

An Exceptional Example of True Freedom

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

This Sunday, we celebrate a great saint, a saint who experienced the divine love to the highest degree a human can ever experience it. She is St. Mary of Egypt. Beautiful and attractive, she sold her body in her youth, and her burning bodily desires and passions led her to live in sin. She embarked on a trip to Jerusalem for tourism and in pursuit of new bodily adventures. There, the divine grace touched her. Among the many pilgrims, only she felt an invisible barrier stopping her from entering the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. This experience pricked her heart, and she deeply felt the gravity of her sins and, thus, her unworthiness to venerate the Holy Sepulcher.

Mary vowed to the Lord to change and live a life that is well pleasing to Him. And not only that happened, but even more. Instead of her fiery and degrading yearnings and desires, which kept her in the bosom of sin, she acquired the spiritual yearnings and desires; thus, she could, with her entire being, touch the true warmth in the bosom of God once and forever.

After she confessed her debased life, she left for the Jordan desert and lived the rest of her life, 47 years, in absolute solitude with her Lord. After meeting her at the end of her life through divine providence, the priest Zosimas revealed to the Church her pious life after her repentance. He listened to her life story and thankfully wrote it down. St. Sophronios of Jerusalem recounted it for the benefit of all generations as an illuminating depiction of true repentance.

Mary transformed her fascination with the body and its needs into the adoration of God only. She fled a life of luxury and affluence and chose an ascetic life that surpassed human ability. Thus, she pricks the heart of every human being who is enslaved to consumerism and crushed by its unstoppable grinder. What makes it possible for a woman who is used to luxury to live alone in the desert, away from all of life's necessities, and sustain her existence with the grass and roots of the desert? It is this desire that was transformed into divine adoration.

When he saw the shadow of a human being from afar, her biographer, Zosimas, followed it. When he called, he heard a female voice pleading with him not to approach because she was a naked woman. He then threw his garment to her so

he might meet her. That is why the icon depicts her as a very thin woman, whose chest bones are protruding. Doesn't her asceticism and abstinence even from the basic necessities of life—for more than forty years—show us how delusional we are about the many necessities we think we cannot live without?

Our holy Church annually celebrates the memory of this great saint on the fifth Sunday of Great Lent. Through that celebration, the Church invites us to rearrange our priorities so that we may live a pious and holy life. In an age that grinds us through the constant chasing after new “needs” that are created daily, how many “Marys of Egypt” do we need to help us reach the desired freedom and to shed the economic fetters that relentlessly shackle us?

Some people think that asceticism is only for a select few; that is not true. According to the teachings of the Orthodox Church, asceticism is asked from every free Christian, even if to a different degree depending on each person.

Many fear the word asceticism. Some even refuse to hear it because, in their minds, it is associated with deprivation and torturing the body! However, in the Christian understanding, it is a liberation from any fetters that may shackle the human being. If you are captivated by smoking, and you are not able to quit or limit your consumption, then you are a slave to smoking. The slave then needs asceticism, exercise of discipline, to be liberated. To be liberated from the captivity of smoking is an ascetic act. The same applies to other issues in our lives; we must control them rather than be controlled by them.

Christian asceticism is a concept that asks you to first become human before it makes you spiritual. A human who is not internally free is an incomplete human. The word “asceticism” comes from the Greek *ascesis* which means “exercise.” When we were university students, we used to hear from our colleagues at the school of architecture, “Tomorrow, we have an *esquisse* (French),” which meant an exercise project or a quiz.

According to the Eastern Christian understanding, to live in asceticism means to practice certain exercises, which include abstaining from bad habits and practices and replacing them with more positive and useful ones. The positive habits will uproot the negative ones and train you to embrace them with joy.

Fasting, for instance, is an ascetic act. When you fast, you abstain from permissible food and replace it with other kinds of food, to train yourself to overcome gluttony rather than being enslaved to it. Limiting the time of watching TV or using social media is also an ascetic act. Today's human beings are surrounded by technologies, demands and possessions that invade the market and equally invade our minds, hearts and emotions. Today's human being lives to work and to increase his income while his expenses increase. He therefore pursues another job or an extra job; ultimately, he wastes his life in a vicious cycle, until he is drained and destroyed. Doesn't basic wisdom demand that one pause and ask oneself: What are my priorities? What are the things that I can let go of and live without?

However, from where would the one who is mentally drained and filled with different worries summon the courage and boldness necessary to stand firm against the current when it is in his best interest?

In a world that is sweepingly materialistic, the Church through her institutions and faithful people should be a living witness of simplicity and freedom from unnecessary demands of life. The Church must be the pioneer in emphasizing the possibility of a fulfilling life through the presence of God in her midst. To be filled with the divine presence means that one is liberated of the psychological and physical challenges that come from the world around us. Even if one has ongoing but positive challenges, they will entice you to pursue *the better life*, that is, to lay your life down in the arms of its Creator rather than blindly pursue the lifestyles pushed by others.

Those who seek true freedom must acquire a great yearning for God, and they must have the necessary self confidence to overcome any sense of inferiority, while paying no attention to how others see them.

Mary of Egypt had such a great sense of repentance that she forgot the world and all that is in it; thus, she became a woman worthy of divine love. We are in the world, and the Lord does not ask us to leave it; rather, He asks us to have dominion over the world. Is it burdensome to acquire the sense of belonging to the heavenly kingdom (which starts here and now, according to Christian teaching) so that we don't forget our invitation to that which is higher, more sublime and more beautiful than the mirage which many waste their lives vainly trying to grasp?

Originally published in 2017.