

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

St. John Climacus.

St. John Climacus is commemorated here on the Fourth Sunday of the Great Fast as a model and teacher of repentance. His book, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, is a timeless classic of the spiritual life. However, the average Orthodox parishioner these days can find it very difficult to read or apply to their own life. Partly this is because it was written for monastics but also because many Orthodox these days have lost touch with the Ascetic dimension of their own Faith.

Recently a very readable commentary on the Ladder has been published to help modern people - *Thirty Steps to Heaven*, from Ancient Faith Publishing. Reading the original Ladder, however, is still best. St. John's wealth of practical experience, great stories, pithy sayings and even humor are well worth the effort. One of my personal favorites is his comment about our tendency to work at some kind of self denial and then take a break, rewarding

ourselves with the very thing we've been struggling against. St John writes, "You can't drive a dog away by throwing bread at it."

I wondered if St. John had any counsel for us as we prepare for our Lenten confessions here towards the last days of the fast. Of course everything in the Ladder has relevance - it is a manual of Repentance. In reading his comments on confession specifically, however, it became clear to me that the kind of confession he was familiar with was rather different than what is commonly practiced in the Orthodox Church today. Still, I think that the Ladder has much to teach us about confession.

St. John was very much a pragmatist - he was interested in results. In particular he was interested in describing the therapies that actually worked for bringing about the healing of the soul. We should remember also that these therapies were specifically those for people who had already become Orthodox Christians and were seeking to "work out their salvation, in fear and

trembling"

One of the first things we might notice in the ladder is that there is no mention of anything "Sacramental" about confession. That was a much later development. St John, although an Abbot, was not a priest, nor were most monastics at that time. There was a continuation of the much earlier practice that we hear of in the Epistle of St. James where the Apostle tells the Christians that they must "confess your sins to one another."

This kind of confession was "before God" but not exclusively "to" God. It was first of all a confession to other Christians and to the Church community. God's overall forgiveness had already been given in the Sacraments of Baptism Chrismation and Holy Communion. If, during such a confession, a sin was revealed that might imperil the person's ability to remain in the Eucharistic Community as a communicant, that would be referred to the Bishop (just as it traditionally is done today) for possible temporary

excommunication and ecclesiastical penance.

Confession within the Eucharistic Community was therefore a natural and necessary component of a common and communal striving to repent of our former way of life and establishing the new Christian way of life, which is following Christ's commandments. Public confession would then, ideally, inspire prayerful compassion and mutual support in the common spiritual struggle. Even today there are remnants of this ideal, found for example in the rite of mutual forgiveness that concludes the daily church service of Compline and the wonderful service of Forgiveness Sunday.

By St. John's time, in the sixth century, this practice of public confession had largely disappeared due to the influx of nominal Christians after the establishment of Christianity as the State Religion of the Roman Empire. One of the real downsides of this was the rather rapid loss of the spirit of mutual struggle and accountability and the tendency towards the privatization of

ones spiritual life. The explosive growth of the monastic movement was very much a reaction to these developments.

Please forgive me if this is turning into something of a history lesson.. My purpose here is to try and revive the awareness of confession being not only to God but to each other. As Christians we need the continuing forgiveness of God and of our Brothers and Sisters in the Parish Community. There is no such thing as a "private" confession. That is a contradiction in terms. Neither is there any such thing as private sin unless we really mean concealed sin. Sin not only transgresses the commandments of Christ but also injures the sinner and at the very least deprives the community of positive help and the whole world of the blessings that might otherwise have been possible

Much of this seems to have gotten lost to the point that many Orthodox today regard confession to be a totally private matter. In one sense it is - the priest may not reveal a confession. But, he is there as a witness, not for God

who doesn't need one, but for the community that does. His witness of our confession helps the other people of the parish have confidence that we too are seriously working towards building up the Christian life in ourselves and thus also doing our part to make real our new identity as members of the body of Christ.

As we are preparing for our Lenten confessions I would ask everyone to think about this. Do you remember the joy we all felt at the Forgiveness Sunday Vespers? Perhaps you also remember an initial reluctance. Now that the "State Religion" phase of Christian history is coming to an end all over the world, maybe it will be possible to revive the reality of the Parish Community as a real Eucharistic Community of people committed to loving Christ and each other.

May God grant it - and let's help him do it!

Fr. Philip.