

11-24-19 We Only Grow in Times of Struggle

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I bring blessings and greetings from Father Allan Boyd and Father Basil Rhodes, who I saw both yesterday at a Don D'arms' funeral in San Jose. It was a wonderful gathering, small, very, very similar in spirit to burying our beloved Nectaria. Don was such a great servant and it's often at the end of somebody's life that you find out really how incredibly consistent they were in the virtue that they've practiced. It was a wonderful time together. So greetings from the Parish of St. Basil's there in Almaden, South San Jose, and let's start.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We have a couple of themes this morning that will help, I believe, and I hope, prepare our hearts for the remainder of Liturgy, for warming our hearts towards God and preparing us to receive him into our mouth as baptized Orthodox Christians in the form of his Holy Communion.

That is the goal, remember, of every Liturgy that ever takes place, that we are given the time, literally we are given the hour and a half, no matter how busy our life has been or how difficult it was to get up this morning and make it to church, we're given this time accompanied by beautiful hymns and singing and the company of our friends around us and the leadership of the clergy to prepare ourselves to meet Christ in the sacrament of Holy Communion. That is the goal every time we gather together for Liturgy. And in the process of Liturgy and even in the annual experience of Liturgy, Sunday to Sunday, year after year, celebrating the resurrection of Christ and the saints are very clear that the resurrection is so important that we actually don't celebrate it on just Pascha, we celebrate it every single Sunday of the year and then on Pascha particularly, we call it out. But we are celebrating the resurrection always and we are coming here to meet Christ, that's why we are here.

And if we are baptized and chrismated Orthodox Christians and we are doing the best we can to prepare ourselves, although we will always be unworthy, and we are doing the best we can in order to avoid sin, although we will always have sins to confess, we come and we meet Christ in the Eucharist. And so, everything we do in a Liturgy and every homily that is given ideally is to help us prepare for that encounter. So have that on your mind and hearts this morning, refresh that reality in your minds and hearts that if you are going to approach the chalice, you are approaching Christ himself to encounter him.

And we have this story in the Gospel reading today of the Samaritan, the good Samaritan, which is obviously an encounter with Christ. The man is going down... we're familiar with the story, he falls among thieves, they leave him for dead. The people that are supposed to take care of him walk by and ignore him, those who are appointed, and then a stranger comes along, a Gentile and a spiritually unilluminated person, probably from Jericho. And we see always that Jerusalem is the city on high and Jericho is always the dirty city below. Jerusalem was a walled city, it was the city of culture, of spiritual intensity and sanctity.

Jericho had been for centuries, another walled city at times, the wall destroyed at different times. It was a lowly place, a place of trade. Whenever we talk about Christ meeting Zacchaeus, we always point out that Christ has gone from Jerusalem to Jericho, he's gone from the best city to the worst city. Then he's found a person in the worst occupation and he's the worst person in that occupation. That's bad. So, in this analogy, which also there is a spiritual interpretation of this parable given by Christ that he's actually

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describing himself, he has descended from the Jerusalem on high and he was greeted hostilely. And those priests and Levites, those who were supposed to be prepared to receive the Messiah ignored him.

And yet, in God's providence, the Gentiles and the sinners, the poor folks, the uneducated, the unilluminated, the unclean, recognized him and they received him and they nurtured him in their life and he ends up with them in that lowly place, meeting them, healing them, sanctifying them, being with them, being among them, the tax collectors, the harlots. So there's an analogy for the Incarnation as well, the Son's descent down to earth to save us there in the story. But what I would like to point out today, and as we approach the national holiday of Thanksgiving, that we are intended to meet God, most often, we don't like this news, but most often in times of adversity, but when we meet God in adversity, if we have truly recognized him and have faith in him, then our response to meeting him in adversity is gratitude, is thanksgiving.

The saints tell us that we only grow in times of struggle, for our comfort-orientated American society of today, it's almost a sin, isn't it, to say that sort of thing? Definitely politically incorrect. I might hurt somebody's feelings if I tell them that suffering is good for them. Isn't that so incredibly unpopular? And yet we find that in times of grace and spiritual inspiration, we grasp spiritually, we get invigorated spiritually, we get inspired spiritually, but we actually don't grow spiritually. We only grow spiritually in times of struggle and pain and difficulty when we simultaneously are practicing our faith, reaching out to God to the best of our abilities, sometimes extremely feebly, but we haven't given up. And that is the time when we grow.

And in every other aspect of life, I like pointing this out just to help us throw off the delusion of our modern day, in every other aspect of life that still is true. We don't do well in school because we partied and drank beer, right? We did our homework and we went to class and we learned, and we did the test. We don't get stronger at the gym by going there and socializing. It's only through the pain and the effort and the discomfort of exercise that we actually make gains. Our brain stays healthy when we keep it active, we test it, we torment it with new learning and new problems that we're going to solve. Once we stop testing our brain and putting it to the test, so to speak, then it stops growing. It starts losing memory, it starts getting dull.

We don't achieve anything, whether we're an athlete or a musician, it doesn't matter what we are, we don't achieve anything good easily. There's a part of us that feels like everything that's good always be good and easy and that's the part of us that was... that's the remnant of us being created in the image and likeness of God where we were supposed to be immortal. We were supposed to be God-like in a sense, and everything was supposed to be perfect around us. So, having lost that state of being, we feel confused on the inside. We're like princes and princesses that had been cast out of the kingdom. We want to go back. Life was just easier there but we're not going to get back there without a lot of struggle.

When I was on Mount Athos one time with my brother-in-law, we are walking along... I've told you the story before, and on the eastern side of the peninsula of Mount Athos, Mount Athos is this long peninsula, it's one in three and the Mount Athos is a mountain on the end of the peninsula. The other two peninsulas are some of the most expensive vacation places in the world. That's the main reason the EU would like Mount Athos to be opened completely for tourism, millions, billions of dollars made. And

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we are out there, and we are on the eastern side of the peninsula, which is forested with chestnut trees. I mean that you're in this solid forest, it'd be like if every redwood tree here was a chestnut tree.

And real chestnut trees when they drop the nut, it's in a case that is totally and completely thorny. You guys are familiar with that. Covered in thorns, you have to really, really work a way for the husk to split in order to get the chestnut out. And so all over the ground, every trail everywhere, it was carpeted at this time of the year with these spiky husks. It was like walking on cactuses, and you'd walk along, and they would literally stick to the bottom of your shoes. Those little stickers would literally go into the rubber of the sole of your shoes. And we are walking along, and we were going from Karakalou Monastery to Philotheou. And we were walking along with the monk, and my brother-in-law looked at the ground and we are thinking about all the greatest ascetics at Mount Athos and Elder Joseph the Hesychast, for instance going around barefoot all of the time, barefoot.

And he asked the monk who we are with, how did the monks to do this? How did they even just get down a trail, let alone fast and pray and everything? How do they just get down the trail? Did they float along in grace, walking in the air and their feet didn't touch the ground or whatever? And we were so into it, it was my first time at Mount Athos, so I was very excited, and the monk looked back at us, we stopped and he kind of looked around for a little bit and he said, "For the most part, they were just a lot tougher than we are."

They'd walked barefoot for years, they had giant calluses on their feet. They had endured, amazingly, physically enduring through hardship in order to attain the goal that they were after. We have to do this in every aspect of life and we do it spiritually as well. And as a result, as we know with our own Simeon the barefoot, when you walk around barefoot long enough, your feet get really tough and pretty soon you are walking on broken glass and thorny chestnuts and you're okay because you're used to it. You're just conditioned, you're just tough enough to keep going on because you've never given up all along and suddenly great things are achievable with the help of God combined with your perseverance in the faith.

So we don't want to be machismo about things. We don't want to be just telling our neighbor to suck it up all of the time, but we want to be a tough people. We want to be a tough people. We want to be enduring. Tough doesn't mean that you're mean, tough doesn't mean you're a bully or you can beat somebody up. It means that you're unflappable. You're just not disturbed. It's going to be okay. You don't know how that God is going to make it right. It's going to turn out in the end okay. I don't know what the plan is.

I told somebody recently that when my mom and dad first got married, my dad would often say to my mom when they had a big problem, how are we going to pay the bills this month? Where are we going to live? What am I going to do? Whatever the question was, and my dad would say, "I don't know, but it'll be okay." And that drove my mom crazy. Her dad was an incredible steady planning man who rarely spoke, and when he spoke, his word was gold and what he said was true. And my dad was a wild artist that grew up in eastside San Jose and liked hot rods.

But over time, my mom learned that he didn't know, he was being honest. When she said, "How are we going to pay the bills this month?" He didn't know. He didn't know. But he was committed to make sure that it happened. And by the end of every month, all of the bills would be paid. They'd have what they needed to do. Whatever goal needed to be achieved was achieved, and over times you realized, and the

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trust grew, that it was okay, that he didn't know what the plan was today. What mattered was he was committed to see that it was fulfilled in the end, and he did it over and over and over again.

And as Christians we really have to be a lot the same way. We don't know what the plan is today. We've suffered the loss of our beloved sister Nectaria. Yesterday I was at a funeral again. We celebrated the memorials of Father Michael Hieromonk Athanasius, my mom, my dad, Photini Frye.

What are we going to do between now and our death? I don't know, but it's going to be okay. Why? Because day after day we are simply going to continue to be Christians, to be faithful to Christ and to know that just like the man on the road between Jerusalem and Jericho who was robbed and beaten... this is the teaching from the mouth of the Son of God. We didn't know at the beginning of that story how it was going to turn out. We didn't know how he was going to be okay in the end, but he was because in God's providence, God supplied what he needed.

We celebrate the memory today of a number of great saints among them is St. Menas, one of the early and incredibly popular martyrs. He was born in Egypt, he was a soldier raised by Christian parents, ended up greatly martyred and standing for the truth under persecution.

About a hundred years after him and I think it's important as Americans to think about this thing particularly today, today we celebrate the memory of St. Martin of Tours. St. Martin of Tours, probably the majority of you are not very familiar with him. St. Martin was 20 years younger than St. Anthony the Great. And after the era of persecution, when Constantine freed the Christians and the church lost the blessing -think about this- the church lost the blessing of being persecuted all of the time, which kept the people spiritually focused, monasticism had to be invented.

And those early Desert Fathers said to themselves, "We don't have an involuntary pressure on us to perform spiritually to the degree of perfection that we want to, and that we saw all of these great martyrs and great saints of this era do. Circumstantially, we don't have that purifying pressure anymore of the threat of martyrdom. So, we need to go voluntarily martyr ourselves." Not kill ourselves, not do any damage to the body voluntarily, not thinking of the person or the body is an evil thing at all. That is not our theology, but going into a place where the natural context of the situation, being in the desert, no water, no food, no grass, living in a cave, there's hardship all around you that you have to endure. Think about that for a minute.

There is voluntarily hardship around you all of the time that you have to endure because they understood that they only grew during times of struggle. And at the same time that St. Anthony the Great, just a little bit after him, 20 years behind him on the chronology, St. Martin of Tours, born in Hungaria, his father was in the military, so he traveled along a lot around the Empire, ends up in France. It's always funny how he's one of the most famous saints of France and he's not French. I love pointing those things out. Constantine is not Greek, sorry, sorry. What's the other one? Oh, Vladimir, right? Vladimir of Russia, he's Swedish.

We need to remember those things. That's the truth. And so at the same time, just 20 years behind St. Anthony the Great, St. Anthony the Great out in the desert, fighting the demons who want him to stop, Martin is in France in a very different context, but the same spiritual life, and he was surrounded by wild pagans. He didn't have to go into a desert in order to be tormented by the sun and the heat and the cold

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and the lack of food, he was surrounded by people who would beat you up, steal your food, take your clothes.

Incredible story in France and incredible ascetic developing a monastery around him, being the spiritual father of Europe before a whole blossoming of saints. And we can read about this in The Life of the Fathers by Saint Gregory of Tours who comes after him much later. And he's there and he's witnessing to Christ all the time. He's living in great deprivation because he also knows that we only grow when we struggle, when we suffer. And he's converting the pagans, many monastics are coming to be with him and have him as a spiritual father.

He's going out and witnessing to the people all the time. He has all of these incredible stories where his faith is being tested as a witness to the pagans as to whether his God is the real God or not. It's so much like the Old Testament, it's amazing. At one point he was a great zealot too. He didn't mind doing very politically incorrect things like wrecking pagan temples. He saw that is as killing a disease that was killing the souls of the people. And then one time in particular there was a pagan temple, he was converting the majority of the people to Christianity and so there was a popular tolerance for him to destroy the temple. So he gets his monks together. They literally pull down the temple, they wreck it. And when he goes then to this pine tree next to the temple and he's going to cut it down because he's been told it was dedicated to a particular demon, and the locals, even the Christians are like, "Ah, do you need to cut the tree down?" It's like living in Santa Cruz.

"Do you have to cut the tree down? It's just a tree. It's natural. The pagan temple we built, we let you destroy that. That's fine. But the tree, it's a tree. It makes the yard look nice." And he says to them, "No, it was dedicated to a demon. The tree itself is fine, but it's an image of the worship of this demon and it has to be destroyed." But there was enough tension among the people that the few remaining pagans got bold and they came out and they were like, "No, we're going to protect the tree. Martin, you will not cut it down." And it turns into this battle, not a physical battle, but a spiritual battle between the pagan leaders, the remnants of the pagans and St. Martin, like the Prophet Elijah and the pagan priest of his time.

And finally, they say, "Okay, we'll make a deal with you, St. Martin." This is one of just many, many, many stories of him. "We'll make a deal with you, St. Martin. If your God is the real God, let us cut down the tree and have it fall on you. And if your God is the true God, you'll be okay." And like St. George and everyone else before him, the great saints of the church, he said, "Bring it on." And they take him and they tie him up and his monks start weeping. He's the greatest Saint of France at the time. It's a wild era in the history of that country and his monks, they start weeping and mourning, "We're going to lose our great elder. He's going to be killed." Even they were terrified, and the pagans tied him up. I've cut down a lot of trees, so I really appreciate this, it says in the story that the tree had a distinct angle. So, when you cut it down, you know exactly where it's going to fall.

And they laid Martin right on the ground, bound in ropes, right where the tree is going to fall. And he told them he wants one arm loose so that he can make the sign of the cross. So, they let them have one arm loose. And they get over there and they're chopping on the tree and the pagans are celebrating and the monks are mourning because their elder is going to be killed.

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And the tree starts to crack and fall, and it comes down, it's coming straight down on St. Martin. (There's a very similar story in Father Arseny of Russia, this is not a unique miracle even, with trees falling). And the tree is falling down, and he gets out one arm out and he makes the sign of the cross. And the tree, it's like it hit something invisible and it bounces away from him towards all of the pagans, doesn't squish them, but they have to run to get out of the way of the tree falling. And the monks go crazy. They're just cheering like crazy and even the holdouts of the paganism there in that area, they confess that he is telling them about the true God.

St. Martin is also the other one who had a wolf... Do you remember the story of the wolf coming into the town, is terrorizing the people? And the wolf would come in at night and it would eat their pets or their sheep or their goats or whatever it was. If they could catch some people on the street, it would eat them as well. This is later when St. Martin is made Bishop of Tours. He was made Bishop against his will. He would not leave his monastery when they told him to become and be the Bishop. And so finally somebody went and lied to him. Someone he loved very much and said that their wife was sick and going to die. So, he leaves the monastery and he comes into the city and they grab him and they force them to become a Bishop. Later on, as the Bishop of Tours, there's this terrible wolf going around the city at night eating people and things and they call on St. Martin to save them, because it's become a great problem. These are small cities compared to what we think of a city at the time.

And so, St. Martin goes out in the night and he confronts a wolf, a real wolf, it's not a demon disguised as a wolf. It's just a real giant wolf that's eating things. And he confronts it in the night, and he rebukes the wolf, "What are you doing? God is the one who created you. I'm a priest of God. You're misbehaving, you shouldn't be doing this. You have to stop tormenting the people. Stop coming in and eating things and killing their flocks. You have to start behaving yourself." And he assumes that the wolf agrees. So, the next day he tells the people the wolf is going to be fine, but leave all your scraps out on the doorstep when you're done with dinner. Because the agreement we made with a wolf is he'll come and eat the scraps that you give him, and he won't bother anyone else. And the people start leaving food out after dinner and the wolf comes and he eats all of the food and leaves everybody alone.

And as years went by, it became one of these condemned myths of St. Martin. Like, "Oh, that's ridiculous. He made an agreement with a wolf. It's just these things that people make up about saints over time." And within the last 30 years, they redid the floor in the Cathedral of Tours, France. And they knew that there were a lot of crypts, bishops buried in the floor. It's a tradition of many of the great cathedrals in the Orthodox tradition as well. So, they knew that as they pulled up the stone of the floor, that they would find graves and they're opening them up. And there were graves of bishops and all these people that they knew they're there or had heard through history that they were there and they ended up opening this one grave and in it was the skeleton of a wolf, and that wolf had become the pet of the entire city. It became docile and tame, it didn't hurt anybody anymore. They took care of it. It guarded them from other wolves like a great dog.

And it was such a wonderful animal at the end that they literally, it was so miraculous, that they buried it in the church. And this is just one of the many anecdotes of St. Martin. So, remember that these glorious saints... and he's very important because we are Westerners, most of us, and this is our Orthodox heritage, he is the St. Anthony of Europe. And the life that we see from them, and we have to apply this every day, we have to apply this now, we have to apply this to the fact that our bottom is a little sore because Father Thaddaeus has talked too long.

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We have to be those people that really actually follow their example. We have to be the people that when we are sick or our kids are sick or it's hard at our job or we don't like the commute anymore or we're not sure how we're going to pay our bills or I'm really tired and I don't want to go to church, the Nativity fast has started, not sure if I really want to enter into it," - we have to be the people that are persevering and simply a little bit more tough in order to enter into the spiritual life and to meet Christ there.

If the man coming down from Jerusalem had not been beat up by thieves, he would not have encountered the good Samaritan. And we have to be tough enough, brave enough, that we know that it is in times of adversity that we are going to meet Christ if we look for him. When things are easy, we don't look for God, do we? And we take credit for the fact that everything is good. When times are hard, and God even allows times to be hard, sometimes, so that we will naturally turn to him for help when we realize that our life is out of our control, we can't control everything that's going on.

And even in the spirit of this week, even in Thanksgiving day, when you are around that table with your family and friends and rejoicing for a short period of time, remember that the only reason we even have that national holiday, as popular, as unpopular as it is... it's one of the last religious holidays, national holidays, if not the last, along with Christmas, as I wrote in a recent newspaper article, I don't care how the Pilgrims and Indians got along afterwards. I really don't. There was a lot of hard times. I don't care that the Puritans were such a pain in the rear. They got kicked out of England by the Anglicans. What I care about is that in the feast of Thanksgiving, in the holiday of Thanksgiving, what I am reminded of is that when things are difficult and God rescues me from that difficulty, I better be giving thanks.

A faithful heart rejoices in God and glorifies God with thanksgiving when we are saved, and that is the spirit that we want to have. That is the attitude of gratitude that we want to combine with the fact that we are tough and brave Christians.

So endure on, the asceticism set before you, you don't have to go out into the desert, you don't have to go to France and be surrounded by pagans. The asceticism that God wants you to enter into is right in your life today. It is the difficulty of today. It is the difficulty that your family is in right now. It is the difficulty of your job or your car breaking down or whatever it is, that is your asceticism, and all of those little inconveniences or even big problems, see an opportunity to encounter Christ.

In the midst of that emotional crisis, of the difficulty of life, realize that it's an opportunity for you to have a profound spiritual experience. In the midst of struggle, cry out to Christ, believe that you don't know what the plan is, but it's going to be okay in the end. God bless you.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.