



My Beloved Ones,

As we continue through the remainder of our Lenten journey, the Church, in its infinite love and mercy, has compassion for our struggles. As this point, Pascha is several weeks away, and it can become easy to allow our weariness to become, at first a distraction, and then a temptation.

It is for this very reason that the Church has chosen to dedicate this Fourth Sunday of Lent to a saint who gave us a guide to help us resist these temptations and overcome our weaknesses. I am of course referring to St. John Climacus, and his *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*.

What little we know St. John's life is that his mastery of asceticism in the Sinai Desert made him a greatly respected person, especially to those Monks in the surrounding area. Though he resisted the *iugmenos* of the Raithu Monastery's request to write his knowledge, St. John eventually compiled his many years of struggle into a book for the benefit of the Brotherhood.

The Ladder of Divine Ascent takes the form of thirty "steps" toward *theosis*, or human unification with our Creator. These steps on the ladder (which correspond to the thirty years of Jesus' life before beginning His Ministry) begin with a renunciation of the world, continuing through discussions on slander, greed, instructions concerning stillness and prayer, before finally ending the on the last step of the ladder, "*Concerning the linking together of the supreme trinity among the virtues.*"

While the book began as a guide for those living in asceticism, there is much that we can learn from it, even simply by examining this above icon of the Ladder of Divine Ascent. The activity of the monks against the demonic powers is both frightening, but perhaps strengthening. I say it is strengthening, for we realize that even these men and women who have chosen to set themselves apart from the world (which is the meaning of the Greek *agios*, or holy), are still subject to the weapons of the demons—even to the point that one of the monks is seen being swallowed by the Evil One, represented by the mouth at the bottom of the icon.

In the face of such challenges ourselves, we might wonder as the Disciples did, after Jesus told them it would be easier for a camel to enter through the eye of a needle than for a Rich Man to see Heaven, "*Who then can be saved?*" (Luke 18:26) Of course, if we, like the Rich Man, rely only on our belief in ourselves, we are destined to fall from the Ladder too. However, if we cling to God, to His Commandments, and to prayer and fasting, we too can continue our way up the Heavenly Ladder.

My brothers and sisters, though we may be weary with cares, and with the burden of our own sinfulness, let us not fall into the sin of despair, let us instead rest in the spirit of prayer and fasting, so that we might gather strength to complete the course of the Fast with God's grace and love.

+ALEXIOS

Metropolitan of Atlanta