

MONASTERY OF ST JOHN

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Diocese of the West—OCA



Great Lent and

Total Surrender to God

by Hieromonk Innocent

Eighteen years ago, I converted to the Orthodox faith. During my years as an inquirer, I tried to follow the ascetic practices of the Church, including keeping the fast of Great Lent. For the particular parish that I attended, fasting meant the type of food (essentially vegan) and the quantity. Eager to follow all the customs, I requested that my apartment be blessed. The priest set up an appointment for the afternoon during one of the days of the Fast.

"How are you?"

"I'm hungry."

"I am glad."

A smile teased his lips.

"That is music to my ears!"

For a moment, his reply struck me as sadistic—for him to be glad at my misery while I tried to follow all the rules! Then I realized that his smug satisfaction was actually proof of his pastoral success. As he had taught us, Lent was supposed to be uncomfortable, it is supposed to cause real hunger pangs. His future catechumen was starting to get it.

Real hunger, in fact, is extremely beneficial. At my monastery, as in many parishes and monasteries in the Orthodox world, the first three days of Lent are spent attending many services in the chapel and eating nothing at all. It is amazing how at peace the body becomes when it is free of the burden of digestion. Thinking becomes easier. The perennial mental fogs lift. The pounding onslaught of thoughts slows down. During the long services, the words of the Psalms, in particular, seem to sink in as never before.

Yet, for all the physical and psychological benefits that fasting brings, it is neither the end nor the goal of our Lenten effort. True fasting is a tool which brings us to a state of being where we are totally relying on God. It is an antidote to the attitude that says, "You're nice, God, but I don't really need you in my everyday life. I'll just leave you for Sundays." This terrible indifference to God is a grave illness that requires strong medicine. Life in the Church is that medicine. Fasting as a personal discipline and, especially, fasting as a community has a strong effect on our souls. Once we, as a Church, have turned away from the food that perishes, then our true food becomes the Lamb of God. When we are in such a state, then He is in the midst of us and the Kingdom has come in power.

When God is the source of our life and not every other material comfort—food, drink or otherwise—then, and only then, can God act through us to put into effect what the Fast is supposed to bring us to: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and breaking every yoke of bondage. Without God, we live in a state of abject spiritual poverty, yet we are blind to it. We need this season of abstinence to shake us up a little, so we can start to see our true state. What a tangible lesson—one given straight to the body—that we abstain from food and drink before coming to the Presanctified Liturgy on Wednesday and Friday evenings! What righteous ingenuity St. Gregory the Dialogist displayed when he composed this service! The faithful are nourished with the Body and Blood of Christ on the weekdays of the Fast, and they are given a cause to keep a complete fast during the day. This interruption in our usual routine compels us to consider: "I am fasting because I plan to

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commune at the evening Presanctified. I am preparing myself because I am anticipating Christ in His Body and Blood. Help me, Lord, as I keep myself for You."

During this blessed period of the forty days, if you keep the fast as our holy mother, the Church directs us, you do well.

If you go beyond that and deprive yourself so that you feel real hunger pangs you do better. If you let the Fast push you to the limit of your strength, so that you call out to God and say, "Help me" then maybe you and I are starting to "get it".

APOCALYPSE RETREAT WELL-ATTENDED



Photo by Fr Gregory Safchuck

Our last organized retreat took place on January 13 and was given by Fr. George Gray of St. Nicholas Church in Portland, Oregon on the topic of the Book of Revelation as an Icon of Liturgy, and was part of the Diaconal Vocational Program. Participants came from the Bay Area, Oregon, and Washington State. Although Fr. George was only able to be here for the one day since his original flight was cancelled, he managed to conduct a full presentation of the topic, and many of the retreatants stayed till Sunday. His talk dealt with the many images in the book which can be regarded as coded commentary of the persecution of Christianity that was going on when the book was written, and on the many uses to which these images are applied in the Divine Liturgy, in spite of the fact that none of its passages are actually read in our worship. Our next retreat will be given by our own Fr. Cosmas.



Sunday of Orthodoxy

Procession with Holy Icons



Sunday of Orthodoxy

*Reading the Declaration
of the Orthodox Faith
From the Synodikon*

Rise and Pray

Coming out, [Jesus] went to the Mount of Olives, as He was accustomed, and His disciples also followed Him. When He came to the place, He said to them, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation.”

And He was withdrawn from them about a stone’s throw, and He knelt down and prayed, saying, “Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done.” Then an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him. And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. Then His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

When He rose up from prayer, and had come to His disciples, He found them sleeping from sorrow. Then he said to them, “Why do you sleep? Rise and pray, lest you enter into temptation.” (Luke 22:39 – 46)

As we enter Great Lent, a time that — as we know from experience — will probably bring more temptations our way than other times of the year, we may find it beneficial to contemplate a situation in which Jesus counseled the eleven remaining disciples to be on guard. If we look carefully at the passage above, we will find it dense with meaning. Space allows for only a brief consideration of a few themes, but perhaps a contemplation of them will help us to prepare for our own journey toward Passion Week.

One thing that ought to stand out is that Jesus is warning the eleven disciples who were left after Judas Iscariot already fell into temptation, and had gone to lead the chief priests, captains of the temple, elders, and armed men with them to arrest Him. He knew what was about to happen, but the eleven did not. He is counseling them to remain vigilant, because we never know when temptation will suddenly come our way.

Another thing stands out that could be easy to overlook. The text says that Jesus found His disciples “sleeping from sorrow.” Clearly they have a sense that danger is lurking, but they lapse into despondency instead of praying for the strength to meet it.

A last point, in this brief contemplation, at least — is that Jesus suggests that they pray not to enter into temptation. We need to pay close attention to His actual words. He does not tell them that they should pray that no occasion of temptation should come their way — a very unlikely thing in a fallen world! — but that they not enter into temptation. Another way of putting this would be to say, “If temptation does come your way, pray that God help you not to give in!” This is probably the advice that we need as well.



The Bobcat that invaded our chicken coop



*“Zusje” (Zoo-shuh) our faithful watchdog
dons her winter sweater*

Facing Provocations, Thoughts, and Temptations: Taking Jesus as our Guide

Retreat at the Monastery of St John March 16, 17, and 18, 2018

Led by Fr Cosmas

On the fourth Sunday of Great Lent we celebrate St John of the Ladder and his book, the Ladder of Divine Ascent. His book contains a wealth of counsel on the spiritual life, written for monks at the request of the abbot of another monastery. Some readers — including some of us monks — may find it so dense, though, that they have a hard time applying it to their lives. It's almost as if St John catalogued and analyzed everything there was to say on the subject so thoroughly that we don't know where to start in putting it to use.

Why not approach the topic of provocations, thoughts, and temptations in a more basic way? Why not draw on passages in the Gospels that show how Jesus handled these challenges? After all, the life and teaching of Jesus was as much a basic point of reference for St John of the Ladder as it is for us. Then those who want to go back to read — or re-read — the Ladder will gain a new appreciation of St John's treatment, and all of us will have a deeper understanding of the Gospel readings we will encounter during Holy Week.



The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers

It was said of an old man that one day he wanted a small fig.

*Taking one, he held it up in front of his eyes, and not being overcome by desire,
he repented, reproaching himself for even having this wish.*

Upcoming Events

- **Facing Provocations, Thoughts, & Temptations: Taking Jesus as our Guide** (Fri – Sun Mar. 16-18, 2018) with Monk Cosmas
- **Orthodox Life School** (Sun– Sat) June 17-23, 2018 For young adults 18-35 yrs. old ; Many Orthodox guest speakers, manual work, outreach
- **St Peter Youth Camp** (Sun– Fri) June 23-29, 2018 For young people ages 14-22; Harrison, Montana

Read more about these at:

<http://www.monasteryofstjohn.org/retreats/>

<http://stpetersmonastery.com/jekyll/update/2016/12/17/summer-youth-camp.html>

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