

Homily on “Great Lent” -- Seven Questions, Seven Answers

His Grace, Michael – Bishop of New York & the Diocese of New York and New Jersey

According to the teaching of our Holy Orthodox Church, the goal of the spiritual life of each and every Christian, without exception, is “*theosis*” or deification -- becoming like God -- and union with Him in the heavenly kingdom for all eternity. The Fathers of our Church over the centuries – great Saints such as Irenaeus of Lyons, Athanasius of Alexandria, Gregory the Theologian, Basil the Great and Gregory of Nyssa -- have summarized the meaning of God’s Incarnation in this formula: “*God became man that man might become like God.*” Certainly we shall only be fully deified on the Last Day, but for each of us the process of theosis must begin here and now in the present life. While it is true that in this present life very few indeed attain full mystical union with God – we call them saints – every true Christian must try to love the Lord our God as the Scripture says, “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30), expressing that love by imitating our Savior Jesus Christ in tangible ways.

There is nothing extraordinary about the methods which we must follow in order to be deified. If someone were to ask, “How can I become like God?” the answer “is very simple.” In the words of Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware), “... go to Church, receive the Sacraments regularly, pray to God ‘in spirit and in truth,’ read the Gospels, follow the commandments. The last of these items — ‘follow the commandments’ — must never be forgotten.” Furthermore, in almost simplistic terms, St. John Chrysostom instructs us that every choice that we make, everything that we do, either brings us closer to Christ or further from Him – it makes us either more like Our Lord or less like Him.

Lent is the proper time for us to evaluate how we are doing in achieving the goal of our spiritual life -- how we are progressing in becoming more and more like our Savior. Hopefully today’s video, “Seven Questions, Seven Answers on Our Spiritual Life,” will help each of us to clarify this.

Question #1: Since my last confession, have I been praying more regularly, more attentively, more sincerely? Our Lord gives us the example: In the Gospel of Luke, we see Him in prayer before every event in His life.

Question #2: Over the past year, have I been reading the Scripture more frequently and more devoutly, trying to learn its meaning and live its commandments? The Bible is a “love letter to us” from the King of Heaven.

Question #3: Since my last confession, have I been attending divine services more faithfully? In the Gospels, we find Christ praying publicly, in the synagogue on every Sabbath, and in the temple on every feast day.

Question #4: Over the past year, have I received the Holy Mysteries on a regular basis? Our Lord gave His life on the Cross for the remission of our sins; we receive that forgiveness through Confession and Communion.

Question #5: This Lent and the other fasting seasons, have I abstained from meat and dairy, excess drinking and forms of entertainment as prescribed by the Church? Our Savior ate and drank nothing for 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness.

Question #6: Have I been sharing more of my time, talents and financial resources for Christ and the extension of His kingdom here on earth, through the work of the Church? He said, “to whom much has been given, much is expected.”

Question #7: Since my last confession, have I been more loving, more kind, more forgiving to my family, co-workers, fellow parishioners, the least of His brethren? Have I treated others as the “image of God?”

You will notice that I have only asked 7 questions. Each of us has to answer those questions for ourselves. Only I can truly say if I have come closer to Christ by the things I have done, by the things I am doing. Hopefully all our answers are “yes.”

But if they are not, there is good news. We can begin anew this very Lenten season to improve our prayer life, our reading of Scripture, our participation in divine services, our reception of Confession and Communion, our fasting discipline, our sharing of time, talents and treasure in thanksgiving to God, and our showing our love for our neighbor in tangible ways.

By doing these things, we will in fact be imitating our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, and in doing so become more and more like Him ... Who loves us more than we love ourselves. To Him be all glory, honor and worship with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.