



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

**306 W. Main Street
Emmitsburg, MD 21727**

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<http://EntranceMission.org>

Working Out Our Salvation in Fear and Trembling
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

Therefore, my beloved, ... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or questioning... (Philippians 2:12-14)

It's that time of year in my classes at the university when I must remind some of my students about the facts of life. Not the facts regarding their procreation; those facts they know only too well. Rather, the facts regarding their status and their place in class. Mid-term grades have been submitted and many of them are now aware that they are in danger of failing, or at least, earning a grade that is far below their hopeful expectation. "What can I do to raise my grade?" many have asked me. My first response is to remind them that higher grades are typically the result of students actually reading the assigned material, studying the notes they are supposed to take during my lectures (I frequently tell them that I do not lecture for my own benefit!) and reviewing what they have learned before taking the exams. Sometimes, they look at me with dismay. "After all," I tell them, "You and your family have paid over \$40,000.00 in tuition for you to learn – not merely to get a diploma – but to learn, to prepare for meeting the challenges ahead in your professional lives." Sometimes they listen; sometimes they don't.

Today is the fourth Sunday in Great Lent, the Sunday of our father among the saints, *John of the Ladder*. St. John wrote his book, "The Ladder of Divine Ascent," for a monastic community on Mt. Sinai around

the year 600 A.D. I see it as a very practical manual for the practice of ascetical discipline, or to put it another way, a manual for the development and practice of basic Christian virtues. St. John of the Ladder describes the first steps of one's ascetical journey as renunciation of the world and its false hopes and its false securities. Little by little those who follow the manual, taking the steps of divine ascent, move on through the virtues, practicing the virtues of patience, humility, charity, learning long suffering in affliction and self-denial for the intent of selfless service, and finally coming to the top of the ladder, *hesychia*, or inner silence, peace of the soul. All of it is summarized in the closing chapters which remind the reader of the threefold divine attributes of faith, hope and charity. Those who follow the thirty steps of the Ladder can fall off along the way; but with God's help, they can start again, and return to the struggle. Growth in Grace, acquisition of those divine attributes that result in our pilgrimage to become ever more like God, is a struggle. It requires effort driven by the motivation to ascend from glory unto glory, to put aside the old man and put on the New Man, the man of self-giving and love.

We often think of salvation along the same lines that my students think of their education. I remind them continually that the purpose of their work in my classes is not merely to achieve recognition and a piece of paper at the end; rather, it is to learn. Likewise, the purpose of our struggle in the faith is not to earn some sort of reward or special recognition; rather, it is to further our growth to achieve our destiny as first described in the very opening chapters of the very first book of the Bible, Genesis: to recognize the image of God within us and to grow unto His likeness. This is what we mean by salvation, the very meaning of which comes from the Latin word for "health." Salvation is health, health of the soul, which is the very presence of the Holy Spirit within us. Our minds must be put aside and descend into our hearts, the Holy Fathers tell us. As disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ who have experienced His limitless and unconditional love for us, we are motivated by that divine love to grow in the virtues, to follow the way of self-discipline, asceticism, not to earn salvation, but to progress along the path of salvation by becoming ever more like Him.

Our progress along the path of salvation, our ascent of the Ladder of Divine Ascent, does not end in death. The Holy Cappadocian Fathers remind us that our progress will continue. We take the first steps now, participating in the life of the Church, receiving the self-giving of God in the Holy Mysteries, and responding in our motivation to live in that love which God freely gives us by acquisition and practice of the divine virtues day after day. Yes, we can fall off that ladder; we can wander from that path; but we can and may return through repentance and renewal of that effort. Lent is our chance to renew that struggle, to return to what St. Paul told the congregation in Philippi as he sat in his prison cell, to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling." We have come a little more than halfway through Great Lent, Brothers and Sisters! Let us pick ourselves up and take those steps that set us back on the path of divine ascent, the path toward the acquisition of those divine attributes that lead us to become ever more like God: patience, long-suffering, self-denial for the purpose of service to others, faith, hope and above all, charity.

Fr. Elias

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