



Homily for the fifth Sunday of the Great Lent

Five weeks of the Great Lent have passed already, dear brethren. Only two weeks remain until the glorious Resurrection of Christ. And so this week the Church gives us both solace and a supreme example of penitence and fasting.

Yesterday we glorified the Holy Virgin. This was a spiritual consolation for us, as we were reminded that the Mother of God is always with us and never ceases to pray to the Lord for us. And today we are given the ultimate example of penitence and fasting, as we commemorate St. Mary of Egypt.

Saint Mary of Egypt came from the city of Alexandria. In her youth she was renowned for her great beauty and her life of depravity. One time she saw a group of pilgrims from Alexandria preparing to embark for the Holy Land, for Jerusalem, in order to venerate the Holy Cross, and Mary decided that she, too, wanted to go along, but only to have a good time. And so she sailed together with the others. In her own words, she was surprised that the ship on which she sailed did not drown because of the debauchery which she created.

Upon arriving in Jerusalem she went with everyone else to church. All the others proceeded to enter the church, except for her. She just could not get in. At first she thought it was because of the crowd, because she was being pushed aside. However, when everyone else went in, while she alone remained outside and could not enter, she realized that some force was detaining her, was not letting her go in. She fell on her knees and cried. She realized that it was her sins that were not allowing her to enter the church.

Suddenly on the wall she saw an icon of the Holy Virgin. Falling down before the icon, Mary tearfully asked the Mother of God to help her. She then heard a mysterious voice inside her, instructing her to go to a priest and repent her sins, and then to go into the desert, cleanse her sinful life there, and never return.

Mary did as she was told and went into the desert, where she spent the first 17 years in a terrible battle with her passions, living in the desert a total of 47 years. At that time the end of her earthly existence drew near and so, by God's providence, the holy elder Zosima came to the desert and saw Mary, who was no longer a sinner, but a saint.

Let us note, dear brethren, how everything is tied in this week. We see a young woman, a sinner, so beautiful in body and so hideous in soul. And how her soul woke up, as she turned for help to the Mother of God, Who continuously prays for everyone. We see the penitence that is necessary for the cleansing of sins. We see the fasting that is required for the taming of our flesh and the regeneration of our soul. We see the obedience which every Christian is called upon to fulfill. And all of it is tied into a single example of purification of the soul.

On this fifth Sunday of Great Lent we must carefully look into our souls. Have we turned to the Mother of God, and have we tried to earn Her protection as did Mary of Egypt? Have we repented our sins? Have we fulfilled our obedience of fasting and prayer?

For 17 years Mary of Egypt cleansed her sins by means of fasting. She, too, experienced extreme temptations from the evil spirits. But she patiently endured them all and only prayed to God to forgive her sins. Our fasting lasts only six weeks, plus one more week of the Lord's Passion.

Let us emulate this great saint who is highly venerated in the Orthodox Church, so that we might merit the protection of the Mother of God, and so that the Lord might forgive us our sins. Then we, too, will be able to sing with a pure heart: "Thy Resurrection, O Christ Saviour, is sung by angels in heaven; may we, too, glorify Thee with a pure heart on earth." Amen.

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