

“The Eucharist, the Cross, and the Means of Our Salvation”
Sermon for the Salutations to the Holy Cross
Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church, March 23, 2021

Introduction

Your Eminence, Metropolitan Gerasimos, dear brothers in the Priesthood, brothers and sisters in Christ: it would be the understatement of the century to say that we have just lived through an extraordinary year. “Unprecedented,” “incredible,” and “unlike anything we’ve seen for the last 100 years” are descriptions that we hear uttered frequently to describe the pandemic from which we are just now beginning to emerge.

“Distressful” is another adjective frequently heard, and it certainly has been for us as people of faith. Being shut out of our churches such as we have constitutes its own form of religious discrimination that truly is unprecedented in our country, a country that had always boasted of robust religious liberty as one of its founding principles.

Test of Faith

I wish to take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude to you, Your Eminence, for your support and collaboration throughout this very trying time. As Orthodox and Catholic Christians, we are in a unique situation because the sacraments cannot be communicated virtually. His Eminence and I have tried desperately, working together, to convince our public officials of this, and that we are responsible and can conduct our worship safely. While such unjust treatment is difficult for us to accept, we must, though, think spiritually and consider what God’s plan might possibly be for His Church at this time.

This season of Lent, “Great Lent” in the Orthodox calendar, is a most propitious time for us to do so, for it calls us to a renewal of living out our baptism, the share we are given in the dying and rising of our Savior Jesus Christ. And what effect has that deprivation of receiving the Eucharist had on this baptismal call of ours, the call to live out our faith in all its dimensions?

The blood and water that flowed from our Savior’s pierced side as he lay in death on the Cross signifies these two sacraments by which he gives birth to his Church. And we see these sacraments typologically prefigured in God’s people of old. In his Catechesis on Christ as the new Moses, our father among the saints John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, draws this connection:

In those days Moses raised his hands to heaven and brought down manna, the bread of angels; the new Moses raises his hands to heaven and gives us the food of eternal life. Moses struck the rock and brought forth streams of water; Christ touches his table, strikes the spiritual rock of the new covenant and draws forth the living water of the Spirit. This rock is like a fountain in the midst of Christ’s table, so that on all sides the flocks may draw near to this living spring and refresh themselves in the waters of salvation.¹

God provided for His Chosen People of old, despite their constant rebellion against Him. Which meant that at times He also had to bring them low, to humble them, in order to turn their hearts back to Him. Can something similar be happening to us now? Perhaps this is a call for us to renew our Eucharistic faith. Our people are upset, and rightfully so, at not having access to this life-

¹ From the Roman Breviary, vol. II, Office of Readings for Monday of the Second Week of Lent, pp. 160-161.

giving sacrament. But do we see the Eucharist merely as something we receive, something that we go to Church to “get”? Perhaps God has a reason for this imposed fast from the Eucharist.

Unworthiness of the Mysteries

In one of our many conversations during the time we were shut out of our churches, His Eminence recounted to me the story of St. Mary of Egypt. This is a saint who, one might say, went from rags to riches spiritually speaking. She lived a dissolute life in her youth, engaged as she was in her career as an entertainer and pursuing quenching her thirst for lust. She even corrupted pilgrims on a journey to the Holy Land, but there had a powerful experience of conversion. It was only after she admitted and repented of her sinfulness, invoking the help of the Mother of God, that she was able to enter the church without difficulty in order to venerate the cross. She then retired into the desert to live as a hermit and do penance for the rest of her life in reparation for her many sins. She made her confession and Communion before crossing the Jordan River into the wilderness, and remained there for forty-seven years.

One year the holy priest and monk Zosimus came across her during his time of Lenten solitude in preparation for returning to his communal monastic life on Palm Sunday. At her request, Zosimus returned the next year during Lent to bring her the Holy Eucharist. And again at her request he returned to the same spot yet the following Lent, but there found Mary’s dead body stretched out upon the ground with the following words traced in the sand next to it: “Father Zosimus, bury the body of lowly Mary. Render earth to earth and pray for me. I died the night of the Lord’s Passion, after receiving the divine and mystic Banquet.”²

A forty-seven year fast from Holy Communion! St. Mary of Egypt spent the greater part of her life in penance preparing for that one perfect Communion. And what about us? Do we have such a reverential disposition to the Holy Mysteries?

For good reason the liturgies of the Church underscore the need to remember our unworthiness of this great gift. In the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, it is expressed in the prayer before receiving the Sacred Mysteries where, immediately after the profession of faith in “the Son of the living God” and his presence in the sacrament, the priest and people say: “I pray to You, have mercy upon me, and forgive my transgressions, voluntary and involuntary, in word and deed, in knowledge or in ignorance. And make me worthy, without condemnation, to partake of Your pure Mysteries for the remission of sins and for eternal life.” And as a reminder, the priest exhorts the people before they come forward: “With the fear of God, faith and love draw near.”

In the Roman liturgy we likewise confess our unworthiness of the sacrament before approaching it by making our own the words of the Roman centurion who declared himself unworthy to have the Lord come to his home to heal his paralyzed and suffering servant: “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed” (cf. Mt 8:8).

Eucharist and the Cross

Mary of Egypt was set on the path of conversion when she entered the church to venerate the cross. That is what we do tonight.

By veneration of the Holy Cross, Mary bore her cross, her own personal cross her Lord and Savior had given her for the sake of her eternal salvation. And so he does for each one of us: he gives us the cross that calls us to repentance, and has the power to turn the most depraved and hedonistic of sinners into the most ardent of believers.

² *Butler’s Lives of the Saints*, vol. II, edd. Herbert J. Thurston, S.J. and Donald Attwater (Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, Inc., 1981), pp. 14-15.

We can look, too, to the transformation of the Roman soldiers who crucified the Lord, mocking him and taking his robe as their spoils, for whom our Lord asked his Father for forgiveness. Of this cry of our Lord on the Cross, “Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,” St. Gregory the Great says: “Is it possible to offer, or even to imagine, a purer kind of prayer than that which shows mercy to one’s torturers by making intercession for them? It was thanks to this kind of prayer that the frenzied persecutors who shed the blood of our Redeemer drank it afterward in faith and proclaimed him to be the Son of God.”³

This is how the cross, the instrument of torture and death, is transformed into an instrument of life and of glory. Through the Holy Eucharist, the sacrifice of the Cross is made present to us on the altar. When we appropriate the cross to our own life, bear our own particular cross (or crosses) our Lord gives us for the sake of our salvation, then that transformation of the cross becomes our own, turning us away from sin and rightly preparing us to receive the Holy Mysteries with “the fear of God, faith and love.” And so we sing tonight: “Rejoice, O Wood most blessed”!

Conclusion

It is a quirk of human nature that you don’t really appreciate what you have until you are deprived of it. If this period of Eucharistic deprivation has been simply an exercise in frustration, perhaps even leading to resentment, because we cannot “get” what we want, then we are rejecting the cross – an opportunity to make progress on the path to salvation.

If, however, it has created a deeper desire in us to unite our sacrifice to that of our Savior on his Cross, if it has renewed our appreciation and reverence for this most precious Gift, if it has awakened in us a more earnest desire to confess our sins in the sacrament so as to prepare ourselves to receive the Holy Mystery worthily and so come as close as we can, with the help of God’s grace, to making a perfect Communion, then we will have heeded the exhortation given us by St. John Chrysostom in that same catechesis on Christ as the new Moses: “Since this fountain, this source of life, this table surrounds us with untold blessings and fills us with the gifts of the Spirit, let us approach it with sincerity of heart and purity of conscience to receive grace and mercy in our time of need.”⁴

³ From the Roman Breviary, vol. II, Office of Readings for Friday of the Third Week of Lent, p. 258.

⁴ From the Roman Breviary, vol. II, Office of Readings for Monday of the Second Week of Lent, p. 161.