
JOURNEY TO PASCHA

No. 5

Sunday of Holy Cross



“Whosoever will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” (Mark 8:34)

Taking up your cross

The Holy Cross is celebrated three times throughout the year: the 14th Sept., 1st Aug., and on the third Sunday of Lent. All three days are triumphant celebrations because we cannot look upon Jesus’ crucifixion without remembering what happened next: the empty tomb and Resurrection. And so a cruel method of execution is transformed into *the* symbol of victory for Christians. We cross ourselves in prayer, we decorate our churches and ourselves with crosses, we joyfully process holding crosses and we sing in hymns *“through the Cross, joy has come to all the world”*.

If we too can look upon the Cross – Christ’s execution – and still see victory in it, still confess Jesus’ lordship, still ask Him for help, then like the thief on His right side we will be saved (Lk 23:39-43). But now the ‘difficult’ part: the thief who Jesus saved was not saved from suffering on the cross. He still hung there until the time came when his legs were broken and he asphyxiated. Jesus’ disciples were not saved from earthly suffering and, moreover, they were promised it. We too, as His disciples, are told: “deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me.” As Theophan the Recluse puts it: *“It is impossible to follow the Lord as a cross-bearer without a cross, and everyone who follows Him unfailingly goes with a cross.”* What is this cross? **Our cross consists of all sorts of inconveniences, burdens and sorrows that come along with living as a Christian.**

Many saints, referring to Jesus' own teachings, were quite clear that a life of ease and comfort were bad signs as to our spiritual health. We all suffer from various sicknesses (passions) of the soul: gluttony, avarice, anger, laziness, pride etc. and when these go unhealed we can often get a reasonable measure of material success. When we try to let Christ into our hearts by 'kicking out the world,' the world 'kicks back.' When we attempt to detach ourselves from a purely material way of living to come closer to God (as we do during Lent), there is a certain amount of 'tearing' and associated pain. Although a 'logical' consequence of our turning to God, our crosses are not made by Him: *"No matter how heavy a cross a man may carry in life, it is still just wood, which man himself made, and it always grows from the soil of his heart"* (Ambrose of Optina). Yet, just as we can look at the Crucifixion and remember the Resurrection, so too must we look on our own suffering and remember the resurrection that is promised us. God allows us to spiritually share in His crucifixion without physically dying so that we can have spiritual resurrection in this life too.

God has **compassion** on us. Compassion literally means 'co-suffering'. God became man and experienced all that we may suffer, both internally and externally: hunger, poverty, insults, death of loved ones, physical pain, abandonment, anguish, betrayal. Therefore He knows our own pain and will not allow more than we can bear. "So rejoice as you feel the cross upon yourself, for it is a sign you are following the Lord on the path of salvation that leads to Heaven. Endure a bit. The end and the crowns are just around the corner!" (Theophan the Recluse)

Guide to Confession – Part I

Through its services, prayers and prescribed practices, the Church during Lent provides an overall 'atmosphere' of repentance that helps us see ourselves, our state and our sins more clearly. A key part of repentance, and taking part in the life of the Church, is **Confession**. Like all sacraments, it is a way through which God interacts with man, with God doing most of the work. In confession specifically, God – through the priest – restores our baptism, cleanses our conscience and frees us from the burden of guilt. All we do is turn up to 'make our confession'.

What does 'making one's confession' mean?

The priest in his stole stands beside a desk on which lie a Crucifix, Book of Gospels or an icon. We come up, one at a time, and when we get near we bow down and touch the ground as though before Christ Himself. The priest prays, then turns to the penitent and reminds him:

*“Christ standeth hear invisibly and receives thy confession: therefore be not ashamed, neither be afraid, and conceal nothing from me: but tell me, doubting not, all things which thou hast done; and so shalt thou have pardon from our Lord Jesus Christ. Lo, his holy image is before us; **and I am but a witness**, bearing testimony before Him of all things which thou dost say to me. But if thou shalt conceal anything from me, thou shalt have the greater sin. Take heed, therefore, lest having come to the Physician, thou depart unhealed.”*

After the prayer, the penitent confesses all his sins and faults, freely speaking from the heart. The priest may wish to offer advice and counsel, but this is not the main purpose of confession. Then the priest tells the penitent to kneel and bow his head. He covers the penitent’s head with his stole, lays his hand on it and prays that God may grant him true repentance. The penitent rises from his knees forgiven and made clean again by the grace received. He kisses the Cross & Gospel book, and is blessed by the priest. Afterwards: thank God and be glad!

Confession itself is as simple as that. Part II will deal with how to prepare for confession.

A Thought for Mid-Lent: Giving Up on Repentance

“When Moses and Aaron began to intercede before Pharaoh to let their people go, the answer to this was increased work for the Israelites, to the point they cried out against their intercessors: *‘ye have made our savour abominable before the Pharaoh’* (Ex. 5:21). This is exactly what the soul of a repentant sinner experiences. When the fear of God and one’s conscience – the inner Moses and Aaron – begin to inspire a soul to rise up onto its feet and shake off the yoke of sinful slavery, joy passes through all its members. But the enemy does not sleep. He heaps mountains of mental obstacles, such as thoughts that sin is insurmountable, and he brings in fear from all sides: fear for our own prosperity, external relationships, influence, even our own life. It even happens that one stops, having only just begun. **Be inspired!** *The Lord of hosts shall be exalted in judgment, and the holy God shall be glorified in righteousness* (Is 5:16). God is stronger than the enemy. Cry out to Him and you will hear the same thing Moses heard: *‘Now thou shalt see what I will do to Pharaoh.’* (Ex 6:1) The enemy does not have power over a soul; he can only frighten it with illusory terrors. Do not give in. Endure and go forth, bravely saying: I will not give in, even unto death, and I will go where the Lord calls me, with the spirit of repentance now acting in me.”

- St Theophan the Recluse (Thoughts for each day of the year)

The Eight Deadly Passions – Sorrow



Whilst we may gain some pleasure, albeit temporary, in gluttony lust or avarice, sorrow brings no joy whilst we suffer from it. It is a ‘passion’ (suffering) in the true sense of the word. More properly this applies to so-called ‘un-Godly sorrow.’ The opposite of this is sorrow over our sins and at the suffering of others. This (Godly) sorrow leads to repentance and prayer (for others); this produces joy at God’s subsequent mercy & miracles.

Sorrow at everything else is, potentially, un-Godly. This includes sadness at being passed over for promotion, not being as good at something as we’d like, or general dissatisfaction (envy). Yet it may also include sorrow due to physical illness, a loved one’s death, or an unhappy family life. It can be sorrow over our kids, or lack of kids; sadness due to a difficult marriage, or from being alone. It is not for us to feel guilty over our sorrow, but be aware of what it does to us over time

Signs of sorrow: The ‘deadliness’ of sorrow lies not in the feeling of sadness itself, but in what sustained sorrow leads to: resentment, irritability, envy, complaining and lack of gratitude. This can develop into bitterness, hatred, blaming others, loss of faith in God, despair, even suicide.

How to combat sorrow: The reason sorrow over our sins and at the suffering of others is called Godly is because it naturally encourages our turning to God. Sorrow over anything else does not necessarily lead to repentance or prayer in such a straightforward way. But it can. Much of our frustration and sadness comes from a feeling of helplessness; yet we do not *need* to pull ourselves out of our own depression, nor should we. *Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he will sustain thee... because he cares for thee* (Ps 55:22 & 1Pet 5:7). Whatever our sorrow, **let go and let God.** In prayer, or even a wordless heartfelt cry to God, we can find an answer. It may be we get humbled over how petty our trouble was, but even in this new perspective we find comfort. We are never alone in our sorrow, and even if we only have one friend, then He is the best of comforters: *Nothing escapes Thee, my God... not even a tear-drop nor part of a drop* (Simon the Theologian). By always turning them over to God, all of our sorrows – whatever their cause – can become ‘Godly’ or ‘blessed’, and then we are promised by Jesus Himself: *“you shall be comforted”* (Matt 5:4)

NB: The Samaritans offer a safe place to talk any time you like; please see <https://www.samaritans.org/>