

Sunday of Forgiveness

by Fr. Photius

Today the Church heralds the coming of Great Lent by confirming our conscious intention to live true Christian lives through the rite of mutual forgiveness, an expression of self-abasement as well as loving concern – concern for the strength of faith in others and in ourselves in a fallen world where sin so easily dominates and estranges us from God.

The hymns for this Sunday center on the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, the lamentation of their fall from purity and heavenly bliss, and their constant petition for forgiveness from their loving Creator, God, Who desires not the death of sinners, but rather that they should turn from their wickedness and live. This mutual love, in imitation of Divine Love, is an explicit recognition of our need for one another in order to work out our salvation, our need to experience the presence of each other in a world where selfishness and cold indifference prevail to dehumanize our lives – our recognition of Christ, our true life and the embodiment of Divine love in Himself, as standing in our midst, uniting us all in His Person, granting us the grace of brotherhood, the exalted rank of adopted sonship in respect to our Heavenly Father – our recognition that in our very hearts, in our very being, in our soul, lies the Kingdom of God, conquered and irradiated with the light of love, so that God might enlighten and fill all things with Himself.

The hymns also underscore the meaning behind our Lenten fasting, what makes it true fasting. Man is directed by God to abstain from knowledge of evil, to avoid experiencing that corrupting force in his life, but rather to commune with God, to taste of goodness, joy, righteousness, truth, beauty, wisdom and love – to commune with the True Life, Christ, and avoid the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, of deviousness, opposition, alienation. But because of Adam's and Eve's uncontrolled desire, the desire to be their own source of nourishment and sustenance, their food became bitter to taste, and they were condemned to work unceasingly in toil and sweat, without sure hope of reward.

For this reason, we in turn, recognizing our sinful state, our lack of pure holiness, abstain from what is bitter to our soul's taste because it is corruptible, because it would sidetrack us and keep us from dependence upon God for all things, because it causes us to be indulgent towards ourselves, dependent on things other than God for our earthly existence, dependent upon our likes and dislikes, our self-pampering, our lack of self-discipline and clear thought, our lack of purity of heart and willingness to be totally open to God, rather than choked and gorged by what is created by God – (or in cases where we talk about our addiction to sin, by what is not of God, nor created by Him (i.e. evil) – This is certainly not a substitute for God's

Person. For this reason we fast, we abstain from certain foods, or on certain days from food altogether, and we fast from doing evil, from letting our attention wander from God, in order to bring us closer to Him.

And just as Great Lent puts into true perspective our lives in relation to one another, to the rest of Creation which was made for our use and enjoyment, so too, Great Lent focuses upon a proper understanding of the experience of God's Presence and His sustaining grace in our lives. Not only do we pray more often, fast, and attend more church services, but we use this penitential season to renew the purity of soul we were granted at our baptism. We remember that Great Lent grew out of the early Church practice of properly preparing those who were to be illumined and cleansed by the Holy Spirit in the waters of Baptism and anointed by the oil of gladness, and sealed by chrism in the sacrament of Chrismation, to bear the mark of Christ on the body and in the soul. We see the need to renew the soul's purity through making a deep, thorough, and true confession, and we confirm our need for Christ to always be present in our lives in this fallen world, by partaking of His Body and Blood more often, even during the week in the Liturgy of Presanctified Gifts, in order to sustain us in our ascetical efforts and to give us the joy of His consoling Presence in our very bodies, and from there in the depths of our mind, soul, and heart. To center Christ in our heart and not center our life in our stomach is our aim. So we confess our shortcomings, our sins, and ask for strength to

overcome them. So we express our contrition in mutual forgiveness and loving care for one another.

We need Christ within us to sustain us in our life. But we also recognize that we are not really worthy of His Presence within us because of our proneness to sin, our eventual bodily death being proof of this. But we also recognize our need to communicate this joy of Christ's Presence within us, to give others the hope for real Life and Joy by our good deeds, the fruit of that grace, and by our loving care, the fruit of our desire to fulfill God's commandment to grow and increase, to share in the work of filling all things with God's Presence.

St. Symeon the New Theologian, whose feast we celebrated two days ago (March 12th), tells us in his Ninth Discourse "On Works of Mercy", that purity of heart comes from paying heed to our ways and from constant confession of the secret thoughts of the soul. It produces in us repentance for what we have done or even thought, and gives rise to tears from the depths of the soul, which cleanses the heart and wipes away sins, so that the soul is spiritually comforted by the Spirit of God, and is watered by the streams of sweet compunction, and in due time yields an abundant harvest. In this state, the soul is identified with God and becomes the abode of the Holy Trinity, seeing God clearly and converses with Him daily, ascending into the heaven of heavens, into the infinite and divine light.

A modern Greek philosopher and Theologian, Stelios Ramfos, in his book entitled "Like a Pelican in the Wilderness: Reflections on the Sayings of the Desert Fathers" (pg133), speaks of the fundamental meaning of forgiveness as spiritual openness, our power to welcome in a friendly way, not by pronouncing our innocence (as in the case of the Pharisee). Forgiveness broadens us inwardly. How far we let God into our life and heart depends on how far we let another person in. The desert fathers see God's justice as the absolute accommodation and forgiveness of an infinite special capacity – through Christ's Incarnation – showing us that we never need to be on our own. We need to be noble in mind and heart, be on a higher level of relationship with one another. When we forgive, the other

person becomes like oneself, not an abstract otherness, but we preserve the other person in his or her own interior life. We can see humanity, responsibility, paying proper attention to ourselves, without posing as righteous and blameless or reducing others to nothing. In the words of that desert saint, John the Baptist, He (Christ) must increase while I must decrease.

To conclude, I defer to the conclusion of St. Maximas the Confessor's treatise on The Ascetic Life (pg 135). St. Maximas states that a hardened heart is abandoned to the self-rule of error. The fruit of penance is the soul's detachment, and detachment is the wiping out of sin. We must walk in the Spirit so as not to fulfill the lust of the flesh (Gal 5:16). "Let us watch and be sober; let us at last cast off the sleep of sloth. Let us emulate the holy athletes of the Savior. Let us emulate their combats, forgetting the things that are behind, and stretching forth to those that are before (Philip 3:31). Let us imitate their tireless course, their flaming eagerness, their perseverance in continence, their holiness in chastity, their nobility in patience, their endurance in long-suffering, their pity in compassion, their unperturbed meekness, their warmth in zeal, their unfeignedness in love, their sublimity in lowliness, their plainness in poverty, their manliness, their kindness, their clemency. Let us not be overturned by pleasures, let us not be softened by thoughts, let us not stain our conscience. Let us follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord. (Heb 12:14). Amen.