

From the Heights: Monastic Musings from the Mountains

Lent, 2015

Volume III, Issue 1

The Integrated Disciplines of Lent

Condensed from a talk given by Prior Theodore at St. Peter's Orthodox Church, Fort Worth, TX



In a homily for the First Sunday of Lent, St. Gregory the Great said, "Let each one, as far as his strength allows, vex his body and afflict his desires. Let each one put to death his base desires, so that, in the words of [St.] Paul, he may become a living, sacrificial victim."

All of us are subject to drives and desires that we call the *passions*. These drives have a purpose in our lives but, due to ancestral sin and fear of death, they have become disordered and have assumed a disproportionate place in our lives. It is to the taming and re-ordering of these passions that spiritual disciplines are directed. They are neither ends in themselves, nor bargaining chips with God, but are tools for opening our lives to the power of God's grace: grace that is freely given, but must also be freely accepted and allowed to transform our ways of thinking and living.

St. Maximus the Confessor says that: "Almsgiving heals the soul's incensive power [i.e., our tendency to become inflamed by our desires]; fasting withers sensual desire; prayer purifies the intellect and prepares it for contemplation... For the Lord has given us commandments which correspond to the powers of the soul."

Prayer

It would be justifiable to ask, "Why is prayer a *Lenten* discipline? Aren't we supposed to pray every day?" The answer would be, "Yes." St. Paul told the Ephesians, "take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit." This echoes our Lord's teaching

that we should pray always. Prayer is *not just* a Lenten discipline. It is a daily *sine qua non* of a living relationship with God.

The character of prayer as a Lenten discipline must be sought not in the *mere doing of it*, but rather in *experiencing it as the unifying agent* for the other ascetic disciplines we practice in Lent and throughout the year.

Bodily disciplines alone cannot save us: only a living relationship with God, through Christ, can free us from the bonds of the passions and sins that beset us. St. Paul wrote to the Colossians, "Why ...do you subject yourselves to regulations — 'Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,' which all concern things which perish with the using — according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh."

Prayer, not rote observance, makes bodily disciplines fruitful against the indulgence of the flesh precisely because it lifts these practices from the level of "self-imposed religion" to become a response to revealed religion, expressive of genuine humility and a tools for spiritual training by bringing our unruly passions under the control of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Prayer allows us to learn from and walk with Christ and his holy Apostles — none of whom neglected fasting or acts of charity. St. Paul told the Corinthians that, "I chastise my body, and bring it into subjection: lest perhaps, when I have preached to others, I myself should become a castaway."

Our prayer in Lent should take on a special character: As we abstain from eating some of our customary earthly food, prayer can transform our hunger for that passing food into a deeper hunger to receive the Bread of Heaven, the food that endures unto eternal life; as we share what we have with others, prayer can increase our awareness of our own dependence upon the charity of God and open our hearts ever wider to the gifts he is longing to bestow upon us.

Fasting

St. Gregory the Great wrote, "The author of

In this Issue:

Integrated Disciplines of Lent 1-3

News and Events 3

Integrated Disciplines, con't from page 1

our death broke the commandments by eating the fruit of the forbidden tree of life. Let us who have fallen away from the joys of paradise through food, rise up to them again, as much as we can, through fasting.”

Humanity went boldly into the kingdom of sin and death through eating. Duped by the serpent, the “liar,” as our Lord called him, we decided that the fruit of the forbidden tree, “was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and...desirable to make one wise.”

Food is necessary for life; it is, of itself, a good thing. But not every food is good for every person. Different foods are appropriate to the progressive stages of our life and there are health issues that make it wise for us to choose carefully what we eat.

God knew what food was good for us at the beginning of our existence; he provided it in abundance and bade us be content with it. He warned us what food was not good for us and told us, beforehand, what the consequences would be if we ate it. But we, for the sake of some tasty looking fruit, accounted God a stingy liar.

We fast, therefore, to tame the unruly passion for life and pleasure that led us into distress and death. We fast in repentance for the selfishness and pride that led us to choose the lies of Satan over the truth of God.

To learn the power of food in our lives, we have only to try and go without it for a day. Hunger is annoying, then unpleasant, then frightening. It reminds us that we are dust, and to dust we shall return if we cease to be fed with what our bodies require. Fasting helps us to recognize our contingent nature, and to choose how we will respond to it: by grasping at what fills us and makes us feel good; or, by turning to the Love that created us and acknowledging that we are dependent upon him.

Our Lord said, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.” Fasting, as a rejection of selfishness and an openness to the food that endures to eternal life, is a valuable way to learn to what degree Christ’s words *abide* in us. The pudding in which the proof of this truth is found is the third of our Lenten disciplines. Listen, again, to St. Gregory: “Fast, then, by lifting up acts of

**“But we,
for the sake of some tasty looking fruit,
accounted God a stingy liar.”**

almsgiving before [God’s] eyes, by doing what you do with love of your neighbor, by being holy. What you take from yourself give to someone else so that your needy neighbor’s body may be restored by the affliction of your own.

Almsgiving

Almsgiving is a practical application of growth in charity – the greatest of the “three things that endure.” We voluntarily fast from what we have in order to share with those whose fasting is involuntary. St. Gregory continues: “The Lord says through the prophet: ‘When you fasted and mourned, did you fast for me? And when you eat and drink, do you not eat and drink for yourselves?’ He eats and drinks for himself who nourishes his body with the Creator’s common gifts, without regard for the needy; and he fasts for himself if he does not bestow upon the poor what he takes for a time from his own use, but keeps it instead to fill his own stomach later. Hence it is said by Joel: ‘Sanctify a fast.’ Sanctifying a fast means showing bodily fasting to God as an alms, by adding every other good deed. Cease to be angry, put aside quarrels. You weaken your body in vain if you don’t restrain your heart from all its pleasures. The Lord says by the prophet: ‘See, you find your own will on the day of your fast.’”

By turning our self-denial to the benefit of others we incarnate the Christian doctrine that what we have is a gift from Divine Providence and not something we own by right. Scripture and the Fathers teach that, if God has given us a sufficiency or even an abundance of material goods, he has done so in order that we can share it with others.

According to St. Basil the Great, “Did you not fall naked from the womb? Will you not go back naked to the earth? Where is your present property from? If you think that it came to you by itself, you don’t believe in God, you don’t acknowledge the creator and you are not thankful to Him who gave it to you. But if you agree and confess that you have it from God, tell us the reason why He gave it to you... Isn’t it, if for no other reason, so that you can gain a reward for your kindness and faithful stewardship, and for him to be honored with the great virtue of patience?”

Our sharing is meant to be a matter of faith, flowing from grateful hearts. In the words of St. Symeon the New Theologian: “As the poor should give thanks to God and return rich love to those who assist them, so all the more should the wealthy give thanks, for... they are able to perform acts of charity and so are saved both in this age and in the age to be. For without the poor they cannot save their souls or flee the temptations of wealth.”

True charity goes beyond tossing money at the poor out of pity or sending a check to a charitable organization. As in all of Christian life, our interior disposition matters in

 News and Events

the sight of God who “searches the heart.” A pure heart gives not only a material gift, but a gift of respect for the image of God in the unique personhood of the recipients. Material gifts that come from self-serving motives do more harm than good. Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh wrote that, “It is not enough to give. We must have a heart that gives. In order to give, we must have a compassion deep enough for our gift to be forgiven, because if we give dutifully, if we are charitable only in our actions, the recipient receives humiliation and sorrow and pain together with our gift.”

Our charity is at its best when it shares the character of the All-generous God’s charity, who, “makes his sun rise on the evil and the good,” without distinction. St. Maximus the Confessor explains, “He who gives alms in imitation of God does not discriminate between the wicked and the virtuous, the just and the unjust, when providing for men’s bodily needs.”

Almsgiving is not an opportunity for judging others, since most of us do not share in God’s ability to read other’s hearts. It is our own heart, our own motives with which we are to be concerned. If we can give in a way that meets real needs, without encouraging vice or deepening brokenness, so much the better. But we are responsible primarily for the openness of our hands and the purity of our own hearts, not those of others.

Carried out in this spirit, almsgiving gives an opportunity for prayer: of thanksgiving to the God who has allowed us to have something to give, be it great or small; of intercession for the recipient whose needs likely extend far beyond our ability to bring relief; and for our deliverance from judging, or self-satisfaction, or pride, since our Lord tells us that “when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.’”

Prayer, then, remains the fountain and the living water not only our Lenten discipline, but our Paschal joy. Without it, the things we do remain merely external while, without external expressions, prayer is in danger of being little more than a conversation with ourselves. True Christian life is a life in which the internal and the external are brought into harmony and transparency with each other and with God, a life of integrity in the fullest sense of the word.



April 24-26: Open retreat, *The Spirituality of St. Silouan*, led by members of the *Monastic Brotherhood of St. Silouan the Athonite*, at the St. Laurence Campus. For information see the flyer on our web site or to reserve a bed, please call 719-371-6345 or email guestmaster@saintlaurenceosb.org.

April 17-19: We will be hosting a *Spring Work Retreat* at the St. Laurence Campus. Come help us spruce up after winter and prepare for the “retreat season”! R.S.V.P. to guestmaster@saintlaurenceosb.org.

March 22-30: After preaching at St. Augustine Orthodox Church, Denver, *Prior Theodore* will travel to Ohio to meet with friends of the Priory and then to New Jersey, for a meeting with His Eminence *Metropolitan JOSEPH* and His Grace *Bishop JOHN*.

March 15: *Prior Theodore* delivered a condensed version of “The Integrated Disciplines of Lent” during the Sunday Adult Ed Hour at St. Mark Orthodox Church, Denver. He also met with Novice Oblate Stephen Greenlee and Mr. Mark Proper to plan some development projects for the St. Laurence Campus.

March 14-18: *Prior Theodore* is in Denver training in the use of Adobe InDesign so that he might be able to carry out projects for L.A. Press.

March 11: *Prior Theodore* presented, “The Integrated Disciplines of Lent,” at St. Peter Orthodox Church in Fort Worth, TX. This was originally scheduled for March 4th, but was postponed due to an impending ice storm.

February 15: *Monk Giovanni*, whose declining health has made living at our remote mountain campus increasingly challenging, moved to California to live with his family in Grass Valley. Father remains a monk in good standing of the Priory and we commend him to your prayers.

February 15: *Gregory Mashburn* was released from the novitiate to return to Missouri. God bless him in his ongoing journey of Christian living.

February 13-15: *Nun Sophia* spent the weekend in Denver visiting with friends.

- Pray for the Community of Our Lady and Saint Laurence's well being, growth in holiness, and vocations.
- Consider affiliation with us an Oblate of St. Benedict
- Encourage your church, Christian organization, or friends to schedule retreats or conferences at St. Laurence Center.
- Give Lancelot Andrewes Press icons or books as gifts.
- Volunteer time at the St. Laurence Center for various projects.
- Donate towards the support of the St. Laurence Campus and/or the monastic community.

How you can help!

The **Benedictine Fellowship of Saint Laurence** is an independent, non-profit corporation established for religious and charitable purposes. All donations are tax deductible. The Fellowship was founded to promote monastic life and spiritual renewal and worship according to the traditions of Orthodox Christianity, under the inspiration of the *Rule of Saint Benedict*. In order to further this ministry, the Fellowship operates a retreat center where people can seek renewal through combining worship, contemplation, and work.

The **Priory of Our Lady and Saint Laurence** is an *unofficial community-in-formation* of Western Orthodox monastics, following the ancient *Rule of St. Benedict*. We live and work at the Fellowship's 600-acre campus in the Colorado Rocky Mountains. The monastics are under the oversight of the Vicar Bishop for the Antiochian Orthodox Western Rite Vicariate, but are not, at present, a canonically erected monastic community. We endeavor to support ourselves with regard to food, medical care, transportation, and personal needs through our service for the Fellowship and through other crafts or services.

4076 Cabin Creek Rd.
Cañon City, CO 81212



Visit us on the Web:

www.saintlaurenceosb.org

Seeking and Serving God in the Way of St. Benedict