

February 26, 2012

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



Forgiveness Sunday

Romans 13:11-14; 14:1-4 Matthew 6:14-21

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the last day before the Lenten season begins tomorrow. It is called Forgiveness Sunday, as we all know. And we all know what this means and what we must do if we are to enter the holy season of the Fast with clean hearts, minds and souls: *we must exchange forgiveness with everyone!*

Thus the Gospel for this morning begins with this serious verse: "The Lord said, If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not..." Well, we know what comes next, don't we? If we do not forgive others, then God will not forgive us, either now, or at the Judgment.

So many sermons have been preached about Forgiveness Sunday and the critical importance of exchanging forgiveness, beginning with our families, then our relatives, others in the parish, and still others—neighbors, those we work with, etc.—that I will not again today preach on this same theme. You've heard it all before, and many, many times. You know the routine. Now it's time not for words, but for deeds; not for pious sentiments but for life-changing action.

Instead, I'd like to say a little about today's Epistle Reading, which relates to the Gospel and the overall theme of this Sunday. Let me begin by repeating this brief Epistle:

"Brethren, salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed; the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Let us then cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us conduct ourselves becomingly as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery



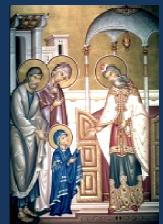
and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

"As for the man who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not for disputes over opinions. One believes he may eat anything, while the weak man eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who abstains, and let not him who abstains pass judgment on him who eats; for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for God is able to make him stand."

This Epistle is a remarkable sermon all its own! First, it begins: "Brethren, salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed [for] the night is far gone, the day is at hand." This is a wake-up call, a loud and clear clarion ordering us to pay attention, for life is going quickly by and we are closer to the end, and to judgment, than we were at this time last year. I remember well the day—just a few months before she died of her last illness--my mother said to me, with amazement in her voice: "I can't believe that my whole lifetime has already gone by. It all went so fast? What happened to the time?"

This morning's Epistle then goes on to instruct us, in no uncertain terms, to "put off the works of darkness." And what are those? Of course our sins, our vices, our bad habits, our indifference to our own salvation and to God Himself as well as indifference to our neighbor. Instead, we must "put on the armor of light".

Now, St. John tells us in his Gospel that Christ Himself is light, and not just any light, such as you and I might create when we light a candle, a fire, or turn a switch on a lamp. No, Christ is THE Light, the Light that came into the darkness, and the darkness could not quench it, could not overwhelm it, and could not put it out. So we are to "put on Christ", and when we do, then we too begin to shine with a spiritual light. This spiritual light can be equated with love, for God is



love, so when we put on the armor of light we put on Christ and we begin to shine with unselfish and unconditional love for others.

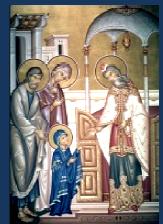
In the next verses, St. Paul specifically says that we are not to do the works of the night—the sins of the night, in other words—but the good deeds and virtues of the day. And he specifically cites not judging others.

Now all of this, it seems to me, strongly suggests that our life is indeed a journey and we are walking on a certain path, a path to the Kingdom of Heaven. As we know when walking on a path through the forest, we can go astray by stepping off the path and perhaps even getting lost, hurt, possibly even attacked by wild animals. But the great 19th century Father of the Church, St. Theophan the Recluse, in writing to one of his own spiritual children—a laywoman--, gave us general rules for staying on the path, the True Path.

I will share these simple rules so that we can keep them in mind as we now begin the Lenten journey and plunge into the deep seriousness of the First Week of Great Lent, a week which sets the whole tone of the sacred season.

First of all, St. Theophan says, we must fear doubt. Doubt is our greatest enemy on this journey to the next life. And doubt enters in when we begin to day dream instead of taking life seriously. And whenever we start thinking that we are capable of accomplishing important things—this thought opens the door to doubt and grace starts to ebb away from our souls and we are alone, we are left to our own devices.

Secondly, we must realize that the path upon which we are walking is surrounded by snares of all kinds, temptations and distractions, and you and I are not immune to any of them, not immune to the most subtle or the most crude and vulgar temptations.



Thirdly, according to St. Theophan, we must have a healthy fear of death and judgment. He writes: "From morning, at the same time you are renewing the memory of the Lord in your heart, take care to add to this the memory of these *final things*. Then," he continues, you will have this thought continually the entire day, just as you have the thought of the Lord; and as you are falling asleep, say, The grave is before me! Death awaits me!"

The fourth rule, St. Theophan says, is that we must remove ourselves, as much as it is possible, from those who are negative, cause us temptation, or distract us from our ultimate goal—which is, again the Kingdom of Heaven.

Fifth, he adds, "Do not, however avoid [all] people, and do not be gloomy..." or depressed because others are misbehaving.

The sixth rule of St. Theophan is the one most often neglected, I suspect, by the average layman: spiritual studies and reading, which includes prayer. These, he says, must be done every day, even if just for a few minutes. "What you do, when," he writes, "is for you to decide for yourself. Get up a little earlier, and before you leave the house, do your spiritual studies to the extent possible. Spend a little more time at prayer, however. Express your vital needs to the Lord like a child and with a child's faith."

And then, lastly—and this is the seventh rule--we are to force ourselves and try as hard as we possibly can in our spiritual life, but always trusting in God for our strength. "Nothing," St. Theophan said, "will happen all of a sudden; everything will come about in its own time. Everything you seek with faith will come. But when? When the Lord is ready to grant it. Be patient, remaining steadfast in the ways you have begun. Be inspired with the hope that the day will come when the light of joy will glow in the heart and it will be emancipated from all bonds, bringing freedom of movement and raising you to that place where the noble images of spirit

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ascend. Then you will soar in the realm of the spirit like a bird that has been freed from its cage."

Brothers and sisters, is this not what we all desire?--to "soar in the realm of the spirit like a bird that has been freed from its cage"? *But this is actually possible*, you see, if we follow the path, if we observe these simple rules for staying on the path, if we put off the works of darkness and put on the light that is Jesus Christ.

May each of us begin now to walk this path during this sacred and holy season of Lent. And may each of us also be found at the end in the safe harbor of the All-bright Pascha of the Lord.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.