16/03/2021

His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America – Homily Clean Monday – The Beginning of Holy and Great Lent



My beloved sisters and brothers in Christ,

Today, we commence our annual pilgrimage to Holy Pascha – a sacred journey of Forty Days and Forty Nights, from which we emerge into the Holiest Week of the year, and the Passover from death to life.

As we chant today, on Pure and Clean Monday – Kathara Deftera:

Τὴν πάνσεπτον ἐγκράτειαν, ἐναρξώμεθα φαιδρῶς, ἀκτῖνας ἀπολάμποντες, τῶν ἁγίων ἐντολῶν, Χριστοῦ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἡμῶν, ἀγάπης τὴν λαμπρότητα, προσευχῆς τὴν ἀστραπήν, ἁγνείας καθαρότητα, εὐανδρείας τὴν ἰσχύν, ὅπωςλαμπροφόροι προφθάσωμεν, εἰς τὴν ἁγίαν καὶ τριήμερον Ἀνάστασιν, τὴνκαταλάμπουσαν ἀφθαρσίαν τῷ κόσμῳ.

Let us begin the most holy season of restraint beaming with joy; let us shine with brilliant rays of the holy commandments of Christ our God. With the brightness of love and the splendor of prayer, the strength of good courage and the purity of holiness! Thus, clothed in garments of light, let us hasten to the Holy Resurrection on the Third Day, that shines upon the universe with the glory of incorruption! [1]

Indeed, my beloved Brethren in the Lord, this is how we begin the Holy Fast – with joy! Like pilgrims at the beginning of their journey, with excitement and enthusiasm. Unafraid of the hardships to come, because we know our destination. We know that our safe haven is the home of the Heavenly Father. We know that no matter how dark the universe will become, when the Sun of Righteousness sets beneath the earth in His total eclipse,[2]He will rise again with even more brilliance in His Glorious Resurrection!

Indeed, this season of the Fast is not a time of deprivation; rather, it is a time of gifts.

The few sacrifices that we make – in our customs of eating and drinking – are mere reminders. And if there are bodily health benefits as well, this is an added blessing.

But any purification that comes from changing our diets is designed to free our awareness from the ordinary, and open our hearts to the extraordinary. And that is why we embrace the Fast – the ἐγκράτεια, the restraint spoken of in the hymn – beaming with joy. The hymn reminds us again and again – using all of the panoply of the Greek language to evoke the brilliance of the light of God – so that we may understand the purpose of our fasting.

Yesterday, on the Sunday of Cheesefare, we heard about the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise, because they did not fast. Every fruit was granted to them except one. Does this sound like deprivation?

No, my beloved brothers and sisters in Christ. The Lord asked for their restraint – their ἐγκράτεια – as a first step in their transformation from being self-centered, to being like God Himself: the Life-giving Sphere, Whose center is everywhere and circumference is nowhere.

God, Who had made them in His own Image and according to own His likeness, was calling them to exceed themselves, and to enter into the communion of love. For there is no love without sacrifice, or without some measure of giving of oneself.

Our God, the Holy Trinity, Who is blessed forever, is a perfect Communion of Love.

There is nothing done by God that does not originate from love. From the creation of the world, to its rebirth in eternity, everything comes from love.

Therefore, to be called into Communion with God, is to be called to love.

To love without prejudice. To love without favoritism. To love with wild abandon, so that we rise like a living flame of love.

As one of the Desert Fathers replied to a brother once, who came to him to ask about his personal spiritual life – a spiritual life, in fact, that might even mirror our own:

“Abba, as far as I can, I say the services a little, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace as much as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?” Then Abba Joseph stood up and stretched his hand towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, “If you are willing, you can become all flame.”[3]

My beloved Christians,

As it says in Scripture: Our God is a consuming fire![4]

But this does not mean a destroying fire. God is an embracing and, indeed, an engulfing fire, Who purifies and transforms everything He touches. As silver is purged of dross in the flame, and as simple clay is fired into porcelain, we are transfigured by God’s love to become images and likenesses of Divine Love.

This is our calling at the beginning of the Fast. This is the map of our journey, if we wish to arrive at the Holy Pascha, which is not so much a time of year, as it is a place in the human heart.

For the heart is where our love lives. It is the throne of God within our being. God desires to ascend this throne deep within our being, and there, to transform each of us into His perfect image, by Our Lord Jesus Christ, Who is …

… the Image of the invisible God, the First-born of all creation; for in Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is the head of the Body, the Church; He is the beginning, the First-born from the dead, that in everything He might be pre-eminent.[5]

Therefore, my beloved Christians,

This Lent, let us be filled with joy for what we are gaining, and not sad for what we are temporarily giving up.

Let us light the fire of love within our hearts for every person and all creation. There is no greater assurance of God’s presence in our lives than the love we bear toward others.

Let us pass through these Holy Days with gratitude. For we have once again been afforded the opportunity to grow in grace and in the knowledge and love of God.

Thus, when we arrive at the Holy and Glorious Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, we will pass the Light to one another, not only from hand to hand, but from heart to heart.

Through the prayers of the Most Holy Mother of God and all the Saints, may it be so.

Amen.

[1] Sessional Hymn by Theodore in Tone II.

[2] Cf. Luke 23:45.

[3] Joseph of Panephysis, Apophthegmata Patrum, Iota.

[4] Hebrews 12:29.

[5] Colossians 1:15-18.

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