

HOMILY ON THE THIRD SUNDAY OF GREAT LENT *CARRYING YOUR CROSS*

St. Ignatius (Brianchaninov)

Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me (Mk. 8:34), said the Lord to his disciples, calling them unto Him, as we heard today in the Gospels.

Dear brothers and sisters! We too are disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ, because we are Christians. We too are called unto the Lord, to this holy temple, to hear His teaching. We stand before the face of the Lord. His gaze is directed at us. Our souls are laid bare before Him; our secret thoughts and hidden feelings are open to Him. He sees all of our intentions; He sees the truth, and the sins we have committed from our youth; He sees our whole life, past and future; even what we *have not yet done* is already written in His *book*.^[1] He knows the hour of our passing into immeasurable eternity, and gives us His all-holy commandment for our salvation: *Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.*

Through living faith, let us lift up the eyes of our mind to the Lord Who is present here with us! Let us open our hearts, rolling back the heavy stone of hardness from its entrance; let us hear, ponder, accept, and assimilate the teaching of our Lord.

What does it mean to *deny ourselves*? It means leaving our sinful life. Sin, through which our fall occurred, has so encompassed our nature that it has become as if natural; thus, denial of sin has become denial of nature, and denying nature is denying ourselves. The eternal death that has struck our souls has become like life for us. It demands food: sin; it demands to be pleased—with sin. By means of such food and pleasure, eternal death upholds and preserves its dominion over man. But fallen man accepts the growth of the dominion of death in himself as growth and success in life. Thus, he who is infected with a fatal disease is overcome by the forceful demands of this disease and looks for foods that would strengthen him. He seeks them as the most essential foods,

as the most needed and pleasant delights. The Lord pronounced His sentence against this eternal death, which mankind, sick with terrible fallenness, imagines to be life: *For whosoever will save his life, cultivating in it the life of fallenness or eternal death, shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it* (Mk. 8:35). Placing before our eyes the whole world with all its beauty and charm, the Lord says, *For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?* What good is it for man, what has he really acquired if he should come to possess not only some minor thing, but even the entire visible world? This visible world is no more than man's temporary guesthouse! There is no item on the earth, not a single acquirable good that we could call our own. Everything will be taken from us by merciless and inevitable death; and unforeseen circumstances and changes often take them away even before our death. Even our own bodies are cast aside at that sacred step into eternity. Our possession and treasure is our soul, and our soul alone. *What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?* (Mk. 8:37), sayeth the word of God. There is nothing that can recompense the loss of the soul when it is killed by eternal death, which deceitfully calls itself life.

What does it mean to take up our cross? The cross was an instrument of shameful execution of commoners and captives deprived of a citizen's rights. The proud world, a world at enmity with Christ, deprives Christ's disciples of the rights enjoyed by the sons of this world. *If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me* (Jn. 15:19; 16:2-3). Taking up our cross means magnanimously enduring the mocking and derision that the world pours out upon followers of Christ—those sorrows and persecutions with which the sin-loving and blind world persecutes those who follow Christ. *For this is thankworthy, says the Apostle Peter, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For even hereunto were ye called* (1 Pet. 2:19, 21). We were called by the Lord, Who said to his beloved ones, *In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world* (Jn. 16:33).

Taking up our cross means courageously enduring difficult unseen

labor, agony, and torment for the sake of the Gospels as we war with our own passions, with the sin that lives in us, with the spirits of evil who vehemently make war against us and frantically attack us when we resolve to cast off the yoke of sin, and submit ourselves to the yoke of Christ. *For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, says the holy Apostle Paul, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places* (Eph. 6:12). *(For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;)* *Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ* (2 Cor. 10:4–5). After gaining victory in this unseen but laborious warfare, the Apostle exclaimed, *But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world* (Gal. 6:14).

Taking up our cross means obediently and humbly submitting ourselves to those temporary sorrows and afflictions that Divine Providence sees fit to allow against us for the cleansing away of our sins. Then the cross will serve us as a ladder from earth to heaven. The thief in the Gospels who ascended this ladder ascended from out of terrible crimes into most radiant heavenly habitations. From his cross he pronounced words filled with humility of wisdom; in humility of wisdom he entered into the knowledge of God, and through the knowledge of God, he acquired heaven. *We receive the due reward of our deeds*, he said. *Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom* (Lk. 23:41–42). When sorrows encompass us, let us also, beloved brothers and sisters, repeat the words of the good thief—words that can purchase paradise! Or like Job, let us bless the Lord who punishes us, Who is just yet merciful. *Shall we receive good at the hand of God, said this sufferer, and shall we not receive evil? As it hath pleased the Lord so is it done; blessed be the name of the Lord* (Job 2:10; 1:21). May God’s promise, which is true, be fulfilled in us: *Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him.* (Js. 1:12).

Taking up our cross means willingly and eagerly submitting ourselves to deprivations and ascetic labors, by which the irrational strivings of our flesh are held in check. The Apostle Paul had recourse to such a

crucifixion of his flesh. He says, *But I keep under* [in Slavonic: “deaden,” or “mortify”] *my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway* (1 Cor. 9:27). *They that are in the flesh*, that is, those who do not restrain their flesh, but allow it to overcome the spirit, *cannot please God* (Rom. 8:8). Therefore, though we live in the flesh, we should not live for the flesh! *For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die* (Rom. 8:12) an eternal death; *but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live* (Rom. 8:13) an eternal, blessed life. The flesh is essentially restrained by the spirit; but the spirit can only take control of the flesh and rule it when it is prepared to submit to its crucifixion. The flesh is crucified by fasting, vigil, kneeling in prayer, and other bodily labors placed upon it wisely and within measure. A bodily labor that is wise and within measure frees the body from heaviness and corpulence, refines its strength, keeps it ever light and capable of activity. *They that are Christ’s*, says the Apostle, *have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts* (Gal. 5:24). What does it mean to take up our cross, and take up specifically *our own* cross? It means that every Christian should patiently bear those very insults and persecutions from the world that come to *him*, and not any others. This means that every Christian should manfully and constantly war with those very passions and sinful thoughts that arise in him. It means that every Christian should with obedience and dedication to God’s will, with confession of God’s justice and mercy, with thankfulness to God, endure those very sorrows and deprivations that Divine Providence allows to come upon him, and not some other things painted and presented to him by his proud dreams. This means being satisfied with those bodily labors that correspond to our physical strength, the ones that our flesh require in order to keep it in order, and not to seek after increased fasting and vigil, or all other ascetic feats beyond our measure, which destroy our physical health and direct our spirit towards high self-opinion and self deceit, as St. John Climacus describes.^[2] All mankind labors and suffers upon the earth, but these sufferings differ; the passions differ that war against us, the sorrows and temptations differ that God sends us for our healing, for the cleansing away of our sins. What differences there are in people’s physical strength, in their very health! Precisely: every person has his own cross. And each Christian is commanded to accept this cross of *his own* with self-denial, and to follow Christ. He who has denied himself and taken up his own cross has made peace with himself and with his own

circumstances, with his own position both internal and external; and only he can reasonably and correctly follow Christ.

What does it mean to follow Christ? It means studying the Gospels, having the Gospels as the only guide of the activity of our mind, heart, and body. It means adapting our thoughts to the Gospels, tuning the feelings of our heart to the Gospels, and serving as an expression of the Gospels by all our deeds and movements, both secret and open. As we said before, only the person who has escaped deceit through *voluntary humility* (Col. 2:18), who has desired to obtain true humility of wisdom where it abides—in obedience and submission to God—is capable of following Christ. He who has entered into submission to God, into obedience combined with complete self-denial, has taken up *his own* cross, and accepted and confessed this cross to be *his own*.

Beloved brothers and sisters! Bowing down bodily to worship the precious Cross of the Lord today according to the rule of the Holy Church, we bow down also in spirit! We venerate the precious Cross of Christ—our weapon of victory and banner of Christ’s glory—each confessing from his own cross, “I have received the due reward of my deeds! Remember me, O Lord, when Thou comest into Thy Kingdom!” By recognizing our sinfulness with thankfulness to God and submission to His will, we make our cross—that instrument of execution and mark of dishonor—an instrument of victory and sign of glory, like unto the Cross of the Lord. Through the cross we open paradise to ourselves. Let us not allow ourselves any evil murmuring, and especially not any soul-destroying blasphemy, which is often heard from the lips of the blind and hardened sinner, who writhes and thrashes upon his cross, vainly endeavoring to escape from it. With murmuring and blasphemy the cross becomes unbearably heavy, dragging to hell the one crucified upon it. “What have I done?” cries the sinner in denial of his sinfulness, accusing the just and merciful God of injustice and mercilessness, blaming and rejecting God’s Providence. The one who saw the Son of God crucified, mockingly and evilly demanded of him, *If thou be Christ, save thyself and us* (Lk. 23:39),—*let him now come down from the cross* (Mt. 27:42). But our Lord Jesus Christ *was pleased to ascend the Cross in the flesh and to endure death*^[3] in order by the cross to make peace between God and man, and to save mankind by death from eternal death. Having prepared the holy Apostles for this great event—the incarnate God-man’s sufferings and shameful death, potent to redeem

the human race—the Lord informed the Apostles in good time that He must be given over into the hands of sinners, must suffer much, be killed, and resurrected. This forewarning seemed strange and unlikely to certain of the holy Apostles. Then the Lord called unto Him his disciples and said to them: *Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. Amen.*

Translated by Nun Cornelia (Rees)

[1] St. Symeon the New Theologian, according to the book written in verse, homily 55.

[2] *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, homily 26.

[3] Troparion to the Resurrection, tone 5.