

## The Path of True Christian Life

*By Archbishop Averky (+1976)*

*Enter ye in at the straight gate, for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it (Matthew 7:13-14).*

The Great Fast, the second half of which we have already entered, is for us a kind of school of true Christian life: it teaches us to enter the “strait gate” and to follow the “narrow way” that, in the words of Christ the Savior, “lead unto life.”

But, as with every school, benefit from its teaching can be derived only by one who studies in good conscience, attentively listening to one’s teachers and striving, with all diligence and assiduousness, to complete all assignments. So, too, in the Great Fast, one can gain genuine benefit only if one fasts in good conscience, attends to all the deeply edifying instructions of the Holy Church, and zealously strives to fulfill all that it demands of one.

Are we all such, contemporary Orthodox Christians?

May the conscience of each one of us reply!

But if we are not such, if the Great Fast is not for us a school, a course of instruction in which we study with all effort and diligence, lovingly fulfilling everything that the Holy Church teaches us, then we are far from true Christianity, we do not live a true Christian life, we bear the name “Christian” in vain, and we cannot expect anything good for ourselves.

What is the path of true Christian life that the Holy Church teaches us by means of the Great Fast?

Having shown us in the third week of the Great Fast – called that of the Adoration of the Cross – that true Christianity consists in the humble, meek, patient, and uncomplaining bearing of one’s cross and co-crucifixion with our Setter of the Contest, Christ, the Holy Church, in the second half of the Fast, graphically, vividly, and with uncommon force and comprehensibility (for those, of course, who are still capable of comprehension!), presents us with what, practically speaking, makes up the path of true Christian life.

Thus, in the fourth week of the Great Fast, our Venerable and God-bearing Father, **John of the Ladder**, the Abbot of Mt. Sinai, who is glorified by the Holy Church, convincingly shows us by his remarkable ascetic life and, simultaneously, by his wondrous written work, ***The Ladder of Divine Ascent***, that the path of true Christian life consists of the gradual ascent up the ladder of Christian perfection, through unceasing battle with sinful passions and lusts, right up to their complete uprooting from one’s soul, and through the planting in the soul of the Christian virtues opposing these passions and lusts.

There was a time when this book – astonishing in the depths of its profound fathoming of the human soul, in all its subtlest twists and most secret movements, in all its secret corners hidden from the external gaze – which is the fruit of many years of personal spiritual experience of the author, enlightened by grace from above, was the favorite reading of our pious ancestors. According to the Church’s Typicon, it should be read during the Divine services during the entire duration of the Great Fast.

But who today reads it? And how many even know of its existence?

How many “learned” courses in psychology there are, by authors of other nationalities and faiths – and atheists, at that – that we read and study! But we, for the most part, do not at all know, and do not want to know, the real, genuine, Orthodox Christian psychology, which alone gives true and exhaustive answers to all the questions of one’s spiritual life.

It is exactly here that we need to seek the solution to that terrible spiritual darkness that is growing thicker and thicker in our lives and is ready to overshadow us, casting us into that fatal abyss of eternal perdition from which there is no escape!

What good can we possibly expect for ourselves, and how can we await salvation, if we see evil only in other people, not noticing it in ourselves and therefore not engaging in, and not even desiring to engage in, any kind of battle with our sinful passions and lusts, as St. John of the Ladder teaches us; if we are satisfied with ourselves and do not consider it necessary to correct ourselves and to be zealous for planting in our souls the Christian virtues indicated by him?

How can we possibly attain genuine joy, spiritual peace and serenity, and all internal prosperity and wellbeing if, not wanting to ascend higher and higher on the wondrous ladder proposed to us by St. John, we do not renounce our inordinate attachment to everything earthly; if we do not teach ourselves to feel like “strangers and pilgrims” on this earth; if we do not want to bear the good burden of obedience, carefully fulfilling God’s commandments and hearkening to all the rules and canons of the Holy Church, instead following our own will, rebelling, and writing our own laws and rules as we happen to like them, to gratify our self-love; if we do not desire to repent when we sin, but rather to justify ourselves, considering others to be sinners guilty in all things, while we consider ourselves, like the Pharisees, to be righteous, irreproachable, and right in all things?

How can we become true Christians, ready to stand at God’s Judgment, if we do not possess the memory of death; if we do not continually weep for our sinful falls; if we do not strive by every means to restrain manifestations of anger and to be meek with all; if we nurture enmity in our hearts for our neighbors, and if we allow ourselves to speak ill and to curse them; if we generally speak much nonsense, not thinking and not training ourselves in noble silence? And – what is altogether bad – if we allow ourselves to lie in

thought, word, and deed, deceiving others, ourselves, and even trying to deceive God Himself?

We will be quite far from true Christianity if, losing faith in Divine Providence and God's infinite mercy for people, we will begin to give ourselves over to gloomy despondency and sloth, doing nothing to correct our lives and beginning to see all interest and meaning in our lives only in purely bodily pleasures: in eating and drinking; in pleasing foul carnal passions; in earning money and spending it on sinful whims; and if we forget about the lofty worthiness of chastity and non-acquisitiveness.

On what can we count if we descend, through unrestrained and insatiable service to our passions, to the perilous condition of "stony insensibility," when the spiritual world, as it were, ceases to exist for us; when everything truly beautiful and lofty seems alien to us, not plucking any string in our soul; when we begin to fall prey to sinful drowsiness, becoming incapable of all spiritual watchfulness, vigilance, and sobriety?

But the most frightful thing is when we cease to note the vainglorious movements of our soul, which feed pride; when we do not feel how this demonic pride is growing bigger and bigger in us, forcing us to hold all other people in contempt, looking down at them as insignificant compared to us; allowing ourselves to become strict, implacable, and merciless judges of other people – when we forget that the highest Christian virtue is humble-mindedness, which, as St. John of the Ladder puts it, "is the door of the Kingdom" (Step 25:30) and can "raise the soul from the abyss of sins to Heaven" (25:68).

We are not true Christians if there is not in us at least the subconscious striving towards the higher Christian virtues: to discernment; to holy stillness of body and soul; to "holy and blessed prayer, the mother of virtues" and "the attitude of mind and body in prayer"; to "Godlike dispassion," which is, as it were, "Heaven on earth" or "the resurrection of the soul before the general resurrection"; and to the "linking together of the supreme trinity of virtues: faith, hope, and love." Having attained these, one has attained to the very peak of the ladder reaching to heaven.

And such, according to the image of St. John of the Ladder, is the plan of ascent on the Christian ladder of perfection: a plan of the entire path of the true Christian life.

**The path of true Christian life, after all, is nothing other than the path of Christian perfection commanded to us by Christ the Savior Himself in His wonderful words: *Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father Which is in Heaven is perfect* (Matthew 5:48). Whoever strays from this path goes against the direct will of God.**

But what about those who, from earliest youth, have managed to defile themselves with all manner of passions and lusts, who have already managed to stagnate in a sinful and defiled life, for whom the known sins and lusts have become, as it were, "second nature" and have become habit? Have they not

definitively perished? Can they receive forgiveness from God and start out on the path of true Christian life, the path of Christian perfection?

To this question, grievous to the conscience of many, the Holy Church gives a wonderful and deeply comforting answer, celebrating in the fifth week of the Great Fast the memory of our Venerable Mother **Mary of Egypt**, who, by the power of her repentance from the greatest of sins became an angel-like righteous woman, an “angelic being” who was “astonishing” in her ascetic life. The amazing and moving Life of St. Mary, which the Church Typicon has prescribed to be read at the Divine service of the so-called “St. Andrew’s Standing” [the full reading of the Great Canon of St. Andrew of Crete], is hard to read without tears of compunction. How truly boundless is the Lord’s mercy for the sincerely repentant sinner, for one who seems to have perished hopelessly! How great is the power of true and sincere repentance!

This Life vividly and clearly demonstrates to us that there is no sin that the Lord would not forgive us, if only we repent truly and sincerely. Therefore the path of the true Christian life, the path of Christian perfection commanded us, is not closed to anyone.

As an example of such active repentance, it is not without special thought that St. Mary of Egypt, a former harlot, was chosen. Although many in our times do not impute this to be a shameful sin, one should know however that **fornication is one of the most grievous sins**. The first centuries of Christianity, when the life of Christians was distinguished by particular purity, were a time of such strictness towards this sin that those who fell into fornication were entirely cast out from the Church, just as one who had fallen away from the faith or committed murder, as unfit members defiling its purity. To the very present, according to the Apostolic and Conciliar canons, those who have committed fornication cannot be deemed worthy of the high calling of the clergy, which, according to the teaching of the Great Father of the Church, St. John Chrysostom, is higher than that of the angels; and clergy who have fallen into fornication after their ordination are deemed unworthy of performing sacred actions and are removed from their rank.

And here, regardless of the weight and criminality of this defiled sin, St. Mary, who was once “**defiled with every impurity**” has “**through repentance become the Bride of Christ, imitating the life of the angels,**” for by the profundity and sincerity of her repentance, sealed by truly superhuman ascetic struggles, she “**cast down the vengeful enemy**” and “**acquired heavenly dispassion**” (from the canon to St. Mary).

How comforting it is to hear and know this!

No matter how far we have fallen, there is always the possibility of getting up, of receiving forgiveness from God, and being found worthy of His lofty gifts of grace. One only has to desire this sincerely and, most importantly, to repent in reality. It is not yet really repentance if we go to confession to a priest, enumerate our sins (and sometimes simply listen to his instruction, repeating: “I have sinned”), listen to the prayer of absolution as it is read and, later, without any twinge of conscience, to continue our previous sinful life. **True**

**repentance should always be joined with the firm resolve to expiate our sins and radically correct our life.**

It is to such true repentance alone that the Holy Church calls us, disposing us thereto by all means through the Great Fast. But a purely formal repentance, one only mechanically brought to confession before a priest, not only does not save us or bring us any good, but can serve for even greater condemnation, as a sinful and criminal deception not only of one's spiritual father and oneself, but of the Omniscient God.

**We should witness to the sincerity of our repentance not only in word, but in very deed, by a change of life,** as we see from the example of St. Mary of Egypt.

Alas! How far from all this, from such a salutary mindset, is modern man! He often drags himself through the stench of the moral swamp of the basest passions and lusts, all the while maintaining the loftiest opinion of himself. He glances proudly from the "heights of his magnificence" on other people, demanding from them every attention, respect, and even worship, becoming irate and enraged when he does not meet therewith. And God forbid that he gets the false impression that he is the "judge" of others and if he becomes vindictive: his judgment will be merciless, and his vindictiveness will be without mercy!

**The unrelieved animal egoism and unrestrained, savage malice of such people truly know no limit.**

These are the dispositions that follow from completely bypassing the path of true Christian life, the "strait" and "narrow" way, which requires self-denial and self-renunciation in the name of fulfilling Christ's commandments. Our Motherland of Russia – which was once **Holy Russia**, for, regardless of all the sinful falls of the Russian people, when there were sins, there was also true repentance – has perished and is no more. We can say this "is no more" because, if there were real repentance now, then there would again be Russia, for God, in Whom there are no lies, promised, for the sake of ten righteous ones, to spare the city of Sodom and Gomorrah, which wallowed in uncleanness and defilement.

Worst of all is that we, who are here abroad, instead of coming to our senses and seeing the light spiritually after everything that we have endured for our sins, these terrible upheavals, have brought here that destructive anti-Christian disposition that led to Russia's fall. The vast majority of people, apparently, do not even think about the necessity of correcting themselves and setting out on the path of that true Christian life to which the Holy Church is calling us, especially now, during the Great Fast.

Do many among us keep the fast?

And if they do fast outwardly, abstaining from certain kinds of non-fasting foods (often reluctantly, grudgingly, and unhappily, as if out of propriety!), are they fasting spiritually, abstaining from sinful passions and lusts? Are they

fasting from malice, rage, and hatred? Are they fasting from vain and malicious talk, lies, and cursing? Are they fasting from fornication, overeating (for one can also overeat on fasting foods), and drunkenness? Are they fasting from all vain and spiritually unprofitable pastimes, amusements, and entertainments? In a word, from everything that makes up the wide and broad way that leads to destruction?

If we do not change ourselves in the most radical and decisive manner, seeing all this only in others and not noticing it first of all in ourselves, then all our talk about the salvation of Russia and of the terrible Satanic evil that is rushing headlong upon it and the rest of the world will be futile, fruitless, and meaningless. All our hopes for something better, for a bright future, for some kind of human progress – for the deferment of the end of the world, inevitably awaited by us – will be vain, unjustified, and pointless.

**The most important thing, that which is now most essential, is to become humble disciples, and not “judges” of our Mother: the Holy Church!**