Will that all be saved.

Fr. Elias

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