

Learning Repentance from Saint Mary of Egypt

From the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee to Great and Holy Saturday when our Lord lies in the tomb, our journey to Pascha is a continuous movement of repentance. Great Lent is often called the school of repentance--the place where we learn how to repent. What is repentance? It is first and foremost a turning toward Christ even as the journey through Lent is the journey towards Holy Pascha. Repentance is a return even as the Prodigal Son returns to his father's home.

On this last Sunday of Great Lent, before we enter the festal days of next weekend followed by Great and Holy Week, the Church offers us the truly beautiful image of repentance in the person of St. Mary of Egypt. Her life embodies the turning away from self-destructive sin and toward life-giving union with Christ. This morning we will consider five characteristics of repentance that are manifest in her life.

Confession of Sins

Saint Mary was from Egypt, where she spent seventeen years of her youth as a harlot. As she recounts her life to the holy monk, Zosimus, her story is largely a simple confession of her sins. This is the first characteristic we learn from her repentance: she simply states her sins. She offers no excuse for them; she blames no one. Interestingly, she does tell stories about her life, but her stories are not supplied in order to explain away her sins. When we tell stories about our sins, we're inevitably telling them because we want to be understood, to have our misdeeds qualified, to excuse ourselves, or to blame others for our wrong doing. Stories, when we're describing our sins, are dangerous because they are a way in which we soften the blow of our irresponsibility.

St. Mary, however, far from excusing her actions, explains how deep sin penetrates her soul. She not only participated in these acts of harlotry for an extended period of time, but she confesses that she had totally embraced this desire. She had no interest in living a different type of life, no interest in turning away from these desires, no interest in battling against them. And, even worse, her desire was

not only for her own pleasure, but she even delighted in being a temptation to others, a stumbling block for them, and the occasion of their downfall and destruction. We see, then, that when St. Mary recounts stories, they are to reveal the depths of her sin. If she was going to tell stories, it wasn't to lessen the significance of her guilt but to take responsibility for her sins and for their destructive consequences in the lives of others.

Contrast her approach with that of Adam and Eve. When God comes to them and says did you eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that I told you not to eat of, Adam says: "The woman you gave me"—and that was true, God gave Eve to Adam—"she gave me of the fruit,"--that was also true. "And I ate it"—that was true too. Adam made three true claims, and yet he didn't repent. His first two statements comprise his story to explain away his responsibility by blaming others. It's as if he said: "God it's your fault, if you wouldn't have given me this woman, I wouldn't have eaten the forbidden fruit. And it's her fault; if she wouldn't have tempted me, I would never would have disobeyed You." So Adam, in hiding behind these words, even true words, attempts to minimize his responsibility. "Yes, I ate the forbidden fruit, but it's not really my fault." This is not repentance.

What's so powerful about St. Mary's story is that she did nothing to hide the shameful of her early years. If we're ever really going to feel compunction and sorrow, Godly sorrow, for our sins, we have to strip away those stories that we hide behind, that we tell in order to make our sins excusable, understandable, acceptable, normal. This, then, is the first point: our repentance must be an honest and straightforward confession of our sins, without excuse, without explanation, without any qualification that detracts from accepting complete responsibility for what we've done.

Responsiveness to God

St Mary, being mired in this extreme sensuality, sees a large crowd of people leaving Egypt on boats to travel to Jerusalem. Wondering what's happening, she boards one of the boats, on which she

delights in bringing about the fall of many more men. She arrives in Jerusalem only to discover that these people are on pilgrimage to the Feast of the Elevation of the Cross. Up to this point, she has expressed no interest in Christianity, and has lived in blatant rebellion to it; but now she is curious. She tries to follow the pilgrims into the church, and our Lord, through the intervention of His Mother, prevents her. Let us sum up her attempts to enter the church in this way: *God* is the One who reveals our sins to us. Jesus Himself tells us that He is going to send the Holy Spirit to convict the world of its sin, of its unrighteousness. This is precisely what St. Mary experiences as she attempts to enter the Church: the awareness of her sins--not by looking at herself, but by God revealing them to her.

When God comes to Adam and Eve, He asks them a question, whether they had eaten the forbidden fruit. It's not as if He didn't know. But, like a good shepherd in search of his lost sheep, God initiates with them to offer them the opportunity to stop hiding. Similarly, God comes to Cain and asks where is your brother. God sends Nathan the Prophet to David to tell him a parable to reveal to him his sin. God sends Jonah to the Ninevites. God sends John the Baptist to the people of Israel. God always finds ways to initiate in our lives, to show us our sins--so that we can return to him and be healed.

We often try to figure out our own sins, entering into a self-analysis. Sadly this pious effort of self-evaluation often severs us from simply responding to God's piercing our conscience. There are two defects to this way of thinking. First, we are relying on our own wisdom and insight, not realizing that God knows us way better than we know ourselves. We need His view of us; He doesn't need our view of ourselves. Second, when we start analyzing ourselves, We're inevitably talking to ourselves instead of talking to God. Once the self-conversation starts, it is very difficult to redirect it to God. Yet it is God who heals us and frees us from our sins, not ourselves, and so it is to Him that we need to express them.

Responding to what it is that God shows us about our lives is really the core of confession. Etymologically the word 'confession,' *homologeîn* in Greek, is 'to say the same thing', 'to agree.' To

confess our sins to God is to agree with Him in response to what He says to us. God says, "Did you eat of the tree of forbidden fruit?" We say "Yes." We don't give complicated stories that deflect from this simple truth. "Where's your brother?" "I killed him." We don't answer, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Why is God continually revealing our sins to us? Because sins are simply our turning away from Him, choosing communion with the things of creation instead of the Creator Himself, preferring the gift over the Giver. God is showing us our sins because He's calling us back to Him. He wants us to return to our true home. God is not trying to make us feel discouraged or despondent; nor is He trying to punish us. He is rather trying to free us from the self-inflicted punishment of trying to live apart from Him, and from the despondency that accompanies that departure. He longs to be with us; He is Emmanuel, God with us. It is when we engage in self-analysis that we beat ourselves up, and sink into this realm of discouragement and despondency. But God is relentless in trying to raise us up from our sins, to draw us back to Him. So this second characteristic of repentance is that when God shows us our sins we simply say, "Yes, Lord, I did it; heal me; free me from the passions that give rise to this sin." We only need to be responsive to what He shows us, without excuse, without blame, without explanation. This is how we are received back into His presence.

Extreme Measures

We often think that Christ came into the world to prevent us from going to a place of torment after we die. The emphasis, however, in the Gospels and the Epistles, is that Christ came to save us not simply from the *penalty* for our sins, but from the sins themselves (see, e.g., Mt 1:21; Jn 1:29; Rom 6:10-14). He came to change our lives here and now, that we would live holy lives, that we would be cleansed in this world; that we would be healed in this world; that we would be transformed in this world; that our lives would be enlightened and the darkness would be cast out; that we would be freed from our bondage to envy, lust, anger, impatience, consumption and greed in this earthly life.

Christ comes to change us in these dramatic ways, but not by magic; not against our will; not without our voluntary cooperation. We cannot change ourselves without Him, and neither can He change us without our working together with him. St. Mary of Egypt beautifully exemplifies this willingness to cooperate with God's work in changing her life, and in this way she reveals to us a third characteristic of repentance: returning to God involves extreme measures. In the case of St. Mary, she followed God's leading into the desert and lived a life of extreme asceticism for forty years, far removed from the sources of temptation that had so controlled her.

There is a temptation to dismiss St. Mary's actions simply because they are so extreme. Maybe they were fine for her, but they are not for all Christians, and certainly not for me. But her behavior reminds us of our Lord's words that are directed to all of us: "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell" (Mt 5:29-30). The Church is very clear that we are not supposed to harm our body; Jesus is not speaking literally. But it does mean that God wants us to take extreme measures against those things in our lives that cause us to stumble. We may not literally follow St. Mary into the desert for forty years of repentance any more than we literally sever limbs from our body, but we will fail to cooperate with God in our salvation if we refuse to take extreme measures appropriate to the sins that entangle us. Continuing to live a normal worldly life has no place in the school of repentance.

How might this look in practice? Consider our TVs, computers, cell phones, and whatever possessions or activities that we cannot live without. We have to ask the simple question: "Would we rather go into heaven without it or into hell with it?" It's a serious, and difficult, question. For if we are honest, it will require extreme measures on our part to cooperate with Christ's work to remove these

passionate addictions from our life. We like to fool ourselves into thinking we can have it both ways, our seductive possessions and a Christian life. Christ doesn't offer us that option.

Extreme measures may take many different forms in our lives: choosing to give sacrificially and anonymously to help us overcome our lust for things; entering an anger management program to help calm our violent outbursts; participating in a twelve-steps program to help prevail against our uncontrolled desires for food, alcohol, or sexual relations. The measures we take are best worked out with our Priest in the context of confession for we are tempted to be too hard or too soft on ourselves, and thus the measures fail to have their medicinal effects. Whatever form they take, we must keep in mind that they themselves do not change us. They are our way of cooperating with God's work in our life. They are a prayer, saying to God, "Lord, I love you more than I love these things" (Jn 21:15).

Relentless Perseverance

A fourth characteristic of repentance complements and completes the third: engage in extreme measures *for a long time*. St. Mary lived a sinful life for seventeen years. After her encounter with God in Jerusalem, she lived in the desert for forty years, seventeen of which were spent in a continuous battle with her own inner sinfulness before she experienced inner peace. Even though the desert life separated her from external temptations and the occasions for the sins of her youth, she still needed to struggle against her passions for such a sustained period of time. What does this reveal to us? That our sins have very, very deep roots. That our illness is not a common cold but a cancer. We need extreme measures, and we need them for a long time, if we are to eradicate the roots of sins and be healed of spiritual illnesses.

So often when we come for confession, we want advice for how to overcome a sin or to make progress in our spiritual life. Having received advice, we try it for two weeks or two months or even a year, and we then we say it didn't work. We give up. But maybe we should ask ourselves, "Do we think

our sins are really so shallow and trivial that we can eradicate them in two weeks or two months or even a year?" No, our sins are not shallow. Our sins and passions run deep into our souls, and we have to relentlessly persevere in our battle against them. As before, it is not *our* efforts that are changing us; Christ Himself is. But we have to be vigilant in placing ourselves in a context in which He can change us, and to do so indefinitely—not holding back, not giving up, not becoming discouraged. St. Anthony the Great says that we should expect to be tempted to our last breath (Saying #4), even as Christ Himself was. And our Lord says, "He who endures to the end will be saved" (Mt 10:22; 24:13; Mk 13:13; Rev 2:10). The fourth aspect of repentance, then, extends the third, instructing us to relentlessly persevere in the practices that separated us from our temptations, passions, and sins.

Longing for Christ

Finally, how does St. Mary's story end? How does her life come to its completion, to its fulfillment? She receives the body and blood of Christ. She is united with the One whom she has sought, with the One who sought and found her. This is her Pascha. It is the culmination, as it were, of her Lenten journey. For us, forty days; for her, forty years. Forty years in the desert, striving to be united with Christ, longing to turn towards Him, relentless, never giving up. St. Mary was not focused on her sins, but rather on Christ. This is the fifth characteristic of repentance from St. Mary's life: to long with our entire being to be united to Christ; to have one's total focus be on Him. She confessed her sins without excuse or shifting-blame, but did not she dwell on them. Receiving the body and blood of Christ is the fulfillment of her forty-year, single-minded journey toward her Holy Pascha. From the very moment that she was enabled by God's grace to enter the church and venerate the life-giving Cross, she longed to be united to her Savior.

Sometimes, when we focus on our repentance, we focus on our sins to the exclusion of Christ. We become discouraged and downcast, without the spiritual energy that hope in Christ provides. Even if

we are making every effort to turn away from our sins, it is not enough. The holy fathers give many examples of turning away from one sin to another. We strive with all our effort to overcome our addiction to social media only to find ourselves now consumed by cable news. We commit to not turning to food for comfort in times of stress and anxiety but now--in our agitated state--we cannot stop criticizing our spouse and children. We try to stem our idle talkativeness only to inwardly judge others for theirs. So long as we try to turn away from sin without turning toward Christ, we fail to fulfill the deepest longing that rests in our heart. "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until they find rest in You" (St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1). If our efforts are directed not only away from our passions, but toward Christ, then the sins which so easily entangle us will gradually lose their grip on us. We will no longer be their slaves, controlled by our desires, but will be healed and freed by the gentle and loving hands of Christ Himself. Yearning for Christ will burn up our passions and sins.

Repentance and healing forgiveness occur first and foremost in sacramental contexts since the mystical nature of the sacraments always involves an encounter with Christ Himself. In baptism we are united to his death, burial and resurrection, setting us on the path of turning away from the world and toward Christ in the life of the church. In communion we consume His body and blood, not for judgment nor for condemnation but for the healing of soul and body. In confession, Christ Himself stands before us to receive us as we are, without our concealing anything from Him, even as he will at the His second and awesome coming. Our whole life in the Church is given to us as a constant movement towards Christ, as a continual turning toward paradise, a return to our Father's home.

By the prayers of St. Mary of Egypt, may our Lord grant us a life of repentance.