

Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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✠ April 10, 2016 ✠

Fourth Sunday of Lent

St. John of the Ladder {649}

New Hieromartyr Gregory V, Patriarch of Constantinople (1821)



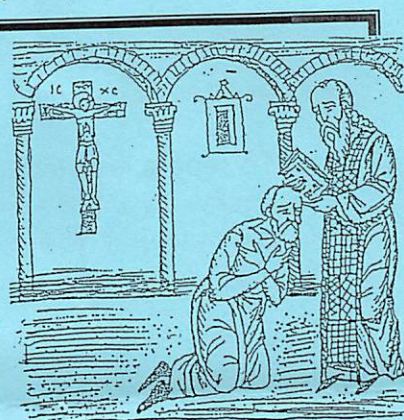
The "Ladder" of St. John Climacus

Fifth Week of Great Lent

- ✠ Wed. April 13 ~ 6:30pm Presanctified Liturgy
- ✠ Thurs. April 14 ~ 6:30pm Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete
- ✠ Fri. April 15 ~ 6:30pm Akathist to the Theotokos in Matins

✠ **This Saturday, April 16 ~ 10:00am – 4:00pm**
Adult Lenten Retreat – Meditation on Psalm 50
 ~ Fr. Demetrios Carellas ~

NOTE: Saturday Vespers will be served early at around 5:00pm



Unceasing Prayer

✠ "The head and beginning of all virtues is, to the extent possible, unceasing prayer to our Lord Jesus Christ, which is called, by way of abbreviation, the prayer of Jesus; the Apostle says concerning it: Pray without ceasing (1 Thes. 5:17). That is, one must call upon the Name of God always, whether we be conversing, sitting, walking, working, eating, or doing anything else. At every time and in every place it is fitting to call upon the Name of God. For by this means, writes Chrysostom, the temptation of the enemy is consumed. Beat the warriors, says **St. John Climacus**, with the Name of Jesus and a stronger weapon you shall not find either in heaven or on earth. Prayer is the banishment of sorrow and dejection, the germination of meekness and angerlessness, the offering of joy and thanksgiving; and innumerable good things are acquired through prayer." ~ **Elder Nazarius of Valaam (+1809)**

Psalm 50 ~ Lord, Have Mercy on me!

"Have mercy on me, O God," cried the Prophet David, "according to Thy steadfast love!" (Ps. 50) Thousands of years later we are still calling out these grief-stricken words.

The story behind Psalm 50 is a truly horrible one. King David wanted to marry Bathsheba, who was married to Uriah, a soldier in the army. In order to have his way in this, David put Uriah at the head of a battle that he might be killed. David then married Bathsheba. After this David was approached by the Prophet Nathan, who was sent by God to reproach the King for his misdeeds. Amazingly, instead of having the Prophet's head chopped off, King David cried out, "I have sinned against the Lord!" The Prophet Nathan replied, "The Lord has put away your sin" (2 Kings 12; Samuel:11,12). How quickly David repented and how quickly the Lord forgave him!

{over}

In order to come to repentance we must know that God forgives us no matter what we have done wrong. Daily we fall, and daily we must get up. He can forgive every sin; He does not pick and choose. The only opening He needs is our heartfelt repentance.

We must also be able to forgive ourselves. This is often the most difficult part of repentance because it takes much humility. After admitting our sins, we often say to ourselves, "I want everything to be fine, I want to feel all better inside!" However, if we always felt better inside right after recognizing our sin, we would probably continue to make the same mistakes over and over. **Elder Joseph the Hesychast** writes, "Every sin a person commits is forgiven him when he repents; however, the memory of it remains with him until his last breath" (Monastic Wisdom, St. Anthony's Monastery, 1998, p.123). God gave us our conscience for a purpose and we must not ignore it. Still, we have to find peace in ourselves in order that our repentance might be joyful and bring us closer to God.

How do we repent with joy? Bring to mind these words of Elder Joseph, "God, my child, is everywhere, and His eye observes everything, but He overlooks our sins because He awaits our repentance" (ibid., p.297). Here, here is the joy! God so loves us that He sees our repentance before our sins. When we rest in this assurance of God's love for us then our hearts are at peace. If God does not beat us up when we sin, why should we beat ourselves? **Bp. Kallistos** teaches:

To repent is to look, not downward at my own shortcomings, but upward at God's love; not backward with self-reproach, but forward with trustfulness. It is to see, not what I have failed to be, but what by the grace of Christ I can yet become (The Inner Kingdom, SVS Press, 2000, p.45).

We also have to keep in mind the importance of the Sacrament of Confession, one of the great mysteries of the Church—our Mother—who knows what we need. "Without confession, repentance doesn't count, and without repentance, one cannot be saved" (Monastic Wisdom, p.300). With Confession comes liberation. Behold a miracle! God in His tender love removes our heavy yoke of sin and once more we can make a new beginning. Only in His love can we find peace and rest for our souls.

As we said earlier, we have to remember our falls so that, having learned from our mistakes, we can become better people. Mother Alexandra wrote, "O Wonder, were it not for sin I would not have known Thy loving kindness, the power of Thy forgiving love through Jesus Christ, my Lord" ("Our Father" booklet. Orthodox Monastery of the Transfiguration, #9). How beautiful it is that all things can be turned to good by God if only we let Him work in our lives. So often we think that this is the end, we have made a hole for ourselves and there is no way out. On the contrary, if we bring our trouble before God in all humility, and trust that He knows what to do in even the most impossible situation, He will show us the way. He may not work things out in the way we want, but we can be sure that it is what is best for our salvation.

How do we come to terms with our sinfulness? How do we find peace in ourselves? As we say in the prayer before Communion, "I believe, O Lord, and I confess that Thou art truly the Christ, the Son of the living God, Who came into the world to save sinners of whom I am first..." If we never made mistakes we would never know just how much the Lord loves us. Each one of us acknowledges ourselves as first among sinners before God, knowing that He loves us because He not only came to earth to die for us, but is still giving Himself to us in the holy Eucharist. As we draw near to the Lord's Pascha let us be reminded of the thief on the cross who confessed his sin before Christ and humbly asked to be remembered in His kingdom. All we have to do is ask. Like the father of the prodigal son, our Lord is awaiting us with open arms at the threshold of His Kingdom. With a broken and contrite heart, let us cry out to Him, "Lord Jesus! Have mercy on me a sinner!"

- Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Life Transfigured, 2008

WHO WAS SAINT JOHN CLIMACOS?

On this fourth Sunday of Lent we commemorate Saint John Climacos, "Ioannis tis Klimakos," John "of the Ladder," so named after the spiritual classic he wrote called THE LADDER OF DIVINE ASCENT. Little is known about Saint John's early life, but he was born about the year 579 and it is certain that at age 16 he came to Saint Katherine's Monastery at the foot of Mount Sinai. At that time the monastery, built at the order of the Emperor Justinian, was dedicated to the Transfiguration. (Only later, when the relics of Saint Katherine were brought to Sinai, did the monastery come to be known by the Saint's name). Here around Sinai John found a well established monastic brotherhood. And scattered throughout the surrounding desert there were hermits dedicated to the solitary life. Except for brief journeys, John was to remain at Sinai for the rest of his life.

During his first years in the desert, he lived under obedience to his spiritual father, Martyrios. An interesting incident is related about his early years with Martyrios. When John was nineteen or twenty, Martyrios took him to the chapel at the top of Moses' Mount and there tonsured him a monk. Coming down from the summit, the two met Anastasios, the abbot of the central monastery. "Where does this boy come from?" asked Anastasios, "and who tonsured him?" Martyrios replied that he had done so. "How strange!" exclaimed Anastasios. "Who would have thought that you had professed the abbot of Mount Sinai!" Martyrios and John continued on their way, and paid a visit to the famous hermit, John the Sabbaite. The holy old man kissed young John's hand and washed his feet but took no notice of Martyrios. The Sabbaite's disciple was disturbed by this seeming disrespect, but after John and Martyrios had left the old man assured him: "Believe me, I don't know who that boy is; but I showed hospitality to the abbot of Sinai and washed his feet." Forty years later these prophecies were fulfilled!

Soon after John's profession as a monastic, his spiritual father, Martyrios, died. John now retired to a cave some five miles distant from the fortress housing the main monastery. He remained here some twenty years living in strict asceticism. According to John's biographer, Daniel of Raithu, during these years John received the gift of tears and the grace of continual prayer of the heart, that is, his heart was in prayer whether he was asleep or awake, at work or at rest. Once his disciple, Moses, fell asleep in the cool shade of a huge rock. John was at prayer in his cell, and, perceiving that his disciple was in danger, began to pray for him. Moses came up to him later, fell to his knees and began to thank him for saving him from certain death. And he related how he had heard John calling him in his sleep and had jumped up at the very moment that the rock broke loose and fell. Had he not jumped out of the way, the rock certainly would have killed him!

In time, John became respected as a spiritual guide, and he began to receive frequent visits from his fellow monks - so frequent that a certain monk accused him of being a gossip and a chatterbox. The Saint was not in the least angered by this, but was silent for an entire year, not uttering a single word until the very monk who

had complained about him came with other brothers and begged him to speak. He then began to instruct them with the wisdom with which God had endowed him.

After forty years of hermit life, against his will John was elected abbot of the central monastery at Sinai. On the day of his installation as abbot, a party of 600 pilgrims came to the monastery. While they were being given a meal, they all noticed a man with short hair, dressed as a Jew, serving at table and giving orders to the cooks, stewards and other servants with an air of authority. Once the meal had finished, the man suddenly disappeared. While everyone was pondering this and asking questions among themselves, John said: "Do not bother to look for him; that was the prophet Moses serving you in his own home."

It was during this last period of his life, while abbot, that he composed THE LADDER OF DIVINE ASCENT, at the request of another John, the abbot of a nearby monastery at Raithu. "Tell us in our ignorance," asked John of Raithu, "what Moses of old you have seen in divine vision upon the mountain; write it down in a book and send it to us as if it were the tablets of the Law, written by God." In his reply John Climacos protested that the task was beyond his strength: "I am still among the learners. But," he said, "by virtue of obedience, I will try, in my own stammering way, to give you what is little more than a poor outline sketch." His "poor outline" is much read even today. So clear, simple and powerful is John's description of the way to raise the soul to God as if on a ladder, that the Church has set aside the fourth Sunday of Great Lent to honor him.

Shortly before his death, John appointed his own brother, George, to succeed him as abbot. But George began to greatly grieve at the approaching parting with John. Then John said that, if he were found worthy to stand close to God in the next world, he would pray that George be taken to heaven in the same year. And so it came to pass. John left this earthly life in the year 649. After ten months, George also fell asleep and departed to take his place among heaven's citizens alongside his brother John.

JUDGE NOT...

Fire and water do not mix, neither can you mix judgment of others with the desire to repent. If a man commits a sin before you at the very moment of his death, pass no judgment, because the judgment of God is hidden from men. It has happened that men have sinned greatly in the open, but have done greater deeds of repentance in secret, so that those who have said harsh words about them have been fooled, with smoke instead of sunlight in their eyes. So listen to me, all you accountants of other people's faults, listen well; for if, as is certain, it is true that "you shall be judged with the judgment you have used yourselves" (Matt. 7:2), then whatever sin of body or spirit that we ascribe to our neighbor we will surely fall into ourselves!

- Saint John Climacos

THE WHIP OF JESUS

" . . . In the temple He found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the moneychangers at their business. . . . And making a whip of cords, He drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and He poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And He told those who sold the pigeons, 'Take these things away; you shall not make My Father's house a house of trade.'"

■ John 2: 14-16

The spectacle of the Temple with the merchants and the animal bazaar was disrespectful to the sanctity of the place, the situation insulting to God. It was unacceptable to have turned the Temple into a stable, a materialistic center, a money-exchange! It was especially unacceptable to Christ Himself Who saw His Father's house reduced to a house of trade.

Oxen, sheep, pigeons, etc., with all their offensive odor, their stench, but also with all the filth of their masters, had spread out "in the temple" and had turned it into a regular fair, which justly excused the holy indignation of the Lord.

The attitude and actions of Jesus were daring, decisive and brave. Only He could have taken such a stand. Only He could have attacked the impudence of the cattle-dealers and moneychangers with courage, frankness and theanthropic authority, without fearing resistance or opposition. He was the "One Who had authority." He was the Master of the House. The Father's house was also *His* house; the Temple, *His* Temple also. Its occupation and use by the merchants was not only irreverent and criminal, but also unlawful.

He made a whip and threw out the animals and masters from the enclosure of the Temple. He poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. He could not see this sham without acting, without fixing and restoring order and respect.

That is why the prophet had said, "Zeal for Thy house has consumed me." (Psalm 69:9). Then His disciples remembered it. (Jn. 2:17). Zeal, fire, love, desire, passion for the cleanliness, the propriety of the Temple consumed Christ to His very depth. . . .

We can easily transfer to the spiritual realm this incident of the expulsion of the merchants from the Temple by the imposing presence of the Lord.

The heart of every man is a temple also, a living temple of the Living God. "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?" (1 Cor. 6:19).

This temple of our heart is built to praise and worship its God and Creator, to throb with love for the Bridegroom "fairer in His beauty than all mortal men." It is created for the Tri-hypostatic God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with His uncreated energies and light, to dwell there.

For this reason a temple, a heart that sparkles with cleanliness and spiritual order is necessary.

The condition of the secret temple within us is often hopeless, *even worse* than the one the Lord found in the Jewish Temple. The heart is turned into a carnal house of materialistic and demonic business by sly and treacherous merchants: filth, horrible filth, "gibeonite thoughts" rising up from its depths, desires, vices, cupidities, egotism, all types of sin conceived and carried here, "laws at war," (Rom.7:23) enemies, pirates, corsairs, darkness and chaos.

How, then, will the temple of the heart be cleansed, renewed? How will the beasts with their bestiality, the merchants with their satanic merchandise, leave? And what is that efficacious whip that can bring about this catharsis?

The Name of Christ is the whip because it brings His fearful, dynamic, divine, indomitable presence. It strikes mercilessly at the demons and cleans the stench and filth of the passions. Christ comes into the temple of the heart. He holds a whip; He Himself is also a whip. His Name is also a whip, as is prayer in His Name.

St. John Climacos writes: "Flog your enemies with the Name of Jesus" and "let the remembrance of Jesus be present with each breath."

The Lord does not permit demons to invade the fortress of our soul when we cry out to Christ fervently, with feeling, tirelessly, unceasingly and carefully. And this is a great profit, because the demons are accustomed to secretly teaching wickedness to the soul by means of bad thoughts. And, as St. Diadochos of Photiki says, when the demons enter the heart, they fortify themselves well, and from there they make their war, trying to camouflage themselves and trick us that they are attacking from the outside.

The spiritual fighter, the true Christian, takes from Christ's hands the weapon that is most terrible to the enemies, and advances shouting: "They compassed me about as bees do a honeycomb, but in the name of the Lord I repulsed them. (Psalm 117:12 Septuagint).

But there is a difference between the Temple of Solomon and the temple of our heart. What? There the Lord entered uninvited, voluntarily. Here, in our inner temple, He asks permission. He wants us to open the door and invite Him in. Or rather, to keep inviting Him uninterruptedly, insistently, ardently, unceasingly.

"Zeal for Thy house has consumed me." Do we ever think how great the Lord's zeal and longing is for His house, that is, our heart? Surely it is a zeal a myriad times more intense, a love infinitely more ardent than that which He showed for the cleansing of the Judaic Temple. "Behold," He says, "I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him. . . ." (Rev. 3:20).

■ from *Watchfulness and Prayer* by Archim. Ioannikios, trans. by Jeannie Gentithes and Archim. Ignatios Apostolopoulos.

LORD JESUS CHRIST, HAVE MERCY ON ME!

FOR CONSIDERATION. . .

Man forgets himself in good fortune and attributes it all to himself—to his powerless and false authority. But as soon as some misfortune befalls him, he begs clemency from his imagined enemy. Fr. Ambrose expressed this truth in this way: "Man is like a beetle. When it is a warm day and the sun is playing, he flies around, proud of himself and buzzes: "All the forests are mine! All the meadows are mine! All the meadows are mine! All the forests are mine!" But when the sun hides itself, the cold freezes and the wind dances, the beetle forgets his vast expanse, clings to a leaf and only squeals: "Don't blow me off!"

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Without devotion to God's Providence, you will not acquire peace. You do not humble yourself, and that is why you have no peace.

- from *Elder Ambrose of Optina* by Fr. Sergius Chetverikov.

Wisdom of St. John Climacus

"Those who pass speedy and harsh judgments on the sins of their neighbors fall into this passion because they themselves have so far failed to achieve a complete and unceasing memory of and concern for their own sins. Anyone untrammelled by self-love and able to see his own faults for what they are would worry about no one else in this life."

"Intelligent silence is the mother of prayer, freedom from bondage, custodian of zeal, a guard on our thoughts, a watch on our enemies, a prison of mourning, a friend of tears, a sure recollection of death, a painter of punishment, a concern for judgment, servant of anguish, foe of license, a companion of stillness, the opponent of dogmatism, a growth of knowledge, a hand to shape contemplation, hidden progress, the secret journey upward."

"Like the sun which shines on all alike, vainglory beams on every occupation. What I mean is this. I fast, and turn vainglorious. I stop fasting so that I will draw no attention to myself, and I become vainglorious over my prudence. I dress well or badly, and am vainglorious in either case. I talk or I hold my peace, and each time I am defeated. No matter how I shed this prickly thing, a spike remains to stand up against me."

"Rise from love of the world and love of pleasure. Put care aside, strip your mind, refuse your body. Prayer, after all, is a turning away from the world, visible and invisible. What have I in heaven? Nothing except simply to cling always to Thee in undistracted prayer. Wealth pleases some, glory others, possessions others, but what I want is to cling to God and to put the hopes of my dispassion in Him (cf. Ps. 72:25, 28)."

"Everything is possible for the believer. I have watched impure souls mad for physical love but turning what they know of such love into a reason for penance and transferring that same capacity for love to the Lord. I have watched them master fear so as to drive themselves unsparingly toward the love of God. That is why, when talking of that chaste harlot, the Lord does not say, 'because she feared,' but rather, 'because she loved much' she was able to drive out love with love (Lk. 7:47)."

"I have seen good souls turn evil from the example of evil people, and it amazed me that they could so quickly shed their natural simplicity and innocence. But it is as easy for the honest to lapse as it is hard for evildoers to change their ways. Still, a genuine turning away from the world, obedience, and a guarding of the lips have often proved very effective and have wonderfully restored those who seemed to be beyond recall."

"Do not refuse a request to pray for the soul of another, even when you yourself lack the gift of prayer. For often the very faith of the person making the request will evoke the saving contrition of the one who is to offer the prayer."

"If leather bottles are kept supple, they can hold more; but they do not hold so much if they are neglected. The man who stuffs food into his stomach expands his insides, whereas the man who fights his stomach causes it to shrink, and once it has shrunk there is no possibility of overeating, so that henceforth one fasts quite naturally."

"The man who recognizes his sins has taken control of his tongue, while the chatterer has yet to discover himself as he should."