



My Beloved Ones,

This Sunday we shall arrive at the very middle of Great Lent, which our Forefathers have very wisely dedicated to the Holy Cross. Different groups in our society have different reactions to this profound symbol of our Faith. As St. Paul says, “...we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 23-24). Throughout the ages, the Holy Fathers have used the symbol of the Cross to perform, not only miracles, but to encourage all in imitation of Christ’s Passion—out of love for the humble manner in which our Creator gave His life for us.

For this Sunday’s Gospel, we read a passage taken from the Gospel according to St. Mark, in which our Lord delivers the prescription for any person who wishes to call themselves a Christian. Though His statement is an emphatic commandment, I ask that we take notice of how it begins, “*If any man would come after me...*” (Mark 8:34) In this way, we are meant to have no doubt that this statement comes from our Creator and Master, who respects the freedom He has given to us. This freedom is a gift that is often too easily forgotten in our own lives. Think of our work, or our families, where we might tend to take for granted or devalue the things our coworkers or loved ones have to offer. Parents, for example, may begin to impart lessons by making demands, rather than using God’s gift of freewill to show their children by example.

Christ Himself led by example, and after offering His children the opportunity to follow Him, He gives us a “job description” of how we might accomplish this goal. We are told that a person must “...let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). Here, we encounter our first difficulty: if my self is my being, how can I forget myself?

In truth, our being exists in two parts, one that is finite, and one that is immortal. Though we can visibly see ourselves and characterize others in the flesh, this part of our being will remain with us only for the length of our earthly lives. Within this finite frame resides our inner being, our soul, which, because of its immortality, we know to be the more important of the two parts, and this is the “self” to which our Lord refers. The soul

of an individual expresses a person's being in different ways: whether we are dealing with our loved ones, with society, or indeed, with God.

The means by which we communicate with others, is what scientists refer to as the ego. This is why, although the Fathers of the Church did not have science to explain the function of the ego, they referred to that part of our being from the very beginning of Christianity. Our Spiritual Fathers advise us to be very careful in how we choose to demonstrate our gift of free will: not to satisfy ourselves, but for the benefit our brothers and sisters.

When we focus on others, rather than ourselves, we, in one way or another, recognize that the pleasures of this life are only temporary. However, recognizing this reality is perhaps the root of our greatest struggles on earth. Fighting against these passions that would bring us temporary pleasure involves a great deal of struggle and agony—that is, taking up our own Cross, and following Him.

As difficult as this may be, Bishop Theophan the Recluse explains that, *“The Golgotha of [our] cross is our heart: it is being lifted or implanted through a zealous determination to live according to the Spirit of God. Just as salvation of the world is by the Cross of God, so our salvation is by our crucifixion on our own cross.”* Ultimately, denying ourselves proves that we are friends of our immortal souls, rather than our slaves to our finite bodies.

We are blessed that this Sunday of the Holy Cross gives us the opportunity to take up this struggle during the remainder of the Lenten Fast, reaching beyond negative impulses, and instead toward the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. Even by taking small steps to practice self-restraint, we shall have the greater tools to avoid spiritually deadly emotions like indolence, and instead cultivate a spirit full of love and zeal.

+ALEXIOS

Metropolitan of Atlanta