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His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America Homily at the Divine Liturgy on the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee



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The Beginning of Triodion

Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church, Whitestone, New York

Beloved in the Lord,

It is in a hymn of this morning's Orthros service that for the first time this year we are introduced to the words "open to me the gates of repentance, O Giver of Life..." reminding us that we are now in the period of Triodion – the season of awareness that leads to the Great Fast of the Holy Forty Days and the Pascha of our Lord.

However, in beseeching the Giver of Eternal Life to “open unto us the gates of repentance,” have we ever paused to contemplate and ask ourselves what exactly are these gates? And what really is repentance?

If you think about your life, and the five senses by which you experience the world around you, you get an idea of the gates of the human mind and soul. We actually note these very senses at every Baptism, in the Εὐχή εἰς Τριχοκουρίαν, the Tonsure:

... κεφαλὴν μὲν ἐπὶ τῶν ὑψηλοτάτων θεῖς, καὶ ἐν αὐτῇ τὰς πλεῖστας τῶν αἰσθήσεων καθιδρύσας, μὴ παρεμποδιζούσας ἀλλήλαις ...

... for You did set the head on high, and planted therein the majority of the senses, which impede not one another...

However, of all these gates to the mind and soul, the eye – though very small – may actually be the largest. This is because everything pours in through our eyes – good, bad ... everything. And it is said that in the course of a single day, the modern person sees more images than a medieval person would have ever seen in an entire lifetime.

Our screens have now become a substitute for the wonders of the created world. When was the last time you went for a walk in nature? Or even had the opportunity to do so? This hymn today, though, asks of God to provide a wholesome vision for our eyes – one created by God, and not manipulated by man.

The other senses are also gates: hearing, scent, taste and touch. And they lead to the twisting pathways of imagination, thought and concepts. While some, indeed, lead to profitable contemplation, many others lead to sinful speculation. But these gates are all designed by the Lord, to open unto us the ways of repentance. Repentance, though, is not so simple – like an apology to God for something wrong that we have done.

Μετάνοια, in Greek, is so much more. The first preaching of our Lord Jesus Christ was the same as His cousin, Saint John the Baptist: Μετανοεῖτε! This word derives from two words in Greek – μετά and νοῦς. Μετά speaks of transformation, while νοῦς speaks of our spiritual mind and the intellect of our soul.

Together, as μετάνοια, they point to a change in the way we see the world, the way we see others and the way we experience ourselves.

Saint Paul puts it this way:

Πάντα μὲν καθαρὰ τοῖς καθαροῖς...

To the pure, all things are pure ...

In this season of preparation for the challenge of the Holy Forty Days, we are called to open the portals of our minds and souls to the world in new and transformed ways.

Confession is part of this process, because without shedding bad habits, it is difficult to take on good practices. But confession is not repentance. Repentance is real change on a very subtle level, where we train even our senses to apprehend the good, and shun the evil.

Let our eyes not seek out the sins of others. Let our ears not hear of rumor and gossip. Let our senses of scent and taste rejoice in the incense of good deeds. And let our hands and feet be eager to help others, especially when there is no reward for ourselves, except the approval of our Heavenly Father.

This is real repentance, and it has deep and long-lasting consequences for our daily lives. We will be happier, healthier and more confident in our destiny with God and with others.

My dear brothers and sisters,

Let us unlock these gates that have been closed due to pain and anger, envy and jealousy, craving and cowardice.

Let us open them up to true μετάνοια, which transforms our own hearts, and can transform the world around us.

And with hearts and minds and souls ablaze with the love of God, let us together travel through Triodion and the period of Holy and Great Lent, arriving – with one voice and one heart – to worship and glorify the Resurrection of Christ our God! Amen.

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Saint Joseph the Hesychast

