

# Orthodox Church in America

## Diocese of New York and New Jersey

### ARCHPASTORAL LETTER FOR THE GREAT FAST 2012

Beloved Concelebrants at the Holy Altar and Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord:

*Christ is in our midst! – He is and ever shall be!*

Abba Sisoës was one of the best loved and holiest of the Desert Fathers. When it came time for him to die, the brothers gathered around his bed. Some of them saw that his lips were moving. “Who are you talking to, Father?” they asked him. “See,” he replied, “the angels have come to take me, and I am asking them for more time – more time to repent.” His disciples said, “You have no need to repent.” But the old man said, “Truly, I am not sure whether I have even begun to repent.”

This story from the Egyptian desert emphasizes one of the many prominent themes of the Great Fast of Lent – that of repentance. We hear this word “repentance” often in the Church: “O Immortal King, accept the repentance of me, a sinner ...” “Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2) ... and during Lent, “Open unto me, O Giver of life, the gates of repentance.”

What is repentance? Godly sorrow for the sins we have committed. This sorrow is not like the worldly sorrow that leads to guilt and despair. Rather, godly sorrow leads to repentance, and repentance to forgiveness, and forgiveness leads to salvation, and salvation establishes the kingdom of God – the rule of God, the reign of God in our hearts. Where there is no repentance, no godly sorrow for our sins, the kingdom of God will never come. For, we cannot have the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the evil one ruling in our heart at the same time.

But repentance is not merely a negative experience of battling against sin and evil. Also, and primarily, it is a positive progress toward God. Repentance is preparing your heart for God to enter – for God came to establish residence in our hearts. This is what Christ meant when He said, “The kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21).

So, although we so often think of repentance and confession as painful or shameful, indeed it is something positive, something life-saving, something soul-saving. That is how so many persons we read about in Scripture saw it and experienced it – first-hand. They saw it, and we too must see it, as a chance to start over from our mistakes as we can nowhere else in our lives. In the business world, for instance, if we fail to seal the deal, saying, “I’m sorry! Let me try again!” – it won’t work. In sports, the batter cannot say, “I didn’t mean to strike out. Can I start over, and try again?” This simply is not the way of the world.

But with God, we have that chance – through true repentance – to confess our sins, our sorrow, and start over. The stories from Scripture that we hear – beginning a few weeks ago, running into Holy Week and beyond – remind us of that. Zacchaeus, the dishonest tax collector, was allowed to start all over when He met Christ and confessed his sins. The unnamed publican praying in the temple was justified from a life of sin, with a confession of genuine repentance – the humble prayer, “O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” The Prodigal Son made a U-turn from his life of sin and returned to his Father. In Holy Week, we will see how Peter cursed and denied his Master three times, and then wept tears of repentance. And on the cross, the thief will have the chance to repent, be forgiven and be with Our Lord in paradise. On the road to Damascus, Paul will be able to make a complete about-face, and turn from persecutor to apostle. And who could forget King David, whose double sin of adultery and murder, became the occasion for the beautiful words of repentance in Psalm 50?

God gives us the chance to live life over again – a new direction, a new life, if we sincerely repent of our sins and turn to Him and His ways. But repentance is more than just feeling sorry for what we have done. It must be more – a genuine return to God; a complete about-face to His way of living.

When the Prodigal Son repented, he didn't just sit there and feel sorry for his sins. He didn't stay where he was – among the swine. He got up and left; he changed the direction of his life. He said, "I will arise and go to my Father." And he did so promptly.

Saint Isaac the Syrian tells us, "This life has been given to you for repentance ... Do not waste it on other things." God gives us the chance to repent, to confess our sins, to start over ... a chance He did not give to the angels. They had one chance, one choice, one moment – that determined their eternity: heaven or hell. Thank God that He gives us the chance to repent, through the sacrament of confession, over and over and over again.

So often we think of repentance and confession in a negative way. We don't want to do it. Or we do it out of obligation, or with reluctance, or with indifference. But we should embrace it as our second chance – once again – with joy! We should thank God for the opportunity to start over again, a chance He did not give to angels ... the opportunity to begin anew, with the eternal effects of our mistakes erased, a chance the world would never give us.

Indeed we should embrace the mystery of repentance and confession with great joy and hope and love ... for the Father, Who "so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but should have life everlasting" (John 3:16) ... this same loving Father awaits our repentance, our U-turn, our return to Him, just as He awaited the prodigal son when he said, "I have sinned ... I will arise and go to my Father." And when we, too, arise from the mire of our sins, and make that journey home to our Father, he will not say, "I told you so." He will not say, "What did you do with my inheritance?" Rather, He will proclaim, "This my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" (Luke 15:24).

"Repent – for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!" This was the theme of Christ's first sermon and the message of all His preaching. Six centuries later, Saint John of the Ladder wrote: "We shall not be condemned at the end of our lives because we did not perform miracles. Nor because we failed to theologize ... or because we have failed to achieve the divine vision ... but because of one reason only: that we did not repent continuously." This is the kind of repentance with which Abba Sisoës, on his deathbed in the desert, inspires us.

As we begin this Lenten Season, the pilgrimage of prayer and fasting and almsgiving that leads to Holy Pascha, let us truly repent and make our confession – with joy! Let us turn back from self to God, from hatred to love, from sin to salvation, from hell to heaven, from death to life. Let us turn from self-service and self-concern, to serving the Lord and being concerned for His people. Let us turn from pride and smugness, complacency and self-appointed goodness; and instead, let us turn to dependence on God, on His grace, and on His power.

Our loving Father is waiting for us ... with the same embrace, the same ring, the same robe, the same banquet, as He lavished upon the returning prodigal. Let us, too, turn to Him now, following the words of our Saviour: "Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand!" May this be the hallmark of our Lenten pilgrimage to Holy Pascha!

With my humble prayers, my archpastoral blessing, and my sincere love,

+ M I C H A E L

Bishop of New York and the  
Diocese of New York and New Jersey