

LENTEN JOURNEY CLASS

March 14, 2023: St. John Climacus (Κλίμακος)

“Adam fell among thieving thoughts: his mind was robbed, his soul wounded, and he lay naked with none to help. The priest that was before the Law did not attend to him; the Levite that came after the Law did not look upon him. Thou alone hast helped him, O God who camest not from Samaria but from the Theotokos; glory be to Thee.

- Aposticha. From the Triodion. Sung at the Vespers on the Fourth Sunday of Lent

“God did not create death; he did not create evil; but he left to human beings, as the angels, freedom, and everything. Thus, through their freedom, some rise to the highest good, others rush headlong into the depths of evil. But you, man, why do you reject your freedom? Why, this reluctance to have to make an effort, to toil, fight, to become the artificer of your own salvation? ‘ My Father is working still,’ it is written, ‘and I am working’ (John 5:17).”

- Origen, *First Homily on Ezekiel*, 3 (GCS 8, 326)

"Do not be surprised that you fall every day; do not give up, but stand your ground courageously. And assuredly, the angel who guards you will honor your patience."

- *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, St. John Climacus

“There are two ways, one of life and one of death; and there is a great difference between the two ways.”

- *The Didache (The Teaching [of the Apostles])*, c. 90-110 A.D.

Sunday of St. John Climacus

The memory of this Saint is celebrated on March 30, where his biography may be found. He is celebrated today because his book, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, is a sure guide to the ascetic life, written by a great man of prayer experienced in all forms of the monastic polity; it teaches the seeker after salvation how to lay a sound foundation for his struggles, how to detect and war against each of the passions, how to avoid the snares laid by the demons, and how to rise from the rudimental virtues to the heights of Godlike love and humility. It is held in such high esteem that it is universally read in its entirety in monasteries during the Great Fast.

Troparion (Tone 8)

By a flood of tears you made the desert fertile
And by your longing for God you brought forth fruits in abundance.
By the radiance of miracles you illuminated the whole universe.
O our holy Father John Climacus, pray to Christ our God to save our souls.

Kontakion (Tone 1)

You offered us your teachings as fruits of everlasting freshness,
To sweeten the hearts of those who receive them with attention.
O blessed and wise John, they are the rungs of a ladder,
Leading the souls of those who honor you from earth to Eternal glory in Heaven!



(This *Ladder* icon is a late-12th-century work at Saint Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai.)

St. John's Life (From the OCA Archdiocese Website):

There is almost no information about Saint John's origins. One tradition suggests that he was born in Constantinople around the year 570, and was the son of Saints Xenophon and Maria (January 26).

John went to Sinai when he was sixteen, submitting to Abba Martyrius as his instructor and guide. After four years, Saint John was tonsured as a monk. Abba Strategios, who was present at Saint John's tonsure, predicted that he would become a great luminary in the Church of Christ. For nineteen years Saint John progressed in monasticism in obedience to his spiritual Father. After the death of Abba Martyrius, Saint John embarked on a solitary life, settling in a wild place called Thola, where he spent forty years laboring in silence, fasting, prayer, and tears of penitence.

It is not by chance that in *The Ladder* Saint John speaks about tears of repentance: "Just as fire burns and destroys the wood, so pure tears wash away every impurity, both external and internal." His holy prayer was strong and efficacious, as may be seen from an example from the life of the God-pleasing saint.

Saint John had a disciple named Moses. Once, the saint ordered his disciple to bring dung to fertilize the vegetable garden. When he had fulfilled the obedience, Moses lay down to rest under the shade of a large rock, because of the scorching heat of summer. Saint John was in his cell in a light sleep. Suddenly, a man of remarkable appearance appeared to him and awakened the holy ascetic, reproaching him, "John, why do you sleep so heedlessly, when Moses is in danger?" Saint John immediately woke up and began to pray for his disciple. When Moses returned in the evening, Saint John asked whether any sort of misfortune had befallen him.

The monk replied, "A large rock would have fallen on me as I slept beneath it at noon, but I left that place because I thought I heard you calling me." Saint John did not tell his disciple of his vision, but gave thanks to God.

Saint John ate the food which is permitted by the monastic rule, but only in moderation. He did not sleep very much, only enough to keep up his strength, so that he would not ruin his mind by unceasing vigil. "I do not fast excessively," he said of himself, "nor do I give myself over to intense all-night vigil, nor lay upon the ground, but I restrain myself..., and the Lord soon saved me."

The following example of Saint John's humility is noteworthy. Gifted with discernment, and attaining wisdom through spiritual experience, he lovingly received all who came to him and guided them to salvation. One day some envious monks reproached him for being too talkative, and so Saint John kept silence for a whole year. The monks realized their error, and they went to the ascetic and begged him not to deprive them of the spiritual profit of his conversation. Concealing his ascetic deeds from others, Saint John sometimes withdrew into a cave, but reports of his holiness spread far beyond the vicinity. Visitors from all walks of life came to him, desiring to hear his words of edification and salvation. After forty years of solitary asceticism, he was chosen as *igumen* of Sinai when he was seventy-five. Saint John governed the holy

monastery for four years. Toward the end of his life, the Lord granted him the gifts of clairvoyance and wonderworking.

At the request of Saint John, igumen of the Raithu monastery (Commemorated on Cheesefare Saturday), he wrote the incomparable *Ladder*, a book of instruction for monks who wished to attain spiritual perfection.

Knowing of the wisdom and spiritual gifts of Saint John of Sinai, the igumen of Raithu requested him to write down whatever was necessary for the salvation of those in the monastic life. Such a book would be “a ladder fixed on the earth” (Gen. 28:12), leading people to the gates of Heaven. Saint John felt that such a task was beyond his ability, yet out of obedience he fulfilled the request. The saint called his work *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, for the book is “a fixed ladder leading from earthly things to the Holy of Holies....” The thirty steps of spiritual perfection correspond to the thirty years of the Lord’s age. When we have completed these thirty steps, we will find ourselves with the righteous and will not stumble. THE LADDER begins with renunciation of the world, and ends with God, Who is love (1 John 4:8).

Although the book was written for monks, any Christian living in the world will find it an unerring guide for ascending to God, and a support in the spiritual life. Saints Theodore the Studite (November 11 and January 26), Sergius of Radonezh (September 25 and July 5), Joseph of Volokolamsk (September 9 and October 18), and others relied on *The Ladder* as an important guide to salvation.

In *The Ladder* Saint John describes the ascent toward spiritual perfection, which is essential for anyone who wishes to save his soul. It is a written account of his thoughts, based on the collected wisdom of many wise ascetics, and on his own spiritual experience. The book is a great help on the path to truth and virtue.

The steps of *The Ladder* proceed gradually from strength to strength on the path of perfection. The summit is not reached suddenly, but gradually, as the Savior says: “The Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force” (Mt.11:12).

From the Sunday of St. John Climacus, the Fourth Sunday of Great Lent:

Epistle is from St. Paul's Letter to the Hebrews 6:13-20

Brethren, when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore to himself, saying, "Surely I will bless you and multiply you." And thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise. Men indeed swear by a greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he interposed with an oath, so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God should prove false, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to seize the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the

inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.

The Gospel According to Mark 9:17-31

At that time, a man came to Jesus kneeling and saying: "Teacher, I brought my son to you, for he has a dumb spirit; and wherever it seizes him it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, and they were not able." And he answered them, "O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me." And they brought the boy to him; and when the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. And Jesus asked his father, "How long has he had this?" And he said, "From childhood. And it has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us." And Jesus said to him, "If you can! All things are possible to him who believes." Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "I believe; help my unbelief!" And when Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You dumb and deaf spirit, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again." And after crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse; so that most of them said, "He is dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he arose. And when he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" And he said to them, "This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer and fasting." They went on from there and passed through Galilee. And he would not have any one know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise."

“But by fasting and prayer...”

Ascetism (Ασκητισμός)

- Asceticism means exercise, combat.
- Asceticism is not obedience to some abstract, categorical imperative. It frees human nature to follow its deepest instinct towards God.

“The purpose of asceticism is to divest oneself of surplus weight, of spiritual fat. It is to dissolve in the waters of baptism, in the water of tears, all the hardness of heart, so that it may become an antenna of infinite sensitivity, infinitely vulnerable to the beauty of the world, and to the sufferings of human beings, and to God, Who is love, Who has conquered by the wood of the cross.”

- Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism*

“Spiritual fat, is the obtuseness with which evil cloaks the intelligence.”

- Evagrius of Pontus, *Centuries IV*, 36

All ascetic struggle is made possible by Christ. It is done in Christ Jesus.

“Amma Syncletia said, ‘Great endeavors, and hard struggles await those who are converted, but afterwards, inexpressible joy. If you want to light a fire, you are troubled at first by the smoke, and your eyes water. But in the end you achieve your aim. Now it is written: “Our God is a consuming fire.” So we must light the divine fire in us with tears and struggle.’”

- *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, Amma Syncletia, 2

Philautia/Φιλαντία (Self-Centered or Vain Glorious Love of Self) v. Freedom

- Freedom towards virtue
- The real purpose of asceticism of fasting and prayer is to conform to the crucified Christ

“Only love overcomes the fragmentation of human nature.”

- Maximus the Confessor, *Centuries on Charity*

Moderation, Humility, and Fidelity are the Way

“If the enemy suggests to you and extreme excuses that risk making your body, feeble and useless, you must moderate your fasting.”

- Athanasius of Alexandria, *On Virginity*

“When I fast, I am vainglorious; and when I permit myself food in order to conceal my fasting from others, I am again vainglorious about my prudence. When I dress in fine clothing, I am vanquished by vanity, and if I put on drab clothing, again I am overcome by vanity. If I speak, vainglory defeats me. If I wish to keep silent, I am again given over to it. Wherever this thorn comes up, it stands with its points upright.

- St. John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Step 22

The life of asceticism requires not just a map to get to the top of the mountain, but a guide; a spiritual father.