

Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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Visit stsymeon.com

✠ March 30, 2014 ✠

St. John of the Ladder

Holy Apostles Sosthenes, Apollos, Cephas,
Caesar & Epaphroditus of the 70

St. Zosimas, Bishop of Syracuse (662)



St. Sophronius of Irkutsk (1771) Blessed Matrona the Barefoot of St. Petersburg (1911)

Fifth Week of Great Lent

- ✠ Tuesday April 1 6:30pm Inquirer's Class
- ✠ Wed. April 2 6:30pm Presanctified Liturgy
- ✠ Thurs. April 3 6:30pm Great Canon of St. Andrew (entire) w/ Matins
- ✠ Fri. April 4 6:30pm Akathist Hymn to the Theotokos w/ Matins

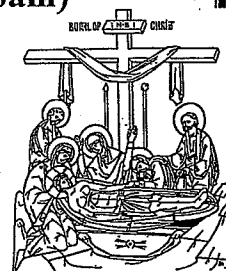
Lord Jesus Christ,
mercy on me.

The Jesus Prayer



Holy Week 2014 Schedule

- ✠ Sat. April 12 10:00am Lazarus Saturday Divine Liturgy – Parish Workday
- ✠ Sat. April 12 6:00pm **Palm Sunday Vespers** w/ Blessing of Palms
- ✠ Sun. April 13 8:30am **Palm Sunday Matins & Divine Liturgy (10:00am)**
- ✠ Palm Sunday Evening - 5:00pm ~ First Bridegroom Matins
- ✠ April 14/15 - Holy Monday & Tuesday ~ 6:30pm Bridegroom Matins
- ✠ April 16 - Holy Wednesday 6:30pm Holy Unction
- ✠ April 17 - Holy Thursday 10:00am Mystical Supper Liturgy
6:30pm 12 Passion Gospels
- ✠ **Holy Friday Services** ✠ April 18 - 10:00am Royal Hours
4:00pm Vespers – Shroud to the Tomb / 7:00pm - Lamentations at the Tomb
✠ Youth All Night Vigil at the Tomb ✠
- ✠ Holy Saturday ~ April 19 ~ 10:00am Divine Liturgy - The Blessed Sabbath
- ✠ **Holy PASCHA** ✠ Begins Saturday, April 19 at 11:30pm
- ✠ Pascha Sunday April 20 ~ 3:00pm Paschal Agape Vespers
- ✠ Bright Monday April 21 ~ 10:00am Divine Liturgy w/ Procession



On the Sunday of St. John of the Ladder

On this day the Holy Church glorifies the Righteous Saint John "Climacos" or Saint John of the Ladder, one of the greatest ascetics, which the Church, in speaking of them, calls "earthly angels and heavenly men."

These great ascetics were extraordinary people. They commanded the elements; wild beasts willingly and readily obeyed them. For them, there were no maladies they could not cure. They walked on

The Physical Life

Often in the life of a Christian there is a great emphasis on "the Spirit:" or spirituality, or some vague variation thereof. While an Orthodox Christian also thinks about the spiritual life, there is something more to it. There is a physical side to being spiritual. From how we eat to our posture in prayer, there are many physical, tangible elements to our life in Christ. That makes perfect sense since Jesus Christ Himself took flesh and became a physical reality in the world for each and everyone of us.

Because of the Fall, our physical self and our spiritual self are out of sorts. Our physical self is soaked in sin and expresses desires that are contrary to the desires of the spirit, just as the apostle Paul writes: "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish" (Gal. 5:17). The spirit and the flesh are unified in the person of Jesus Christ. Through this unification, the Lord Jesus can unify each of us and make us whole and holy as we were meant to be.

The Orthodox Church places an emphasis on disciplining the body and controlling its desires.

This emphasis is nearly absent in most forms of Christianity. One of the primary ways to discipline the body, as seen in Scripture, is through fasting. Although fasting can take different forms, in the Orthodox Church, fasting primarily focuses on abstaining from meats and animal products (such as dairy and eggs). The Orthodox sometimes abstain from wine and olive oil in addition to the other foods mentioned. Depending on the strength of the individual, there should also be a change in the amount of food and not simply the types of food consumed.

Orthodox Christians fast from certain foods not because they are bad or unclean, but because controlling the types of food and the amount we eat has a tangible effect on our prayer life and our ability to defeat entrenched sinful habits over time. The goal of fasting is to soften the heart and make each of us a humble temple where the Holy Spirit of God can dwell fully. The effect of fasting is to strengthen the will so that we can make decisions in other areas of our life that go against the sinful inclinations of our bodies. In a way, we might say fasting trains us to overcome temptations. Fasting also has the opposite effect from our typical Thanksgiving Day dinner. Instead of putting us to sleep, fasting allows us to be watchful and prayerful. In the Orthodox Church, the discipline of fasting is so important that it is practiced 200 days out of the calendar year.

Fr. James Guirguis, *Ask for the Ancient Paths*, pps. 103-104

It was said of **Abba Agathon** that he forced himself to fulfill all the commandments. When he sailed in a vessel he was the first to handle the oars and when the brethren came to see him he laid the table with his own hands, as soon as they had prayed, because he was full of the love of God. When he was at the point of death he remained three days with his eyes fixed, wide-open. The brethren roused him saying, "Abba Agathon, where are you?" He replied, "I am standing before the judgment seat of God." They said, "Are you not afraid, Father?" He replied, "Until this moment, I have done my utmost to keep the commandments of God; but I am a man; how should I know if my deeds are acceptable to God?" The brethren said to him, "Do you not have confidence in all that you have done according to the law of God?" The old man replied, "I shall have no confidence until I meet God. Truly the judgment of God is not that of man."

When they wanted to question him further, he said to them, "Of your charity, do not talk to me any more, for I have no more time." And so he died with joy. They saw him depart like one greeting his dearest friends. He preserved the strictest vigilance in all things, saying, "Without great vigilance a man does not advance in even a single virtue."

Repentance is the daughter of hope and the denial of despair. ~ St. John Climacus

Continued from page 1.

waters as on dry land; all the elements of the world were subject to them, because they lived in God and had the power of grace to overcome the laws of terrestrial nature. One such ascetic was Saint John of the Ladder. He was surnamed "of the Ladder" (τῆς Κλίμακος) because he wrote an immortal work, the Ladder of Divine Ascent. In this work we see how a person can ascend the ladder of the virtues step by step and reach godly perfection. We see how one virtue leads to another, as a man rises higher and higher and finally attains to that height where there abides the crown of the virtues, love.

In his sixteenth year Saint John decided to offer himself as a sacrifice to God; thus he left the world and went to live on Mount Sinai. After 19 years there, he came to practice asceticism in the monastery of Kyriakos, in a place called "Tholas." He lived there for 40 years. He ate everything allowed to a monk, but only a little amount, and he fought fiercely against that deadly self-justification which confirms us in slavery to sin. As regards his tearful prayers, there is none who could narrate the extent and the intensity of them. He slept only as much as it was necessary to maintain his life and so as not to harm his power of thought. His whole conversation was full of God's love and all his days were a continual prayer. He delivered his spirit to the Lord in 603 at the age of eighty.

Countless souls have been saved down through the centuries through heeding his instructions on spiritual life written in "The Ladder." The ascent to perfection is indispensable for anyone who wishes to save his soul unto eternity. When we throw a stone up, it ascends until the moment when the propelling force ceases to be effectual. So long as this force acts, the stone travels higher and higher in its ascent, overcoming the force of the earth's gravity. But when this force is spent and ceases to act, then, as you know, the stone does not remain suspended in the air, but falls quickly back to earth. This is according to the physical laws of terrestrial gravity.

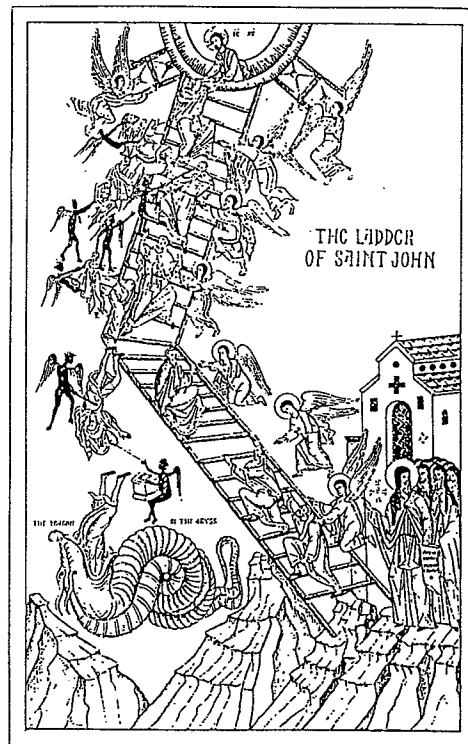
So it is also in the spiritual life. As a Christian gradually ascends, the force of spiritual and ascetic labors lifts him on high. Our Lord Jesus Christ said: "Strive to enter in through the narrow gate." That is, the Christian ought to be an ascetic. Not only the monastic, but every Christian. He must take pains for his soul and his life. He must direct his life on the Christian path, and purge his soul of all filth and impurity.

Now if the Christian, who is ascending upon this ladder of spiritual perfection by his struggles and ascetic labors, ceases from this work, his soul will not remain in its former condition; but, like the stone, it will fall to the earth. More and more quickly it will drop until, finally, if the man does not come to his senses, it will cast him into the very abyss of Hell.

It is necessary to remember this. People forget that the path of Christianity is indeed an ascetical labor. Last Sunday we heard how the Lord said: "He that would come after Me, let him take up

his cross, deny himself, and follow Me." The Lord said this with the greatest emphasis. Therefore, the Christian must be one who takes up his cross, and his life, likewise, must be an ascetic labor of bearing that cross. Whatever the outward circumstances of his life, be he married or monastic, it is of no consequence. In either case, if he does not force himself to mount upwards, then, of a certainty, he will fall lower and lower.

And in this regard, alas, people have confused thoughts. For example, a clergyman drops by a home during a fast. Cordially and thoughtfully, they offer him fasting food, and say: "For you, fast food, of course!" To this a certain bishop customarily replies: "Yes, I am Orthodox. But who gave you permission not to keep the fasts?" All the fasts of the Church, all the ordinances, are mandatory for every Orthodox person. Speaking of monastics, such ascetics as St. John Climacos and those like him fasted much more rigorously than the Church prescribes; but this was a matter of their spiritual ardor, an instance of their personal ascetic labor. This the Church does not require of everyone, because it is not in accord with everyone's strength. But the Church does require of every Orthodox the keeping of the fasts.



Once there came to Saint Seraphim of Sarov a mother who was concerned how she might arrange the best possible marriage for her young daughter. When she came to the Saint for advice he said to her: "Before all else, ensure that he, whom your daughter has chosen as her companion for life, keeps the fasts. If he does not, then he is not a Christian, whatever else he may consider himself to be." Do you see how one of the greatest Saints of the Church, Saint Seraphim of Sarov, a man who, better than we, knew what Orthodoxy is, spoke concerning the fasts?

Let us remember this. Saint John Climacos has described the ladder of spiritual ascent; then let us not forget that each Christian must ascend thereon. The great ascetics ascended like swift-flying eagles; we scarcely ascend at all. Nonetheless, let us not forget that, unless we employ our efforts in correcting ourselves and our lives, we shall cease our ascent, and, most assuredly, we shall begin to fall. Amen.

(- from the Triodion and the writings
of Metropolitan Philaret.)



The Most Confessed Sin

A brother at Scetis committed a fault. A council was called to which Abba Moses was invited, but he refused to go to it. Then the priest sent someone to say to him. "Come, everyone is waiting for you." So he got up and went. He took a leaking jug, filled it with water and carried it with him. The others came out to meet him and said to him, "What is this, Father?" The old man said to them, "My sins run out behind me and I do not see them, and today I am coming to judge the errors of another." When they heard that they said no more to the brother but forgave him. (From The Sayings of the Desert Fathers)

During the season of Lent we are called upon to repent of our sins and reveal them to our spiritual Father in the Mystery of Holy Confession. It is most unfortunate that the Sacrament of Holy Confession, and with it Holy Communion, have come to be seen as a "duty," rather than the pillar and groundwork of the spiritual life. This formalism continues to rob many people of the experience of God because they come to Confession unprepared, taking only a few brief moments to examine their conscience with the help of a sin checklist in their prayer book.

With such a brief and shallow preparation, many people come to Confession not knowing what to say - and so, rendering an account of their sins for the previous six months or longer, their spiritual father hears that most confessed sins: "I ate meat on a Friday," and its brother, "I took the Name of the Lord in vain."

One would expect that with such depth of sins being confessed that our churches would be models of sanctity, attracting new members through the holiness of the average churchgoer. But the sad truth is that these two sins are the most confessed because most of us don't understand what confession is, let alone what sin is. Having gone through the checklist we exonerate ourselves from all but these two sins.

The real problem is that many of us never experience spiritual growth. We revert back during Confession to that eight year old child. In the world of the eight year old, murder and adultery, hatred and jealousy, lying and lewdness are normally far removed from the experience of day to day life. It is sad and difficult to realize that as we grew physically and emotionally, our spiritual growth was often stunted. The truth is that we have no idea of how to approach Holy Confession as adults. We are often oblivious to what sin is and what we must look for in ourselves to confess.

The famed Orthodox spiritual writer, **St. Isaac of Nineveh**, some fourteen hundred years ago said: ***"The person who can see his own sin is greater than someone who can raise the dead."*** More common, however, is the attitude pointed out in the example of Abba Moses in the above story: our own sins run out behind us unseen but we are always ready to judge the sins of others. The Lord Jesus tells us, ***"Hypocrite, first take the beam out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly how to remove the splinter from your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:5).***

There are several methods that we can use to correct this spiritual blindness that is within us. The first is to realize that Confession must be an ongoing process that takes place every day! The Orthodox prayer book contains a "Confession of Sins" to be prayed at morning or evening prayers. At the end of the day we need to examine our lives and ask the Lord and ourselves where we fell short, what we could have done better and the state of our relationship with those around us. This small act is the foundation and the beginning of a true spiritual life.

In our prayers we must ask the Lord to both reveal our sins to us and grant us the desire to confess them. We pray in the Lenten Prayer of St. Ephraim the Syrian: ***"Grant me to see my own sins and not to judge those of my neighbor."***

It was out of the conviction of his own sinfulness that St. John Chrysostom wrote in his prayer before Holy Communion: *"I believe that Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Who came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the first."* St. John wrote this prayer as a personal devotion, which the Church loved and came to use.

As the Saints grew nearer and nearer to God, they became more and more aware of their own sins. It is like a person in a dark room who cannot tell if his clothes are clean or dirty, but the more he or she comes into the presence of the light, the more he or she can see the dirt. We are now in the dark room and need to seek the light to see our own sins.

As we approach Confession, we need to look for the correct standard to judge ourselves by. We often look at the people around us and believe that we are no better or worse than they are. Hence, we find little fault with ourselves. We need to find a higher standard by which to judge ourselves. One place where we can find a better standard is in the pages of the Gospel. We can become aware of our sinfulness by asking ourselves, when we hear the Gospel reading in Church or when we read at home, exactly where we would fit in.

In Chapter Eight of the Gospel of St. John there is an interesting story of a woman caught in adultery: *Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?" This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear. So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, "Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more" (St. John 8:3-11).*

As we read this story, the question we must be asking ourselves is: "Where do I fit in here?" Would I have been the woman caught in adultery? That is, are my sins blatant and obvious to those around me but, somehow, I am able to rationalize away my bad behavior. Would I have been one of those who brought the woman to Jesus demanding that justice be done? That is, must I always have my own way and seek vengeance or get even with those who may have done me wrong? Would I be one of the older men, quick to realize my sin and walk away in shame, or one of the younger for whom it took a while longer? Some of the Church Fathers in commenting on this passage said that Jesus was writing on the ground the sins of those who were accusing the adulterous woman. Would I have been with the Lord, ready to forgive a penitent sinner, knowing that I myself am guilty of many sins? Or am I so blinded by my pride that I would have stayed and started throwing stones?

Take as another example the familiar Parable of the Prodigal Son. How many of us identify with the older son who did not run away and kept to his Father's house. Do we feel his resentment at the younger son? The truth is that most of us are not in the position of the older son, but have become ourselves prodigals - squandering our spiritual inheritance through a lack of prayer, not going to Church, refusing the invitation of the Lord. In looking at this Parable, it is the Prodigal that the Church calls upon us to identify with and not the righteous pride of the elder son. **When hearing the Gospel, place yourself in the story - ask yourself honestly where you would be and you may catch a glimpse of your sinful self.**

If we daily examine ourselves through prayer; if we find ourselves in the Gospel story; if we make life itself a preparation for Confession, we will find this Sacrament is much more than an obligation - it is the foundation of our spiritual life and brings us closer to the experience of the Kingdom of Heaven.

We will also discover much more to confess than the last hamburger we ate on a Friday.

-Fr. Lawrence Barriger, Johnstown, PA

A Modern Lent - Fr. Stephen Freeman

“... a beginning for a modern Lent is to repent from the modern world itself. By this, I mean renouncing the notion that you are a self-generated, self-authenticating individual.”

Few things are as difficult in the modern world as fasting. It is not simply the action of changing our eating habits that we find problematic – it's the whole concept of fasting and what it truly entails. It comes from another world.

We understand dieting – changing how we eat in order to improve how we look or how we feel. But changing how we eat in order to know God or to rightly keep a feast of the Church – this is foreign. Our first question is often, “How does that work?” For we live in a culture of utility – we want to know the use of things. Underneath the question of utility is the demand that something make sense to me, and that I be able to ultimately take charge of it, use it as I see fit and shape it according to my own desires. Perhaps the fast could be improved?

Our modern self-understanding sees people primarily as individual centers of choice and decision. A person is seen as the product of their choices and decisions – our lives are self-authenticated. As such, we are managers.

Of course there are many problems with this world-view from the perspective of Classical Christianity. Though we are free to make choices and decisions, our freedom is not unlimited. The largest part of our lives is not self-determined. Much of the rhetoric of modernity is aimed towards those with wealth and power. It privileges their stories and mocks the weakness of those without power with promises that are rarely, if ever, fulfilled.

Our lives are a gift from God and not of our own making. The Classical Christian spiritual life is not marked by choice and self-determination: it is characterized by self-emptying and the way of the Cross.

When a modern Christian confronts the season of Lent – the question often becomes: “What

do I want to give up for Lent?” The intention is good, but the question is wrong. Lent quickly becomes yet another life-choice, a consumer's fast.

The practice of the traditional fast has been greatly diminished over the past few centuries. The Catholic Church has modified its requirements and streamlined Lenten fasting (today it includes only abstaining from meat on the Fridays of Lent – which makes them similar to all the other Fridays of the year). The Protestant Churches that observe the season of Lent offer no formal guidelines for Lenten practice. The individual is left on their own.

Orthodoxy continues to have in place the full traditional fast, which is frequently modified in its application (the “rules” themselves are generally recognized as written for monastics). It is essentially a vegan diet (no meat, fish, wine, dairy). Some limit the number of meals and their manner of cooking. Of course, having the fast in place and “keeping the fast” are two very different things. I know of no study on how Orthodox in the modern world actually fast. My pastoral experience tells me that people generally make a good effort.

Does any of this matter? Why should Christians in the modern world concern themselves with a traditional practice? What is at stake in the modern world is our humanity. The notion that we are self-authenticating individuals is simply false. We obviously do not bring ourselves in existence – it is a gift. And the larger part of what constitutes our lives is simply a given – a gift. It is not always a gift that someone is happy with – they would like themselves to be other than they are. But the myth of the modern world is that we, in fact, do create ourselves and our lives – our identities are imagined to be of our own making. We are only who we choose to be. It is a myth that is extremely well-suited for undergirding a culture built on consumption. Identity can be had at a price. The wealthy have a far greater range of identities available to them – the poor are largely stuck with being who they really are.

But the only truly authentic human life is the one we receive as a gift from God. The spirituality of choice and consumption under the guise of freedom is emptiness. The identity we create is an ephemera, a product of imagination and the market. The habits of the marketplace serve to enslave us – Lent is a call to freedom.

Thus, a beginning for a modern Lent is to repent from the modern world itself. By this, I mean renouncing the notion that you are a self-generated, self-authenticating individual. You are not defined by your choices and decisions, much less by your career and your shopping. You begin by acknowledging that God alone is Lord (and you are not). Your life has meaning and purpose only in relation to God. The most fundamental practice of such God-centered living is the giving of thanks.

Renounce trying to improve yourself and become something. You are not a work in progress. If you are a work – then you are God's work. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in" (Eph 2:10).

Do not plan to have a "good Lent" or imagine what a "good Lent" would be. Give up judging – especially judging yourself. Get out of the center of your world. Lent is not about you. It is about Christ and His Pascha.

Fast according to the Tradition instead of according to your own ideas and designs. This might be hard for some if they are not part of the traditional Church and thus have no fasting tradition... Covenant with others (family, friends) to keep the traditional fast. Don't be too strict or too lenient, and if possible keep the fast in a manner that is mutually agreed rather than privately designed. Be accountable but not guilty.

Pray. Fasting without praying is called "the Fast of Demons," because demons never eat, but they never pray. We fast as a means of drawing closer to God. Your fasting and your prayer should be balanced as much as possible. If you fast in a strict manner, then you should pray for extended periods. The point is to be single – for prayer and fasting to be a single thing.

To our prayer and fasting should be added mercy (giving stuff away, especially money). You cannot be too generous. Your mercy should be as invisible as possible to others, except in your kindness to all. Spend less, give away more.

Eating, drinking, praying and generosity are very natural activities. Look at your life. How natural is your eating? Is your diet driven by manufactured, processed foods (especially as served in restaurants and fast food places)? These can be very inhuman ways of eating. Eating should take time. It is not a waste of time to spend as much as six hours in twenty-four preparing, sharing, eating and cleaning up. Even animals take time to eat.

Go to Church a lot more (if your Church has additional Lenten services, go to them. Classical Christianity worships according to Tradition and focuses its attention on God. It is not there for you to "get something out of it."

Entertain yourself less. In traditional Orthodox lands, amusements are often given up during the Lenten period. This can be very difficult for modern people in that we live to consume and are thus caught in a cycle of pain and pleasure. Normal pleasures such as exercise or walking are not what I have in mind – although it strikes me as altogether modern that there should be businesses dedicated to helping us do something normal (like walking or exercising), such that even our normal activities become a commodity to consume.

I could well imagine that a modern person, reading through such a list, might feel overwhelmed and wonder what is left. What is left is being human. That so much in our lives is not particularly human but an ephemeral distraction goes far to explain much of our exhaustion and anxiety. There is no food for us in what is not human.

And so the words of Isaiah come to mind:
**Lo! Everyone who thirsts, Come to the waters;
And you who have no money, Come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk Without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, And your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, And let your soul delight itself in fatness (Isa 55:1-2).**

"Let your soul delight itself in fatness..." the irony of Lent.