

## **Perfect Love (and Repentance) Casts out Fear**

Fr. Hector Firoglanis – Sunday, May 3, 2020

This past Friday, Fr. Luke Veronis sent out an email that included a Facebook post that offered a Little Perspective to the challenges we are facing in our world today:

*"For a small amount of perspective at this moment, imagine you were born in 1900. On your 14th birthday, World War I starts, and ends when you are 18. Later in the year, a Spanish Flu epidemic hits the planet and runs until your 20th birthday. On your 29th birthday, the Great Depression begins. Unemployment hits 25%, the World GDP drops 27%. That runs until you are 33. The country nearly collapses along with the world economy. When you turn 39, World War II starts. You aren't even over the hill yet. And don't try to catch your breath. On your 41st birthday, the United States is fully pulled into WWII until you are 45. At 50, the Korean War starts. At 55 the Vietnam War begins. When you are 62 the Cuban Missile Crisis threatens to end life on our planet as we know it. When you turn 75, the Vietnam War finally ends."*

Obviously, that's a tough life for anyone who was born around 1900. But a person born 100 years later in 2000 will already have experienced in their first 20 years of life: the September 11 Attacks, the Great Recession of 2007, and now the Great Pandemic of 2020. The reality is that since the time of the Fall, human history has been full of heartache and hardship.

Our Lord Jesus Christ did not come to end suffering in this life, but to prepare us for His eternal Kingdom, where ***"God will wipe all tears from [our] eyes, and there will be no more death, suffering, crying, or pain"*** (Rev. 21:4).

But our Lord tells us: ***"In this world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world"*** (John 16:33).

In the events leading up to our Lord's Crucifixion, we see reactions of fear and of courage. When confronted with hardship and dangers in this world, what is it that makes some people respond with fear while others respond with courage?

To help answer this question today we look to the foot of the Cross where we see the courage of St. John the Evangelist, the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and the other Myrrh-Bearing women whom we celebrate on this Second Sunday after Pascha.

What gives them their courage is their love, and in the case of Mary Magdalene, her repentance. During these uncertain time, it is repentance and love that will give us courage. As St. John the Theologian – whose feast day we celebrate this Friday – writes:

*“There is no fear in love; but perfect love (and repentance) casts out fear” (1 John 4:18).*

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But not everyone had this courage. When Christ was arrested, the Apostle Peter was overcome with fear and even denied the Lord three times.

The rest of the Disciples likewise scattered and remained in hiding until the first appearance of the Resurrected Lord – which we read about last week on the Sunday of Thomas.

At the time leading up to our Lord’s betrayal, the Disciples were still thinking with a worldly frame of mind. They were hoping to secure for themselves a place of honor at the Lord’s coming Kingdom. They were still worried about worldly pursuits and ambitions, and were not yet adopting the mind of Christ that is characterized by humility, service, and love.

As a result, when things began to unravel, they ran and hid in fear.

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During these times of hardship we find ourselves in today, the illusion of human control and self-sufficiency is being exposed.

This week as we watched and read the news, we saw and heard how the Pandemic is now beginning to disrupt the supply chain. We are starting to see cracks in the very system which feeds over 300 million people each day in the United States. Things that we have never imagined are now becoming a distinct reality.

If we don’t have a strong faith in God, we can easily be overcome by feelings of insecurity and fear.

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Going back to our Lord’s crucifixion, we can learn how to overcome our fears by looking at the example of those who courageously stood by Christ till the very end: His Mother, the most Holy Theotokos; St. John the Evangelist, the Apostle of love; and St. Mary Magdalene, Equal to the Apostles.

The distinguishing characteristic of all three is that they all loved Christ tremendously. Of course, the Virgin Mary and St. John had a great love for Christ.

In the case of Mary Magdalene, she is distinguished by her repentance and her love. The Gospel tells us nothing of Mary Magdalene's younger years, but Tradition informs us that Mary of Magdala was young and pretty, and that she led a sinful life. It says in the Gospels that the Lord expelled seven devils from Mary (Luke. 8:2). From the moment of her healing Mary led a new life and became a true disciple of the Savior.

In the Gospel of Luke chapter 7, right before the mention of Mary Magdalene, we see a sinful woman approach Christ from behind to repent for her sins while the Lord is at a supper with Pharisees. Christ uses the occasion to teach some Pharisees a lesson by saying: ***"There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?"***

Simon the Pharisee answered and said, ***"I suppose the one whom he forgave more."*** And Jesus said to him, ***"You have rightly judged."*** Then referring to the sinful woman who washed His feet, Jesus said: ***"Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little."*** (Luke 7:41-47).

This passage has much to teach us about repentance, love, and courage. When we are aware of our sinfulness, instead of worrying about the sins of others, we repent more fervently. The more we repent for our sins, the more we love God for the great debt he has forgiven for us.

This love for Christ turns into courage, as the sinful woman displayed when she went – uninvited – to the home of a Pharisee to wash the Lord's feet with her tears and wipe them with her hair. The Pharisees were scandalized; but our Lord was moved by her love and courage.

Repentance, love, and courage are again linked together after the Resurrection, when the Resurrected Lord asks the penitent Peter three times: ***"Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?"*** He asked three times to restore him after his three denials of Christ. St. Peter repented for his denials, affirmed his love for Christ – ***"Yes Lord, You know that I love You"*** (John 21:15) – and went on to become a courageous and fearless Apostle of the Lord until he also was crucified – upside down – in Rome.

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We all want courage – especially during times of uncertainty and fear – but as we see from the Holy Scriptures and testimony of our Saints, courage is cultivated by repentance and love.

The courage of the Virgin Mary, the Myrrh-Bearing Women, St. John the Evangelist, the repentant St. Peter, St. Mary Magdalene, and all the Apostles and Saints and Martyrs throughout history was in every person cultivated by their repentance and love for Christ.

I think of holy people like St. Paisios who spent most of his life repenting for his sins and growing in his love for Christ. During the Greek civil war he served as a radio operator and would always volunteer for the most dangerous missions.

**“It would be better,”** Said Elder Paisios, **“for me to die than the other soldier, than to have my conscience killing me for the rest of my life. How could I endure that?”** His repentance enflamed his love for God. His love for God enflamed his love for his neighbor. And this allowed St. Paisios to live a life of courage and fulfillment – as opposed to a life of fear and self-preservation.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, this is the model for our lives – this is the model of Life revealed by God.

This Pandemic is likely exposing our spiritual weaknesses, our fears, and our sins. Glory to God. May this Pandemic become our opportunity for a deeper repentance – a deeper change of our lives. Now that the illusion of human control and security in this life has been exposed, let us run to God in repentance and begin a new life that truly puts Christ first as **“our rock, in whom we take refuge”** (Psalm 18:2).

This deeper repentance will enflame our heart with a deeper love for God. With this love, we will desire to obey our Lord’s commandments, the first of which is to love our neighbor.

We must be alert during these times, responding to the spiritual, emotional, and material needs of others around us with a spirit of charity. Within the next few weeks we will be starting a food box distribution from our church and will require some young healthy volunteers to help with safely distributing them to those in need.

Let us repent, and let us cultivate love for God and our neighbor during this time, and divine courage will drive all fear, anxiety, and uncertainty from our hearts – just as it did for St. Peter, St. John, the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and the rest of the Myrrh-Bearing Women whom we commemorate on this Second Sunday after Pascha.

May we have their prayers, and during these uncertain times, may we continue to cultivate repentance, love, and courage within our hearts.

Christ is Risen!

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Στην εποχή μας που υπάρχει φόβο και αβεβαιότητα, η εκκλησία μας δίνει στην δεύτερη Κυριακή μετά το Πάσχα τις μυροφόρες Γυναίκες. Οι Μυροφόροι Γυναίκες είχαν θάρρος επειδή είχαν αγάπη για τον Χριστό. Όπως γράφει ο Απόστολος Ιωάννης, **«Η τέλεια αγάπη έξω βάλλει τον φόβον»** (1 Ιω. 4'18).

Με μετάνοια και προσευχή, να καλλιεργούμε τέτοια αγάπη για τον Θεό και τον συνάνθρωπό μας, και θα αποβάλλουμε τον φόβο από την καρδιά μας και θα έχουμε αντί αυτό την ειρήνη και το Θάρρος του Χριστού. Χριστός Ανέστη! Αληθώς Ανέστη! Αμήν.