

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Christ is in our midst!

Today is the Second Sunday of our Lenten struggle. As many of you know, with all of the Sundays in Lent, we have the Epistle and Gospel readings along with a special commemoration. And just like last week, we celebrate another 'triumph of Orthodoxy' as the Church holds before us St. Gregory Palamas.

St. Gregory was born into a noble family in Constantinople in the early 1300 and after the early death of his father he was taken under the wings of the Emperor (Andronikos II) and educated in the best institutions where St. Gregory excelled. The Emperor hoped that St. Gregory would continue the work of his late father in the Imperial Court, but after the completion of his education St. Gregory chose the monastic life settling on Mt Athos in around 1318. St. Gregory wrote many treatises and sermons but is remembered most for his successful debate before several Councils with a Western Scholastic philosopher, Barlaam. Barlaam believed that philosophers had better knowledge of God than did the prophets (or even the Apostles) and he asserted that education and learning had much more value than contemplative prayer. He contended that God was completely unknowable and Barlaam was scandalized by the hesychastic way of life of the monastics who believed that they might be granted an experience of God if they purified themselves through asceticism and quieted their minds and hearts through prayer. So, Barlaam began to attack this them and this premise through his writings. St. Gregory asserted that the prophets had the much greater knowledge of God because they had actually seen or heard God directly. St. Gregory drew an important distinction that it is impossible to know the transcendent and unknowable God in his **essence** but certainly possible to know God in his **energies** as God reveals himself thus to humanity. He further asserted that when the Apostles Peter, James, and John witnessed the Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor, they were in fact seeing the uncreated light of God; and that it is possible for others to be granted to see that same uncreated light of God with the help of repentance, spiritual discipline, and contemplative prayer - although it is not somehow automatically granted or achieved mechanically.

Now some of us may be thinking that these guys really had too much time on their hands to be discussing and arguing about these distinctions – who knows God better prophets or devout, learned philosophers. But all kidding aside, just like a builder will be very careful regarding the foundation of a skyscraper, so the foundational principles in our life in Christ need to be clearly articulated. Otherwise a gradual shifting or drifting away from the Truth occurs, leading eventually to wide divergences that may result in falling away from Christ entirely through heresy and schism.

To appreciate the importance of St. Gregory's contribution, we need to remember that we are created in the image and likeness of God. With that image is the inborn capacity to know, experience, and commune with God on a personal and intimate basis. But it is up to us to prepare ourselves by becoming more 'like' unto God. All of you must remember PID – purification, illumination, deification. If we did not have the

capacity to experience God and commune with him, then illumination and deification would not be possible. Now although we may think illumination and deification is not likely for us personally, we none-the-less recognize deification in those we call Saints who have been imbued so completely with the energies of the Holy Spirit that their earthly bodies do not decompose but are incorrupt, or their bodies may exude fragrant myrrh that often has healing properties, or some other unexplainable, miraculous quality. Those of us who have taken pilgrimages to Orthodox countries or visited St. John of San Francisco's relics can attest to this being quite true.

But as St. Gregory also pointed out, experiencing God in this way is not something that happens automatically but takes both great effort on our part and merciful condescension on God's part. This is the opportunity we have in Great Lent.

Now, we just finished up with the winter Olympics in South Korea. Regardless of whether you are an Olympics fan or not, or whether your favorite athletes won, everyone has to admire the single focused commitment that many, if not all, these athletes make simply to get to this competition. I remember hearing one interview with an American cross country skier who talked a little about her preparations. She had been in training over 14 years, dedicating her entire life to improving in this sport. She would ski 6-8 hours a day in the winter months – long distance skiing sprinkled with intense interval training. Then she would hit the gym for muscle strengthening, followed by additional specific exercises for another several hours. Even in the off season she would run a minimum of 6 hours a day and continue the workouts in the gym. She does this every day of the week except one when she completely rests. She works with coaches, trainers, and other professionals to try to find any little flaw in her technique or make improvements in her routine to make her time better. She is willing to make any adjustment necessary or lifestyle change in order to improve her time because a race (or medal) can be determined by a second or even a fraction of a second. She eats over 4,000 calories of food per day and sometimes simply gets tired of chewing. And let's not forget the time and expense to travel to races and getting there early to acclimatize. She has been doing this for 14 years -all to win an Olympic medal. And this is just for cross-country skiing. I hear the regimen for the curlers is even more intense.

I bring this up not simply because the Olympics just finished but because it struck me that all these athletes were so dedicated, for such long periods of time, to try to be their best. And it made me consider how much more worthy a goal it is to have a relationship with God –my creator and the creator and sustainer of the universe. So, it made me ask the question of myself, what I am willing to do?

In today's Gospel we have an inspiring example of what some were willing to do. (This is such an inspiring example that one of the icons in our Church is dedicated to the remembrance of this event.) We have before us a man who was paralyzed, could not walk on his own but was confined to his bed. He had heard that Jesus, the healer who had cured many, was coming back into town and he knew this was his chance. So, it

was arranged that 4 of his friends would carry him on his bed to see this healer. That in itself is quite an undertaking. Ask yourself if you have 4 friends that would do something comparable for you? Continuing, when they arrive at the location where Jesus is to be, the place was so packed that there was no way that they were going to be able to get even close to Jesus. For most people, this might have been the end of the story – sorry but we should have planned better, came earlier, been willing to spend the extra money to buy front row seats. But these men would not let this serious, almost seemingly insurmountable, obstacle stop them. And we know the story. They climbed up on the roof of someone else's house, took it apart, and lowered their friend right in front of Jesus. These guys are friends who go the distance.

Now I want to draw our attention to two important elements – one is the heroic effort of all these men to bring their paralyzed friend to the Lord. The second, is that all their efforts brought their friend to the brink of healing. But it was the Lord himself, who in His love and mercy for us and this man, brought about his healing. So too it is with us, the Church puts before us this season of the Fast – Great Lent – so that we willingly and consciously make efforts to bring ourselves before the Lord. We fast in body and mind, make efforts to attend Church more often, put aside at least some of our worldly entertainments and pleasures, focus more on prayer and reading. Our efforts are a necessary and important element, but it is the Lord alone who in his love and mercy will provide the healing. It is also noteworthy that in seeing the faith of all these men, Jesus healed the paralytic spiritually first by forgiving his sins and then healed his physical malady. Too often we come to the Lord wanting our outer circumstances to change thinking that those circumstances are the sole reason for our being unhappy or unfulfilled. But the Lord knew better with this man and knows better with us – often waiting until our hearts are healed and free before changing our outer circumstance. – but that is another sermon just by itself.

So, I encourage everyone, take advantage of this season, make an extra effort, do what you can – then do just a little more – not for vanity or even as a challenge, but as an effort to draw closer to Christ's presence which, as St. Gregory Palamas articulated, is available to each and every one of us. Amen.