

Слава Ісусу Христу! Glory to Jesus Christ!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



*“The Lord is my light and my salvation
Whom should I fear?
The Lord is my life’s refuge
Of whom should I be afraid?’ Psalm 27:1*

In the Rite of Holy Baptism in our Church, this psalm quote is sung as the Prokimen just before the Reading of the Epistle. It is no accident that these words were chosen to be used at the time we were baptized into Christ, sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit and became children of God. We were being given the assurance that throughout our life, come what may, the Lord is our **light, our refuge and our salvation**. If this is so, why should we be afraid?



There is no doubt that there is a lot of fear in the world today. In our human weakness, we are afraid, afraid of what this coronavirus might do to us and our loved ones, afraid that we will lose our financial resources, our jobs, maybe our home, afraid that we will run out of food and supplies before this quarantine is

over, afraid that fear itself will accelerate violence and greed in our society. How do we find solace in the midst of this fear?

In Part 1 of this Lenten sharing, we meditated on the longing of our Lord God and Creator, who wishes to keep all His children in his loving embrace, who is forever seeking, searching and knocking. We contemplated the words of our Lord found in the Book of Revelations:



*Behold, I stand at the door and knock:
if anyone hears my voice
and opens the door,
I will come in to him
and eat with him
and he with me.
Rev. 3:20*

We were assured of what God is doing to find us, to keep us safe, to lead us to our eternal salvation. Today we are going to meditate on what *we* are doing, or perhaps *could be doing* to keep ourselves within the embrace of our Lord God, where we will feel secure, no matter what is happening around us. We cannot overemphasize this: The power to let God in or shut Him out lies within us.

So what is the first step?



Let's think about the Prodigal Son. He was living his life in a merry way, doing what he wanted, enjoying the pleasures of food and company – not unlike most of us a few months ago. Suddenly he finds himself poor and hungry, alone and desperate. Afraid. What will happen to him? Then he remembers his father's house and how good it was to be there. "I will go to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned."



His first step was **REPENTANCE** and this is our first step too if we desire to be close to the heart of God. In fact, every year we are given a special time of grace, called the Great Lent, during which we are called to repentance. This Sunday we commemorate Mary of Egypt who is for us a model of repentance.

From the age of 12, Mary of Egypt lived the life of public prostitution. Her days were spent in the company of sinful, lustful people. The things she did we cannot even speak about. One day she decided to join a pilgrimage on its way to Jerusalem. She saw this as an opportunity to tempt the pilgrims and to earn some money for herself. When the pilgrimage reached Jerusalem, Mary tried to follow the pilgrims into the church where the relics of the Holy Cross were kept. To her great frustration, she found herself repelled by an unseen force. Three or four times she tried to enter the church but could not. She retreated to a corner of the church yard, sensing that it was her sinful life that prevented her from entering the church.



Mary's eyes fell on an icon of the Mother of God. Right then and there, she began to weep bitterly, filled with great remorse over her sins. She promised the Mother of God that if she were allowed to enter the church to venerate the relics of the Holy Cross, then she would spend the rest of her life in repentance. After this humble prayer, she tried again to enter the church and this time, to her great joy, she succeeded. In keeping with her promise, she retreated to a desert where she lived alone for 47 years, praying constantly and reaching the heights of holiness.



This story of Mary not being able to enter the church reminds me of an experience I had a few weeks ago. Already we were instructed that the churches were to be closed to the public but the priests were to continue to celebrate the Divine Liturgies. It was the Third Sunday of the Great Fast, when we venerate the precious life-giving Cross of our Lord. I was in the sacristy preparing for the Divine Liturgy when I heard a loud banging on the front doors of the church. Three or four times the noise echoed throughout the whole church. Whoever was trying to get inside could not do so. The doors were locked.

This begs the question: Since at this time we are not allowed to enter the church, does this call us to *repentance* for some sins we have not regretted before?

God has commanded us to “Keep holy the Lord’s Day”. Have we forgotten this? Have we perhaps neglected our Sunday worship, preferring to engage in other

pursuits on Sunday mornings – leisure, recreation, sports activities, shopping, mowing the lawn? If so, we are called to repent.



The Holy Eucharist is the summit of our Christian life but now it is unavailable to us. Have we perhaps been careless in the reception of the Lord's Body and Blood from the chalice, not preparing ourselves properly, not even thinking what it is we are doing, perhaps being in a state of sin and neglecting to go to Holy Confession first? If so, we are called to repent.

At this time of crisis, some people are suggesting that God is punishing us. But I do not believe God is punishing us, because, as we have been assured, God is a God of love. However, I do believe that God is *correcting* us. If we have strayed from the path of holiness, then we are in *need* of correction. And as anyone, who has ever been "corrected" by a parent or a teacher in school, knows all too well, correction can be *painful*.

Maybe we have been too self-focused, neglecting the needs of family, neighbours – now are forced to self-isolate and this is painful. Maybe we have been forgetting to visit the elderly, the shut in, the sick – now we find our elderly loved ones in danger of dying alone, and we are not allowed to visit them. Maybe we have been too focused on material possessions, on making money – now we fear our savings are in danger of disappearing.



Whatever our sins may be, we are called to *repentance*. There is currently a lot of talk about social or "physical" distancing. Our lack of repentance is for us a "spiritual distancing" from God. It is true that repentance may be a struggle but to God our repentance is the most beautiful thing in the world. Remember how the father of the prodigal welcomed his son with rejoicing and festive merriment. Remember that Mary of Egypt is now considered a revered saint in heaven.

I encourage you to offer your heartfelt repentance to the Lord our God and at the nearest opportunity, when it is safe to do so, to take advantage of the Holy Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) in the church.



After repentance, the second step we are called to take in order to remain close to the heart of God is to practice **TRUST**. How difficult it is for us to trust in God! We prefer to be our own masters, to be in control, because we think we know best what

is good for us, or what we would like. But we are deceived. We cannot control everything. And we do not always know what is best for us.

But God, who created us and who loves us, knows what is best for us. We may not understand fully why we are being led through this great tribulation at this time, but we are called to trust that God's desire is for some good to come out of it. Already we notice Facebook pages filled with messages of faith, love and hope. People are reaching out to one another, by phone and through the internet. We are learning to think of others, not just ourselves. At a time when we are not allowed to touch one another, we are virtually holding hands as we face this crisis. This is God's work, bringing good out of something bad.

One way to practice ***trust in God*** is to turn to His Mother, Mary. We know that little children, whenever they are hurting or frightened, run to their mother. They feel safe and consoled when they are in her arms.



Mary, the Mother of God, is our Heavenly Mother, given to us by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Our church tradition is filled with stories of times when the people turned to her for comfort, help and protection. We even have a feast day in October dedicated to the Protection of the Mother of God. We have a treasury of hymns and prayers that speak of our faith in her help in times of sorrow or affliction. For example, in the Moleben to the Mother of God, we sing:

*“You pray, O gracious one,
for all who with faith
have recourse in your mighty protection,
for we sinners, in afflictions and sorrows,
burdened by our numerous sins,
have no other deliverance before God,
O Mother of God on high.
Therefore we bow before you and cry:
deliver your servants from every adversity.”*

Such hymns and prayers are not based on someone's poetic creativity. They are based on people's real life experiences, their unfailing trust that God is helping them through the prayers of His Holy Mother.



For the last century or so, the Mother of God has been appearing in visions to various people, at Fatima and in Medjugore. Always she has been calling us to prayer and conversion. Always she has been warning us of tribulations to come and inviting us to consecrate ourselves to her Immaculate Heart, which is to be our refuge, just as Noah's ark was a refuge during the Great Flood. For this our church already has a wonderful prayer that is well known to many people:

*Beneath the mantle of your mercy,
We take refuge, O Virgin, Mother of God.
Do not disdain our prayers in times of need,
But deliver us from every danger,
O only pure and blessed one.*

Repentance and trust in God, these are the things that will keep us close to the heart of God, so that we do not need to be afraid, come what may. Therefore I encourage you to continue in your prayers at home. Pray individually and pray as a family. Pray the Rosary daily, putting yourself in the care of our Heavenly Mother. Read passages from the Holy Scriptures and be assured that always, now and forever – GOD IS WITH US!

Now let us pray in the comforting words of Psalm 91:

- ¹ *Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.*^[a]
- ² *I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress,
my God, in whom I trust."...*
- ⁹ *If you say, "The LORD is my refuge,"
and you make the Most High your dwelling,*
- ¹⁰ *no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent.*
- ¹¹ *For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways;*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

**May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God the Father
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you always**