

Dear sisters and brothers: Christ is among us!

On warmer and clearer days these past few weeks, many, many people took their cars to the car wash to clean away all the salt and dirt that had accumulated during the winter. Not only does a good washing make our cars look sharper, it also helps preserve the finish from the corrosive effects of salt. We don't throw away our vehicles because they're dirty, we clean them, make them bright and shiny again.

It's something like that with us as human beings created by God. During the first week of Lent we read that "God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness... So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.'" (Genesis 1:26-27) God makes each one of us, from our mother's womb, in His image. He leaves in us His marks as our creator. As an artist leaves their fingerprints in the paint when they compose a work of art, so God has left His fingerprints in us, so to speak. He has left in us a divine spark and a place in our hearts that only He can fill.

That divine image in us we cover over not with salt and dirt but with our sin. Sin distorts God's image in us but cannot destroy it. Sin does make it harder to see God's image in us much as the mud and salt might obscure the make of a car. There is no person who is not made in God's image. From Adolph Hitler to Mother Theresa, all are made in God's image. But it's more difficult to see that image when we clump sin all over it. We don't throw that image away because we can't see it, whether in the womb or in youth or in old age. God's image is there within us.

Though we deface God's image by our sin, we do not destroy God's image in them. God does not take back His image from His fallen creation. Rather, He planned from the beginning to restore, to renew His image in us. God did not shut us out. In the Liturgy of Saint Basil today we will hear the wondrous words, "Thou, O God...provid(ed) for (mankind) the salvation of regeneration in Thy Christ Himself...He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being likened to the body of our lowliness, that He might liken us to the image of His glory." In the tenderness of His mercy God visited us, sending prophets, giving us the Law through Moses as a guide to lead us to Himself. All leading to the coming of the Son of God among us through the Virgin Mary by the working of the Holy Spirit. The Son of God came as one of us "to restore His image which had fallen." His image in us humans which had fallen through sin and which we add to be our sin.

This restoration of God's image in us is a joint project. Christ came to restore His image in us, we for our part must turn from our sin, wash it away through our repentance, through confession of our sin and striving to live in accord with the Holy Spirit Whom the Father has sent to us. Lent is THE time for us to turn from our sin so that we may ascend in holiness and find ourselves at Pascha of the Lord as images more restored than we were last Lent. We make this journey together, as a family, and we have a family who is in heaven who pray for us to be where they are. The holy icons we see throughout the temple are of sinners who struggled against temptation with God's help. They lived lives of repentance. They lived in humility, integrity, patience and love. By this, God's image was revealed brightly in them. People clearly saw in them saints, holy ones of God. People saw in them Christ whose image radiated from them. Saint John the Baptist, he's what the image of Christ looks like in him. The Theotokos, she's what the image of Christ looks like in her.

On this First Sunday of Lent when we remember the restoration of the holy icons, the holy images, in the life of the Church, we call to mind that we are living icons, living images of Christ, who also need to be restored. Who need to clean away the dust and the dirt and the salt of sin with which we cover ourselves so that our original beauty may be renewed in us: the image of God in which He created us. We look to the holy icons of the saints around us, those who made God's image shine in them by their prayer, their lives of compassion and mercy. They look to us to join them in the beauty of the heavenly kingdom so that with them as one Body of Christ we may worship eternally the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.