

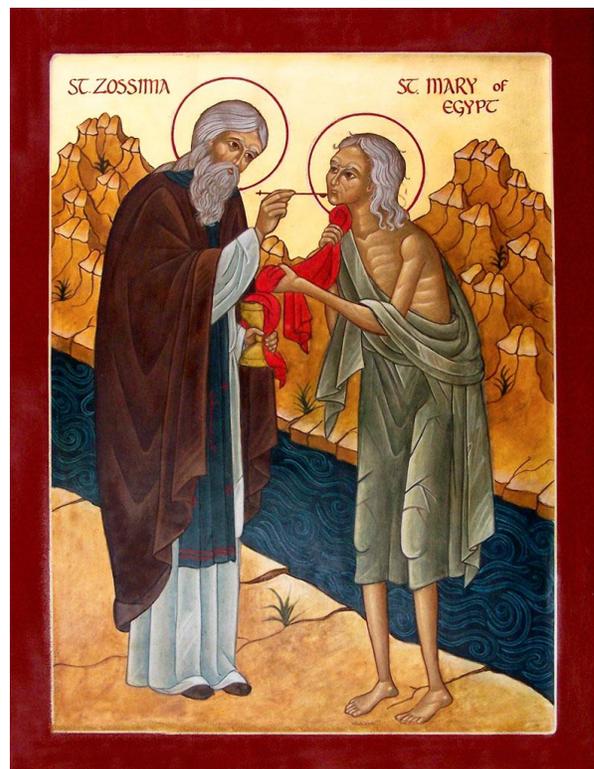
***Homily-Reflection on
St. Mary of Egypt
The Fifth Sunday of the Great Fast
2017***

Glory to Jesus Christ! Let us begin this reflection in the name...

In today's Gospel St. Mark bears witness that Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen to him. Despite what Hollywood or some magazines in the grocery store might like us to believe, Jesus is the Incarnate Son and Word of God. He was not surprised that He was rejected, arrested and crucified. He actually told His Apostles exactly that this would happen to Him. Jesus underwent all of this willingly. As He said in another place, "No one takes [my life] from Me... I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it [up] again." (Jn 10:38).

Today's Apostolic Reading from Hebrews gives us the reason He did this. It states, "Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come... with His own blood He entered the Holy of Holies once for all, having obtained [our] eternal redemption." Christ's sacrifice paid "the debt of death" for our disobedience -once AND for all. He took death upon Himself in our humanity and broke the power of death by His resurrection. So, if we are united with Christ, death has no power over us.

This is the Sunday of St. Mary of Egypt. From the earliest days of her womanhood, Mary lived a life of sin AND fornication [which is sex outside of marriage]. She pursued this lifestyle for seventeen years because she thought (to quote St. Mary herself), "life consisted in the satisfaction of my fleshly lust." By Mary's own admission, she had ruined the souls of many by her sins.



Her conversion came about when she decided to go to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross -NOT for religious reasons- but in order to entice some of the many pilgrims there into sin. Yet when Mary decided to enter a church herself to witness the elevation of the Holy Cross, something miraculous happened: her sins prevented her from entering.

The grace of the Lord at that moment touched Mary's heart and the power of God's holiness shook her to her foundation. She broke down in tears and wept from the depths of her heart. Seeing an icon of the Most Holy Theotokos she uttered a profound and beautiful prayer which ended with the words, "Be my witness before Your Son that I will NEVER defile my body again with the impurity of fornication."

St. Mary then received the sacraments of initiation and spent the next forty-seven years of her life in the desert in prayer and repentance. She fell asleep in the Lord (on April 1st) after receiving her Lord in Holy Communion from the Presbyter, St. Zosimas.

When we consider the life of St. Mary, one thing is obvious: When it comes to our God, (the God of Christianity), morality matters. It's on every page of the New Testament: reminding us that God calls us to live differently than the world. He calls us to be IN the world, but not OF the world. God wants to draw us up into His own divine life and sin is the only thing that separates us and prevents our union with Him.

We should keep this in mind when look at modern media which repeatedly promotes sinful images, seductive ideas and confusing messages -to us and our children. This is most important when we approach the holy sacramental mystery of our Lord's Body and Blood which unites us most intimately with God.

If we approach the Holy Gifts while living an immoral life-style, we receive them unto our own condemnation. Just as we pray in the Liturgy of St. Basil the Great: "...that none of partake of the holy Body and Blood of your Christ for judgment or condemnation."

Any sexual intimacy ---outside of the relations between a man and a woman in the covenant of marriage--- is sin and must be repented of before approaching our Lord in Holy Communion. The word Repentance comes from the Greek word *metanoia* which means a total change of mind and behavior. Repentance is not simply sorrow for sin but a firm determination to turn away from it -to a new life in Christ.

God's moral law is not an arbitrary set of "do's" and "don'ts." It comes from the very way we are designed. God tells us what is good -or- what is bad based on the way He made us. So morality is really living in harmony with God's (original) design.

That original design WAS marred by our ancestor's sin. This means we are all born broken, defective and with sin. Psalm 50 states, "...in sins and iniquities my mother conceived me." We are conceived with sin in our being -but this doesn't mean we have to give in to it. Sin is something we are called to overcome through the power of God, His Divine Energy in our lives

The word "sin" comes from the Greek "*hamartia*" which means to miss the mark for which we are created.

Like St. Mary of Egypt, we overcome sin through struggle, through ascetical effort (which is why we have fasts), through prayer and by union with God. The goal of life in Byzantine tradition is union with God (Theosis). In our tradition we don't just focus on the fact that we are saved. We focus also, more importantly, on what God has saved us for: Union with Him!

St. Mary came to a turning point in her life. She made a decision, a radical decision, to turn away from evil and to live for Christ. Not all of us have such a radical turning point -but- all of us ARE called to be radically conformed to Christ: to give our lives entirely to Him. As we pray in the Divine Liturgy, "Let us commit ourselves and our whole life to Christ our God..." In the name... Glory to Jesus Christ!

Sub-Dn. Lazarus Der-Ghazarian
A.D. 2017