

Dear sisters and brothers: Christ is among us!

Today brings us to the middle Sunday of Lent; two Sundays are past and only two more Sundays remain before we enter into the week of our Lord Jesus' passion and resurrection. We are traveling the path of "bright sadness", sadness in that we mourn before God over our sins yet bright in that such sorrow brings forgiveness and the Light of Life. Repenting we come to a bright day today, the Sunday of the Cross. After three weeks of increased fasting, increased prayer at services and at home, increased giving to the poor the Cross of Christ is given to us for encouragement, as the sign of Christ's victory already won for us.

Last night at Vespers we sang, "Come, O Adam and Eve, our first father and mother, who fell from the choir on high, through the envy of the murderer of man! When of old with bitter pleasure you tasted from the tree in Paradise. See, the Tree of the Cross, revered by all, draws near. Run with haste and embrace it joyfully, and cry to it with faith: O precious Cross...partaking of thy fruit, we have gained incorruption; we are restored once more to Eden, and we have received great mercy."

The Cross of Christ makes us look back to the tree of Paradise. God commanded Adam, saying "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." (2:16-17) God asked Adam to obey this simple command. But the serpent, the envious murderer of man, tempted Eve to disobey, telling her that if she eats of the fruit "You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (3:4-5)

It was in Paradise at the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that sin came into the world. Adam and Eve failed to love God as they ought. Rather, filled with self-love they sought to make themselves gods. By partaking of the fruit of this tree in Paradise they brought sin into the world and with sin, death. Instead of food bringing life, eating the fruit of the tree brought death to all the race of Adam and Eve.

The disobedience of Adam and Eve had to be undone from within, from within our humanity. The Son of God had to come among us in order to redeem us from the sin of Adam and Eve in Paradise. It was there, in the garden of delight which God made for them, that our first parents came to a tree brimming with life and with fruit and, disobeying God's command, they ate from it. It is this turning away from God that brought death, symbolized by the eating of the fruit of the forbidden tree. Jesus Christ is the new Adam who is obedient to His Father in all things being "obedient unto death, even death on a cross" as Saint Paul writes (Philippians 2:8).

And, as we pray at Saint Basil's Liturgy, "(Christ) lived in this world and gave us commandments of salvation; releasing us from the delusions of idolatry." Jesus came to give us the path to life if we but follow Him. The delusion of idolatry is the delusion Adam and Eve had, that they were gods, separate from God Himself, taking His place.

Jesus undoes Adam's disobedience by dying upon the Cross on Calvary. By a tree we were condemned in Paradise; Jesus takes up the tree that is for us salvation. The Cross of Christ, the tree of life, the tree of the new Paradise, becomes the fount of all blessings, the source of all graces. Where eating the fruit of a living tree in Paradise brought death, Christ, by taking up the dead wood of the Cross, gives Himself to us as the fruit of life, His Body and Blood for us to eat and drink unto the remission of sins and life everlasting.

And Jesus calls us to follow His path of love saying, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." (Luke 9:23) Jesus speaks of self-denial which is what Adam and Eve failed to do. God told them one thing but the serpent tempted them and they did not deny themselves the pleasure of the forbidden fruit. And so they

were cast out of Paradise. Jesus calls us to deny ourselves that is, to change our lives from ones of sin to ones of virtue through Him. One of the early Christian authors wrote, "A man also denies himself when...he changes a life of habitual wickedness. (For example) He who has long lived in debauchery, abandons his lustful self when he becomes chaste, and in like manner forsaking any sin is a denial of one's self." (Origen) It is a denial of the old Adam in us, that part of us that delights in sin. Jesus means that when we turn from our sins, we then come after Him, the new Adam Who has won the victory for us already by His death upon the Cross.

Let us continue the last three weeks of the fast renewed in our spiritual struggle knowing that we have one who has trod the path of following God's will before us, the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ who shouldered the wood of His Cross before us and in our stead, giving "Himself as a ransom to death in which we were held captive, sold under sin, descending through the Cross to Death that He might fill all things with Himself." (Saint Basil's Liturgy)