

In the Gospel reading for the 2nd Sunday of the Great Fast we hear once again the story of the sick man who is brought by his friends to Jesus. There are many good lessons that can be learned through reflection upon this text, but the one that has always stood out for me is this powerful image of what Christian friendship is all about.

Here in the Great Lent this Good News lesson reminds me of our Christian duty to help each other draw near to Christ. How can we fail to also notice that in bringing their friend to Jesus these men are also bringing themselves to Him? Here again is the lesson that we heard some weeks ago during our preparation for the Fast: "insomuch as you do unto others, so do you unto Me."

St. John Cassian echoes this same truth when he writes, "It is useless to boast of our fasting, vigils, poverty( alms-giving), and reading of Scripture, when we have not achieved the love of God and of our fellow men." What

great reminders of the true goal of all our Lenten labors.

So, how's it going? Hopefully by now God will have visited us all with some helpful afflictions or unexpected troubles that can help upset the apple carts of our spiritual complacency and self-satisfactions. This is, of course, beyond any difficulties we may have with the Lenten exercises themselves. I have been fortunate in receiving several such "blows from Heaven" myself. Such trials are always painful, especially to our ego's but are absolutely necessary if we expect to make any real spiritual progress.

A good example of how this works can be found in Met. Anthony Bloom's book *Beginning to Pray*. In it, he tells the story about a certain monk who was an "irascible man", quick to argue and quarrel and who was prone to having violent bouts of anger. By God's Grace this man somehow came to the point where he realized that he was the one with the problem. So he went into the Church and fell down before the Icon of Christ. With tears he

pleaded that the Lord would free him from his passion of anger. He stayed like that for along time, until he felt some consolation in his soul, then left the temple full of hope for his deliverance.

It chanced then, that the first person he met was one of the few monks who had never aroused the slightest bit of anger in him. For the first time, however, this monk was offensive and unpleasant to him. Boiling with anger the next monk he encountered was a man who had always been kind and respectful to him. This man also spoke gruffly to him.

In great distress the monk ran back to the temple and again falling on his face before the Lord complaining "Lord, have I not prayed that you deliver me from this anger?" And the Lord answered him, saying, "Yes, my dear one, and for that reason I am multiplying the occasions to learn."

Met. Anthony goes on to say that "it is important for us to realize that God will act in this way...when we ask for something in our prayer we should

expect that we will have to do our utmost, putting all of our strength, intelligence, courage and enthusiasm into our actions." He reminds us that "God will not crucify himself for us every day."

Of course it is not just the more obviously irascible types of people that have this kind of problem. Few of us have learned how to endure without anger, insults, disrespect, ingratitude, injustice and interference from others, Deny us our favorite foods, amusements or other comforts and we can all become quite irritable, even cranky.

Lets all try to be careful about this as we move more deeply into the Fast. Lets guard against allowing ourselves to become upset with each other, for any reason, to take offense or believe that it is somehow our "Christian duty" to correct others. If other peoples sins are unpleasant in our eyes or cause us inconvenience or even real suffering, lets try to remember that this is exactly what St. Paul is talking about when he exhorts us to "bear one

another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.'

All of us are suffering trials and tribulations that most other people know nothing about. Helping our Brothers and Sisters come to Christ is not about "us" correcting "them" but rather about Him healing us all.