

Great Lent – A Time To Regain Our “Birthright Of Beauty”

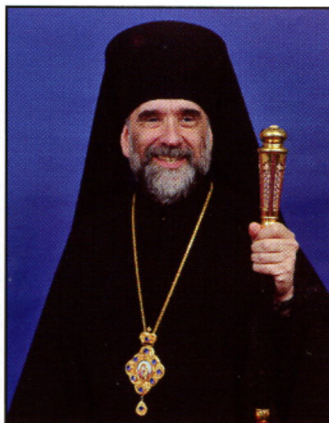
by Bishop Michael

Rather than being received with anticipation and joy, Great Lent may be a time we actually dread. The demands of extra services, the rigors of fasting regulations, the fear of going to confession all weigh heavily upon our welcoming and accepting the Great Fast in the spirit in which it is given to us. But for the holy fathers, the great saints of the Church, Lent is a time of renewal, an opportunity for regeneration, another chance for us to regain our “birthright of beauty.”

So often when we think of “beauty,” we think of the face of a loved one, the landscape of nature, a masterpiece of art. These, of course, are examples of exterior beauty beheld by our physical eyes. There is even an ecclesial dimension of such beauty – classical church architecture, radiant iconography, the magnificence of the Liturgy. But when St. Athanasius said, “Mankind was endowed with a “birthright of beauty” (*On the Incarnation*, 3), he meant something different – the inner, transformative beauty of the human person – the “beauty” of the soul.

When human beings were created, God honored us with His divine image – Genesis tells us, man was made “in the image and likeness of God.” Taken from the dust of the earth, Adam was given life by God through His own breath, His own Spirit. This presence of God, this breath of God, projects the image of God upon human beings and gives us a beauty and a “crown of glory.” It makes us the ruler of creation and responsible for it (Gen. 1:28-29; 2:19-20). Man’s creation in the image of the Holy Trinity (“Let us make man ...”) means that our very being and the way we are to live out our life are designed to image the life of God Himself. In doing this, we attain to the likeness of God.

Man, through his disobedience, rejected this divine vocation and failed to realize his life as love and communion with the All-Holy Trinity. Immediately following Adam and Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit in the Garden, we see the destruction of harmony and the division created between males and females, because they rejected both true love of God and true



love for one another. They lost their innocence, and the beauty of their soul was sullied by the dark stain of sin. Before eating of the fruit, “they were not ashamed,” but after, they hid themselves from God.

The Lord gave Adam and Eve a chance to repent, but instead of asking for forgiveness, Adam blamed Eve for the sin, and Eve blamed the serpent. And so, they were cast out of Paradise – their sin meant separation from God and immortality. Their life became one of ugly corruption and impending death. In the words of St. Maximos the Confessor, man had “fashioned for himself a living death for the whole of time to this present age” (*Difficulty*, 10).

The Funeral Hymn of St. John of Damascus summarizes all of this succinctly in these words:

Thou hast called me into being from nothingness,
and honored me with Thy divine image;
but because I had transgressed Thy commandments,
Thou hast returned me again to the earth from
which I was taken;
Restore me to that image, to my pristine beauty.

His words so practically speak to the point of the tragedy of death in another one of the funeral hymns:

I weep and I wail when I think upon death,
and behold our beauty, fashioned after the
image of God,
lying in the tomb disfigured, dishonored,
bereft of form.
O marvel! What is this mystery concerning us?

But the Wisdom of Solomon tells us, “God does not delight in the death of the living” (Wisdom 1:13). After thousands of years of man’s suffering from the oppression of sin, the Father deemed it good to send His Only-Begotten Son to save us from sin and death and eternal separation from God. When the Word of God took on flesh and became man, He became everything we are except that He was without sin and a fallen will. He made it possible for man to suffer and

die in a redemptive fashion, modeling for us how to become a true person: reborn in Holy Bâptism, united in His resurrection, continually working out our salvation in repentance, and growing in His likeness.

Our hymnography proclaims this truth in the Kontakion for the Sunday of Orthodoxy:

The uncircumscribed Word of the Father became circumscribed,
Taking flesh from you, O Theotokos,
And He has restored the sullied image to its ancient glory,
Filling it with the divine beauty,
This our salvation we confess in deed and word,
and we depict it in the holy icons.

When Christ became the God-man, He took on Adam's corruption brought about by the first sin. Adam's "garments of sin," according to the fathers of the Church, included subjection to the corporeal, the biological life. We must not forget that Christ took on that biological form. He condescended in such a way as to mold to Himself that garment of disobedience for the purpose of showing perfect obedience to the Father in all things. It is notable that our Lord chose to be born and to proceed through each stage of the human biological lifespan, from a helpless babe to a full grown adult. In so doing, he Christified every stage of our biological aging. By being obedient to His Father at every stage of His life, He revealed to us how we might be mindful of God through every stage of our life (Heb. 2:17-18).

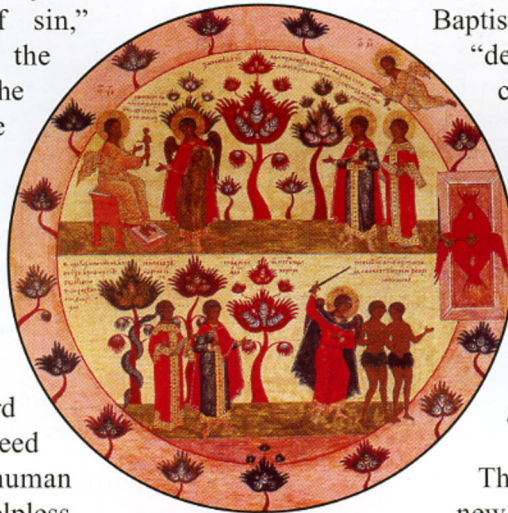
Christ died for the purpose of overcoming the consequence of sin, by defeating our subjection to death. By His Cross, the Lord destroyed death itself and restored us to the possibility of eternal life. One of our Saturday evening Vespers hymns proclaims this: "When Thou wast seen nailed to the cross, O Christ, Thou hadst restored the beauty of Thy creatures" (Resurrectional Aposticha, Tone 2). And from among the hymns of the Lenten Sunday of the Cross, we exclaim: "Through the Cross reveal Thy beauty to us, O Christ" ("Lord I Call" text).

How did He do this? Christ obeyed the law of death. That is, being crucified, having died, and being buried, Christ returned His flesh to the dust of the earth. But Hades could not stand the presence of He Who is Light and Life, and our bondage to that "death by death" was overthrown. For Christ had taken our infirm and mortal nature and swallowed it up in His Life (II Cor. 5:4). As St. Nicholas Cabasilas explains, Christ laid down man's "garments of skin," the result of Adam's sin, and raised man up to the right hand of God. The Lord not only revealed life as spiritual, He actually transformed our nature into an immortal and spiritual one – one that could again image the beauty of the Holy Trinity and attain the likeness of God (*Life in Christ*, pp. 162-164).

This is possible for each of us by our experiencing personally the Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Mystery of Holy Baptism. In our own baptism that former "deformity and hideousness" that caused man to progress deeper and deeper into spiritual decay is cast off, according to the teaching of St. John Chrysostom (Homily 8 on Colossians). Instead, we do not grow towards "old age, but youthfulness," towards beauty of soul and purity of heart, as is symbolized in the baptismal garment (Cf. Eccl. 12:1).

The challenge is to maintain that new and beautiful life in Christ. Having put off the old garment, that old tunic, that old man, and his slavery to the passions, we must not put them on again. We must not trade our beautiful, pure, white garment received in baptism for that darkness of sin that

formerly covered us. This truth is attested to in the *Song of Songs*, an Old Testament book of wisdom, written by King Solomon. There, the bride says, "I have taken off my tunic; how can I put it back on? I have washed my feet; how can I dirty them?" (Song of Songs 5:3). St. Gregory of Nyssa, in his commentary on this text, explains to us that that the bride is the soul; her tunic is the old man, her former "garments of skin." She is already baptized in the preceding verses (she "went up from the washing," Song of Songs 4:2) and has already put on the



*Sol'vchegodsk, Russia.
The Cathedral of the
Annunciation, part of a
three-part composition on
the altar door; 1570's*

Continued on page 12

Jacob's
well
Spring 2011

Continued from page 11

Journal for this newly established mission parish. In some countries, like Russia, there are five Orthodox churches within walking distance of one another. Here in America, thousands of people will drive hours to go to football games on Sunday morning, but it is difficult to motivate people to drive an hour to church.

"People are only going to come to church if it's a 15 to 20 minute drive," said Fr. Holowatch who commutes from Endicott each week. He knew that there was a need for an Orthodox church within driving distance. Frs. Holowatch and Binkewicz also knew that an English speaking liturgical service would be a key factor in building a new community.

Bernie Lopez, who has lived in Ithaca her whole life and who is not Greek, attended St. Catherine's Greek Orthodox Church. She said "After 57 years I finally found a church where I feel at home and comfortable." Bernie has felt a part of the Holy

Apostles family from the first time she entered the new Mission. She fondly remembers that Fr. Binkewicz even briefly left the choir to introduce himself and to see if she had any questions on the day of her first visit.

Fellowship hour after the service offers more than just homemade soup and baked goods. It is the perfect opportunity for new members to meet and learn about one another. The Orthodox community is very small, which makes it easy to reach out and connect with newcomers. And, after fasting for 12 hours before taking Holy Communion, it is a joy to have a hearty meal made by different parishioners especially during the cold Ithaca winters. ❖

For more information, please visit the church website at:

<http://www.holyapostlesorthodoxchurch.com>.

Ally Oleynik is a student at Ithaca College.

Continued from page 4

Bridegroom, Christ. Of this beauty we sing at every Baptism: "As many as have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ. Alleluia!" (Gal. 3:27).

And what of those of us who do, through human weakness, fall from grace and sully that garment once white and pure with the darkness and defilement of sin? What of those of us who have squandered our "birthright of beauty"? They find themselves like the Prodigal who spent his inheritance on sinful living, no longer in the bridal chamber with the Bridegroom but "in a far country," wallowing in the mud with swine, sharing not the Banquet of the Kingdom, but rather the pods that the pigs ate. The Gospel calls us to repentance and confession, in order to receive anew the forgiveness of the Father and our "birthright of beauty." The Lord in His parable gives us every assurance that our heavenly Father will receive us with joy and gladness if we only "arise and go," confessing our self-inflicted and sinful separation from the "home" where we truly belong. The Master promises us the inheritance that was once ours. The robe, the ring and the banquet will be ours again. (Luke 15:11-24).

Great Lent is the time for us to "regain our birthright of beauty." The God-given gifts of repentance and confession, aided by prayer and fasting and almsgiving, are at our disposal. What a great time of

opportunity, what a season of hope and joy! The loving Lord wants our union with Him so much that He provides us with yet another chance. The choice is ours, as it was for Adam and Eve so long ago. The choice is ours, as it has been for the saints in every generation. We must choose to enter again the new life, to desert the dark coldness of a life outside of Christ. Our hearts may have previously frozen, but King Solomon prophesied a spiritual springtime:

Behold, winter is past, and rain is gone, it has departed.

The flowers are seen in the land,
the time of pruning has arrived;
the voice of the dove is heard in our land
(Song of Songs 2:11-12).

We are reminded of our previous withered life in bondage to sin in the sight of winter. Every spring we rejoice over our life in Christ in the sight of the new life brought at the Paschal season. We should make use of our awareness of the changing of the seasons to call us to thanksgiving and to remind us that Great Lent is the "time of pruning," of refining ourselves in Christ, of renewing the image and likeness of God through repentance and confession. Let us embrace with joy this opportunity to regain our "birthright of beauty." ❖