
JOURNEY TO PASCHA

No. 3

Sunday of Orthodoxy



“...upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

(Matt 16:18)

We are not alone! | Celebrating the ‘Triumph of Orthodoxy’

After the fasting of the first five days of Lent, the first weekend is kept as a joyful feast celebrating the ‘Triumph’ of the Church over various enemies: physical, spiritual and ideological.

On the first Saturday of Lent, we remember **St. Theodore the Recruit** – a Roman soldier and Christian from modern-day Turkey who refused to offer sacrifices to pagan gods. After suffering tortures to try and change his mind he was thrown into a fire. There, in 306 A.D., he gave up his life, though his body was untouched by the flames. In 363, Christianity was legal in the Empire but the current emperor – Julian (the ‘Apostate’) – was a pagan who wanted to reverse this. As part of his campaign against Christians, he conspired in the first week of Lent to sprinkle all the food in Constantinople’s marketplace with blood from animals sacrificed to idols. In this way, the Christians would unknowingly break the fast. Fifty years after his death, St Theodore appeared to the Archbishop of the city, Eudoxios, warning him of what was planned. He instructed Eudoxios and his flock to instead boil wheat (*kolyva*) and eat this alone. Now, the first Saturday of Lent is used to celebrate the martyr Theodore (lit: ‘Gift from God’) with hymns and by the eating of *kolyva*. We also remember all the martyrs who help us, even after death.

Not all the enemies of God are non-Christian ‘outsiders’. Jesus told the Apostles that Peter’s declaration about Him (*you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God*) was the rock upon which He would build His Church – us (Matt 16:16-18). He also said that this confession came from divine revelation, not human reasoning. Moments later, Peter willfully rebukes Jesus for suggesting He will be murdered and for this Jesus calls him ‘satan!’ (v. 21-23) When we use our own reasoning alone to think about God and Jesus we tend to make mistakes; if we are proud as well then we end up loving our ideas more than reality and this leads to heresy and division. The Church has always had to fight against such self-will, but particularly at times when Christianity was legal and ‘outside’ persecution was less. In response, the Church would gather together in councils to determine what was divinely revealed truth and what was man-made fiction, or heresy. Out of this came clear teachings on the nature of Jesus Christ, the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and our relationship with Them. In the 8th to 9th centuries A.D. the big controversy was over Holy Icons. The Church had always considered Icons to be a reminder of the physical reality of God becoming man – Jesus – and a way of directing our mind and prayers to those depicted. When the Empire started to lose ground to Muslim invaders in the east, the emperor reasoned it was because the Church made images of God, unlike the Muslims, and so the invaders were favoured in battle! From this false assumption the empire persecuted, on-and-off, those who venerated icons for over 100 years: so-called Christians imprisoning, torturing, exiling and even executing other Christians. Finally, the Empress Theodora (also meaning, ‘Gift from God’) ended the madness with another gathering of the Church and declared the **Restoration of the Holy Icons**. As well as a procession of the icons around Constantinople, the declarations of faith from previous councils were also read out, reaffirming the faith of the Church that unites us all. This happened on the first Sunday in Lent, 11 March 843. Before 843, the first Sunday in Lent was dedicated to Moses, Aaron, Samuel and the prophets.

The first week of Lent is usually hard because we are still getting used to the increased prayer and fasting. Let the examples of Theodore and all the martyrs, Moses and all the prophets, give us strength to imitate, in a way, their martyrdom by our own self-denial. Let the celebration of the Sunday of Orthodoxy remind us that the Church is all of us, and how when we come together in worship of the same God, revealed to us, not even the gates of Hell can prevail over us. Holy martyrs, confessors and fathers, pray to God for us during the rest of Great Lent!

You and your Conscience

According to Dorotheus of Gaza, the **conscience is given by God** as *'something divine...like a spark, both light and warmth... which enlightens the mind and **indicates what is good and what is evil.**'* It is therefore also called 'natural law' by this saint and



others. Although given us by God, **our conscience is not pure** because of the fallen world we live in. Culture, our upbringing, history and our own bad habits darken this part of us. This is why 'the Law' (the rules of the Old Testament) was needed to 'indicate what is good and evil' instead of our impure conscience. But good news: **baptism enlightens the conscience.** God, in baptism, heals us of our spiritual sicknesses, including those affecting the conscience. After this 'rebirth' the conscience is *'inflexible rule, infallible judge, unerring teacher'* (St Gregory Palamas) and *'captain of the heart'* (St Macarius of Egypt). It is identified by many holy fathers as the 'adversary' when Jesus says *'agree with your adversary quickly, while you are in the way with him'* (Matt 5:25). In other words: ***'if you want spiritual health, listen to your conscience, do all it tells you, and you will benefit. God and our conscience know our secrets. Let them correct us'*** (St. Mark the Hermit). Therefore **never go against your conscience** *'even in the smallest thing'* (St Dorotheus). If we do, by following our own desires or ideas when our conscience tells us otherwise, then we disagree with our 'adversary' and, as Jesus warns, our conscience may: *'at any time deliver you to the judge [God]...and you be cast into prison [Hell]'*. Even before that, ignoring our conscience slowly suffocates it until almost dead. We become unfeeling towards sin, complacent about evil, and altogether cut off from God. What if, many years since our baptism, our consciences are already half-dead through sin? The saints tell us that **we can refine and preserve our conscience by following God's commandments.** We can do this by reading the Gospel's commandments (esp. Matt Ch. 5-7) and practicing them. Above all, combine your efforts with God's and **pray to God to strengthen your conscience.** In time, with humility, our conscience can become pure and then, as John of Karpathos says, *'we're no different from the prophets and the rest of the Saints.'*

Excerpts about the conscience: <https://enlargingtheheart.wordpress.com/tag/conscience>

The Eight Deadly Passions – **Gluttony & Lust**

Gluttony and Lust are related to each other as both come from natural bodily desires that have become excessive or misdirected – the desire for food and sex respectively. It is natural to eat and it is natural to have sex: God told Adam and Eve to do both. Yet when we allow our bodily urges to rule over our spirit and even our rational mind then the things we are drawn to do can not only harm us spiritually but mentally and physically as well. Gluttony and Lust are also related in that excessive love of food tends to lead to love of sensuality in general (lust).

But there are two bits of good news: **1.** The methods for fighting gluttony also help conquer lust, and **2.** These methods of battling gluttony and lust are naturally part of Great Lent.

Signs of gluttony: overeating, drunkenness, secret-eating, excessive love of physical comfort, obsession with fine food (being a ‘foodie’) and the body (including being a fitness ‘fanatic’); leads to temptation to independently alter the fast and prayer-rule, self-love, and of course: lust.

Signs of lust: sexual thoughts about others, flirting, helping others because we are attracted to them; leads to consuming pornography, self-gratification, adultery or fornication (if unmarried).

How to combat gluttony and lust: the main virtues to look for are **abstinence** and **chastity**. Great Lent’s increased prayer and fasting help to weaken bodily desires without harming our health. We often find that at Pascha we look forward to meat, eggs and dairy, but cannot eat as much as we could before the Fast because we’ve subdued gluttony. What stifles gluttony tends to cut off lustful desires too so we get a double-victory. An additional weapon against lust is watchful chastity: avoiding certain situations, places or people that stir up temptations. Regular confession also helps expose the passion of lust and weaken its attractiveness. Some Saints taught *very* harsh treatment of the body to defeat gluttony and lust. Suitable for monks, these methods need to be modified for those of us with jobs and families. Therefore **always** seek advice from your priest/confessor before starting any regimen for fighting gluttony and lust.

For more information on lust: http://orthodoxcounselor.com/Articles/healing_from_lust.htm

“Let us now set out with joy upon the second week of the Fast; and like Elijah let us fashion for ourselves from day to day a fiery chariot from the great virtues... let us arm our flesh with purity and let us put the enemy to flight and gain the victory”