

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ: Christ is among us!

Before any of us receives the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, we first pray together, in the first person singular, "I believe, O Lord, and I confess that Thou art truly the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Who camest into the world to save sinners, of whom I am first." We make our own St. Paul's confession to St. Timothy today "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners." (1 Timothy 1:15) We all pray this prayer, all of the baptized, clergy and faithful alike. We each call ourselves the first among sinners.

By praying in this way, we ask God to see everyone else before ourselves. As we hear during the first week of Great Lent, "More than all men have I sinned, I alone have sinned against Thee. But as God take pity on Thy creation, O Savior (Ode 2); I alone have sinned against Thee, I have sinned more than all men. Reject me not, O Christ my Savior." (Ode 3)

We make ourselves the first among sinners. This means that we are not busy judging nor condemning others, rather we see every person as one with us, not outside of us, but one as we share in one humanity and the one sin of the world which the Lamb of God came to take away (John 1:29). We see ourselves as the root of pain in the world. "We must pray for other people with contrition and pain in our soul. We can only achieve this if, due to our humbleness, we consider ourselves the cause of all the problems in the world." So says Saint Paisios the Athonite, a saint of our times, who fell asleep in the Lord in 1994. We rather condemn ourselves before God, judge ourselves, and ask God to save our neighbor and our enemy first. This may sound strange to our ears but it is the truth of God Who came to us to save us though we sin against Him daily.

St. Peter of Damascus asks us about our love of our neighbor: "If we are not willing to sacrifice this temporal life, or perhaps even the life to come, for the sake of our neighbor, as were Moses and St. Paul, how can we say that we love him? For Moses said to God concerning his people, 'If Thou wilt forgive their sins, forgive; but if not, blot me as well out of the book of life which Thou hast written' (Ex. 32:32 LXX); while St. Paul said, 'For I could wish that I myself were severed from Christ for the sake of my brethren' (Rom. 9:3). He prayed, that is to say, that he should perish in order that others might be saved — and these others were the Israelites who were seeking to kill him. Such are the souls of the saints: they love their enemies more than themselves, and in this age and in the age to come they put their neighbor first in all things, even though because of his ill-will he may be their enemy. They do not seek recompense from those whom they love, but because they have themselves received they rejoice in giving to others all that they have, so that they may conform to their Benefactor and imitate His compassion to the best of their ability; 'for He is bountiful to the thankless and to sinners.' (cf. Luke 6:35)." (*A Treasury of Divine Knowledge*, 1)

We are not to hate anyone or anything. We are not to hate at all. We are not to nurture hate in our heart and mind. Love cannot dwell in a heart that hates, regardless of where that hate is directed. God, Who is love and only love, cannot share His temple with the devil. The attitude of hate can have no place in us. St. Ammonas put it beautifully when he said, "Without [love], as the Apostle says, even if we spoke with the languages of the Angels, and had all the right faith, and moved mountains, and gave all we have to the poor, and gave the body to martyrdom, we would gain nothing. But perhaps you would say, 'and how can one give all that one has to the poor, if one doesn't have love, for mercy is love'? Mercy is not perfect love, but only a part of love. Many show mercy to others, and others they wrong, to others they show hospitality, against others they remember evil, some they shelter, others they abuse, have compassion on strangers, and hate their own. Therefore this is not love, it is not, for love does not hate anyone, does not reprove anyone, does not condemn anyone, does not grieve anyone, does not denigrate anyone, neither believer, nor non-believer, nor stranger, nor sinner, nor fornicator, nor the impure, but rather it loves even more the sinners, and the weak, and the careless, and is in pain for them, and grieves, and cries, and suffers with the wicked and sinner

more than with the righteous, imitating Christ, Who called the sinners and ate and drank with them. For this, showing what the love for others is, He taught saying, 'Be good and have pity, like our Father Who is in heaven!' And even as He sends rain over the evil and the good, and makes the sun rise over the righteous and unrighteous, so the one who truly has love loves all, has mercy on all, and prays for all." (*Bibliotheke Hellenon Pateron kai Ekklesiastikon Suggrapheon*, pages 60-61, translation by Fr. Silviu Bunta)

And Saint Seraphim of Sarov counsels us, "You cannot be too gentle, too kind. Shun even to appear harsh in your treatment of each other. Joy, radiant joy, streams from the face of him who gives and kindles joy in the heart of him who receives....All condemnation is from the devil. Never condemn each other...instead of condemning others, strive to reach inner peace...Keep silent, refrain from judgment. This will raise you above the deadly arrows of slander, insult, and outrage and will shield your glowing hearts against all evil."

This is the path of divine love, of the love God the Father has for us, His sinful children, a love that gifted us with His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. A love which sees every person as one with us, whether friend or enemy. This we pray as we end our litanies to God that we promise "our whole *life* to Christ our God." Our whole life, singular. Before we pray the Lord's Prayer, "we commend our whole *life*" to God. We (plural) commit our life (singular) to God. We ask that we (plural) "may complete the remaining time of our *life* (singular) in peace and repentance." This we must make real in our lives. Though it may seem impossible yet it is possible by God's grace. Moses told God he'd rather be crossed out of the book of life for the sake of the sinful Israelites. St. Paul wrote St. Timothy that he'd gladly be cast out from God for the sake of those who were trying to kill him. Such is the power of God's love in the saints. And saints is who God calls each of us to be through the grace of the Holy Spirit alive in us.