

SUNDAY OF ST. JOHN CLIMACUS

“This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting.”

On this fourth Sunday of Lent, we commemorate St. John Climacus, a seventh century monk known most popularly for his work, ‘The Ladder of Divine Ascent,’ which is a treatise on the importance of asceticism as a means of attaining spiritual perfection. The two main ascetical efforts undertaken by the clergy, religious, and faithful of the Byzantine Church during the Great Fast are prayer and fasting. But why? Why prayer and fasting?

Prayer is our relationship with God, our connection to the Divine. It moves our hearts and minds outside of our earthly home and allows us to lift our “eyes to the hills” because our “help comes from the Lord, Who made heaven and earth.” (*Ps 121:1-2*) Often times though, we have trouble praying because we are very attached to this world. To things, people, food – you name it, we grasp for it. Fasting attempts to break the hold of these temporal or transitory goods on us in a tangible way so that we may remember that the good things God gives us are just that – gifts provided by God and are not God in and of themselves. It allows us to take a step back from these essential goods in our life and remind ourselves that “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (*Mt 4:4*), that is, Jesus Christ. In the words of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, fasting combined with prayer “allow [Christ] to come and satisfy the deepest hunger that we experience in the depths of our being: the hunger and thirst for God.”

There are also times in our life (or rather in our hearts) when we experience demons that can *only* be cast out through prayer and fasting. We hear in the gospel today about a faith-filled father who approaches Christ on behalf of his demon-possessed son. Because of the father’s great act of faith, Jesus is able to heal his son – but this healing causes a stir among the disciples. “Why could we not cast him out?” Jesus responds, “This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting.” When we encounter such demons, or even harder, the inner reality of our own sinful heart, we realize that prayer and fasting become not just an ascetical effort, but a way of life, a necessity to our salvation, and a pathway by which we purge our hearts, minds and bodies of the demons or sins that possess us.

According to our Typikon or rule of life, “Fasting is one of the pillars of monastic life and an important tool in attaining detachment, freedom, and self-discipline.” In the tradition of our Holy Fathers, such as St. John Climacus, who we commemorate today, monastics participate in the traditional ‘black fast’ for the 40 days of the Great Fast and Holy Week, which means we fast from meat, dairy, wine and oil. (Yes, there are in fact still some food groups available outside of these categories!)

For monastics, fasting becomes our way of life. We first learn to fast from food but that external fasting reminds and leads us to the internal reality that I mentioned before – God alone satisfies our hunger. But we are human – and sometimes are very forgetful. (Perhaps I just speak for myself!) For this reason, the Church in her Wisdom combines prayer with our fasting. Again from our Typikon, “However, fasting is not an end in itself...Fasting must always be joined with prayer. Therefore, the periods of fasting in the monastery coincide with the liturgical cycle of the Church. In this way, fasting also creates a spirit of expectation and joy as the monastery looks forward to the coming feast.” By living out our fasting in conjunction with the Church’s liturgical cycle, we are constantly reminded of why we fast through the prayers we pray and our prayer directs our attention back towards God, the One we desire to fill us. Just remember, fasting without prayer is simply dieting! Our fasting must serve a purpose; otherwise we become “a resounding gong or a clashing symbol.” (*1 Cor 13:1*)

Remember, it is never too late to participate in the Great Fast! If you haven’t kept your Lenten promises to yourself or you never got around to coming up with any, ‘plug in’ to the wisdom of the Church and pick one of the items of the traditional fast to give up! (Or all of them!) Find a Lenten prayer service to attend at your church (or at a monastery!) or try praying the Prayer of St. Ephrem. Offer up these sacrifices for the intention of finding your vocation! Allow these final weeks of the Great Fast to engage your mind and heart in a new way through the prayer and fasting tradition of the Church, so that when we reach Pascha, you will truly know Christ is RISEN, body and soul!