

April 1, 2012

# Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young  
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



The Sunday of St. Mary of Egypt, April 1, 2012

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

Today is the Sunday of St. Mary of Egypt, the only other saint to whom a whole Sunday is dedicated during Great Lent or, in fact, during the Church year. Her story is very ancient—she died on April 1, Holy Thursday, in the year 522--and knowledge of her began to circulate widely in the monastic communities of the Middle East almost immediately. Her story has become the best and greatest of all models of repentance, and this is why the Church long ago awarded her a Sunday, as well as her regular feast day, which of course falls on the day of her death, April 1. In addition, her life is read during weekday divine services during the 5th week of Lent. St. Mary has been rightly called “an icon in words of the theological truth of repentance” (Sr. Benedicta Ward)

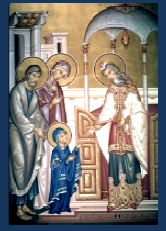
We have heard her story so many times—at least once each year of our lives if we’ve been attending Lenten services, so her life is, or should be, quite familiar.

Simply put, Mary was a prostitute who repented of her sinful life and spent the rest of her life in the desert doing penance for her sins. As I said, we have heard—or read ourselves—the details of this life so often that we take them for granted. However, the fact is, her life is really quite disturbing if we pay close attention. As one Orthodox professor, Susan Harvey, said of her in a lecture she gave some years ago on the subject: “In the end. It [her story] haunts me far more often than it comforts me.” (Professor Susan Harvey, Ph.D, Brown University)

Dr. Harvey makes an interesting point. She says that most of us, when we think of the saints, see them as people who have been closely united to Christ throughout their entire lives and incapable of sin from youth on. We don’t see whether they had struggles, vices to overcome, and so forth. But if this is the case—if this is what we really think--, then we are very wrong. It’s true that a few men and women were saints from the womb, but most were not. Most had to ascend the same ladder of struggle and virtue that you and I must climb. They had the same fallen human nature that we have. They were tempted as we are, and they gave in to those temptations as do we. Of course this is abundantly, dramatically, clear in the life of St. Mary of Egypt. *But*, when *she* repented

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of her sins she did so with all her heart, *unlike most of us*. You and I tend to express “regret” for our sins, even a passing and superficial sorrow. But this is not real repentance, which means a firm turning away from sin.

St. Mary’s understanding of repentance was not just a matter of making a few changes, a few “adjustments” here and there in her life, but of *a total and complete change* of her entire outlook on her life and herself. She changed everything, beginning with her very thoughts, and she did this quite literally overnight, after many years in deep sin! The Church wants all of us, brothers and sisters, to imitate her and do the very same thing at this point in our Lenten journey, so that we might be truly prepared to walk with Jesus up to Jerusalem, there to witness His terrible and terrifying Passion and Death and participate in His glorious resurrection.

This, you see, is the whole purpose and point of this Sunday dedicated to St. Mary of Egypt: to invite us to do as she did. We were already given a clue, a “hint” about this in the very first week of Lent when, during Compline in the evenings, we read and sang the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete, where, among many things, he says: “Beware, Oh my soul—the tax-collectors and prostitutes are seizing the Kingdom of Heaven before you!” To



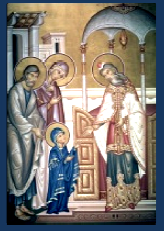
St. Andrew’s stark statement we can add that tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands or millions of repentant tyrants, murderers, adulterers, thieves, and persecutors of the Church have already entered the Kingdom of Heaven...while you and I stand stupidly outside, deep in our sins, like the sands of the sea surrounding us...

Therefore it is true to say that our Orthodox saints have come directly out of the ranks of sinners just like us. And St. Mary of Egypt is a symbol and representation of all of fallen and immoral humanity.

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So, my dear brothers and sisters, on this day the Church “lifts up” St. Mary as the best repentant sinner the Church has ever produced. And it is not just her repentance that the Church wishes us to see, but also her experience of the full goodness of God and His fatherly love and care for us, His quick readiness to receive us back into His loving and forgiving arms.

So let us, then, if we have not already begun to do so, learn repentance and begin to experience the goodness of God’s love and forgiveness, as well as the grace and strength that the Lord sends so willingly, happily and abundantly to keep repentant sinners on the path into the Kingdom of Heaven.

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