

Let Us Begin Lent Joyfully

Joy in the Christian life occupies the heart of everything, including without exception the Great Lent period. The music, hymns, and poems of the divine Church services call upon Christians to begin to rejoice: “O faithful, with joy let us enter upon the beginning of the Fast. Let us not be of sad countenance but let us wash our faces in the water of dispassion, blessing and extolling Christ unto the ages.” (Orthros of the first Monday of Great Lent)

The Lord Jesus Christ commands those who are fasting to be joyful. He also denounces sadness and depression, especially when that behavior exposes their fasting to people. The Lord Jesus Christ commands His people to hide their pain and to cover their sorrowfulness caused by sin. He asks His faithful people to live out the life of repentance, to maintain a low profile when practicing fasting and abstinence, and to appear shiny and glowing in front of people. “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting.... But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that it will not be obvious to men that you are fasting.” (Matthew 6:16-18)

Sadness or the lack of joy according to a Christian mindset is a sin that requires actions of repentance and definitely is not a virtue that deserves the attitude of admiration. This is quite different from feeling the blessed sadness toward the sorrowful tragedy of the fallen world. The Lord has promised that those who mourn for this reason will be comforted: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4).

By the same token, there is a different type of sadness that is possible and acceptable as well, that can lead us to repentance and conversion. The Apostle Paul refers to that by saying, “Yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death” (2nd Corinthians 7:9-10).

The struggle of a Christian during the season of Lent is to cast away from him the “worldly sorrowfulness” and to embrace “the blessed grief for God’s sake”. This is the type of sorrow which Saint John of *The Ladder* characterizes as “grief and blessed remorse that is filled with joy” and “grief that produces spiritual laughter in the soul”, because “God does not need nor desire for man to weep and be in pain, rather He wishes for him to rejoice and take pleasure in God’s love” (The Ladder of Divine Ascent, step 7).

The Apostle Paul taught on this type of sadness. It is sorrowfulness for God’s sake that is followed by repentance and bearing salvation that is not to be regretted. These words of one of the great saints are echoed in the teaching of Saint John Cassian when he said, “The only acceptable Christian sorrow is the sorrow that is accompanied by repentance and associated with the hope in God.”

This type of grief for the sake of God nourishes the soul with the hope that stems from repentance and is mixed with joy. This is why we become obedient and eager to carry out every gracious deed, such as humility, kindness, endurance, and patience in coping with all pains and difficulties that are permitted by God. The characteristics of this type of thing indicate that a person enjoys the fruits of the Holy Spirit which are “love,

joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, kindness, gentleness, and chastity” (Galatians 5:22-23).

On the other hand, we know that the other type of sorrow has its fruits too, the fruit of the spirit of evil: slothfulness, impatience, anger, hatred, strife, despair, and indolence in prayer. So as we lack chastity and generosity, and as we suffer from anger and the rest of other passions, we are forced to experience or live the other type of grief that is painful.

We can be healed through prayer, hope in God, contemplating the Holy Scriptures, and through living with the people who have obtained the degree of deification. So, would it not be worthwhile for us to learn how to grieve during this Lenten season so that we may attain the blessed happiness?