



Orthodox Mission of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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On Repentance Before Death Week of November 4, 2012

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

"There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Laz'arus, full of sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table; moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried; and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off and Laz'arus in his bosom. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Laz'arus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Laz'arus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"

One of the teachings of the Holy Orthodox Church that has troubled many people is the teaching that there is no repentance after death, that the only time for repentance is now in our lifetime. We think, *How can it be that God will not show mercy to sinners after death? How can it be that some wind up in the presence of the saints in heaven, while others go somewhere else, into a place of suffering and distress? How can the all-merciful God allow this to happen?*

I have often asked these things myself, as have not a few of the Fathers. And yet, the Church is clear in her teaching that the time for repentance is now, in this life; the time for our salvation is the present moment. **Now**, as St. Paul taught so very clearly, *is the acceptable time*. **Now**, during our lifetime on earth, before the day we die, is the time of repentance.

In our Lord's parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus that we heard on Sunday we heard the words of the Master Himself speaking of a man who refused to change, even when he went to Hades, the place of torment and suffering, distant and separated from those who had come into joy. Even there in Hades, after seeing the beggar Lazarus resting on the Bosom of Abraham, the Rich Man, who is unnamed (because he is really like every man) continues to treat him like a slave. One would think that if he had truly come to his senses, seeing the place of torment in which his sins had placed him, he would have begged for Lazarus' forgiveness. But he does not. Instead, he asks Abraham to send Lazarus back to bring him refreshment and to warn his family; he continues to treat Lazarus as a lackey, even though he is confronted in the presence of God with the gravity of his own sin.

This is the way we are. We become the kind of people who will not change because of years of self-serving choices made over and over again. We serve ourselves repeatedly, struggling for the good things of life for ourselves and our own (even the rich man in Hades was concerned for his own, his family). But we miss the mark of how God created us to be. Remember what our Lord said about Moses and the prophets? How the Rich Man's family had them, Moses and the prophets, to guide them? How they would not come to repentance and faith even if someone were to rise from the death if they would not come to repentance and faith through Moses and the prophets? The substance of the law and the prophets was the love of God and the love of neighbor; and, our Lord repeatedly taught that our neighbor is anyone in need – **anyone and everyone**. If we do not heed that message now, in this life, struggling with all our heart and with all our mind and with all our soul to become the kind of people who love and serve others in need, then we too will eventually become like the rich man in the parable: Eventually, through our repeated self-service, we become the kind of people who will never be changed; eventually we become like the Rich Man in the parable, a man cemented into a personality congealed in self-service, the kind of man who even when he is confronted with the horror of his own sin, continues to treat others with contempt, even as he, the rich man, continued to treat the beggar like his own slave: *Father Abraham, ... send Laz'arus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue....* .

Let us not misunderstand. It is not that God is hard or merciless. God is truly All-Merciful; it is His will that all should be saved. But by the time we come to the end of our lives, so many of us have become so accustomed to living with our sin that we simply refuse to change. And repentance, Brothers and Sisters, is all about the will to change. Who among us then can be saved? The disciples asked our Lord this very question. And the answer is really the key to understanding it all. With man, Jesus said, it is truly impossible; but, *with God all things are possible*.

If you would be the kind of person that the Lord created you to be, then you can do only one thing. Only if you beg Him like a peasant on your knees with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength to give you the grace of repentance – only then can there be any hope. For left to ourselves,

Brothers and Sisters, we will all quite frankly wind up like the Rich Man in the parable, enjoying the good things of life while others around us suffer, failing to see the beggar at our gate, the man who needs a friend, the woman who is mistreated, the child who is alone, the student who wants to be accepted, the youth who struggles to fit in or find his way in life – failing in short to be the kind of people who belong in paradise with the saints. And God loves us so much that He allows us to be where we insist on being: those like the Rich Man from the parable would be unhappy, miserable in paradise, for there they could not devote their time to the exercise of their own will and to the fulfillment of their own comfort; there, in paradise, they would live as Christ created them to live – entirely for others.

If you cannot be satisfied without the fulfillment of this hope – to live entirely for others – then you are truly blessed; God will give you the desire of your heart. If you are aware of your inability to change, then you are doubly blessed; for you know how impossible it is for you to achieve what you desire. Ask, therefore, and you will receive; knock and the door will be opened. Do not depend on your own strength or your own good will to be saved; depend entirely on God's will to save you, and ask Him repeatedly to make you the kind of person who lives for others, even as our Lord Jesus Christ lives for others. Then and only then will the impossible will be made possible for you. Repentance will begin, and the eternal path from glory unto glory will truly begin for you as well.

Remember what the LORD has done for you! Give Him thanks and praise! *Glory to His NAME for all things!* Pray for me, His most unworthy of priests.

In Christ our true God,

+Fr. Elias

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