

The Feet of Faith

A very devout and virtuous monk had a sister in the city who lived a dissolute life. The brothers in the desert often urged the monk to go to the city to bring his straying sister to her senses. At first he hesitated. He feared the dangers hiding in the world for young monks. Afterwards he decided to go.

Just as he approached his father's home, the neighbors saw him coming and informed his sister. The straying sister's heart jumped at this unexpected news. For years she had wanted to see her beloved brother. She ran into the street to greet her brother just as she was, with bare feet and her head uncovered.

He, beholding her destitute state with his own eyes, was greatly troubled. His soul wept. "Are you not sorry for your own soul, my sister," he told her sorrowfully, "and for those who, on your account, go astray? Think of what awaits you after death!"

The innocent face of the brother, his unassuming attitude, the tears of compassion that flowed from his eyes, along with his just admonition, shook the sinful women.

"Is there salvation even for me?" her lips murmured.

"O yes, if you sincerely desire it enough."

"Take me with you," she begged, "and do not leave me by myself to struggle with the fierce billows of sin."

"Put on your sandals, cover your head and follow me," the monk said.

"But let me go as I am, brother, because, if I go back into this workshop of Satan, who knows if I will have enough strength to come back out?"

The monk was pleased with her firm resolve. Without wasting time, he led her out of the city, and they went on their way to the desert. He intended to take her to a convent that was known to him. While they were walking, they saw a caravan in the distance coming to where they were.

"Get out of sight, little sister," the monk told her. "Hide behind the bushes; for these people, not knowing you are my sister, might see us together and be scandalized."

She complied with his advice. When the caravan passed, the brother yelled to her to continue on their way. She did not seem to hear. The monk went near and talked to her again. He pushed her with his foot. There did not appear to be any sign of life. She had died. He saw her bare feet completely covered with blood and torn to pieces by the stones on the road.

Discontent over the sudden death of his sister, the monk returned to his cell. Uncertainty ate away at him.

“It is impossible for her to be saved,” his mind told him, “since she did not have time to repent.”

He related to the elders in detail all that had happened in the desert. It was then revealed to a very holy hermit that God had accepted the repentance of the sinful woman and had enlisted her among the righteous for the self-denial she showed, as well as for reviling not only material things, but her own body.

This story, taken from the writings of the desert fathers, illustrates two things: how one’s personal witness can change another and the true nature of repentance.

It was the humility and compassion of the monk that penetrated the hardened heart of his sister. As St. Saraphim of Sarov said, “by acquiring the Holy Spirit a thousand souls around us can be saved.” It was the monk’s unity with Christ and not his intellectual knowledge of divine things that was capable of breaking through his sister’s enslavement to the passions.

Our Lord taught that our faith has an effect on those around us. It was the faith of a mother for her daughter who had become possessed by demons through which Christ granted healing:

Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly. (Matt 15:28)

Many times we don’t realize the impact we can have on others. The monk left the security of the monastery, risked the temptations of the world, and sought out his lost sister. Faith without risks is powerless. Love without sacrifice is empty.

The sister, moved by her brother’s faith and compassion, changes her life. In the spirit of St. Paul, she “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and made no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Romans 13:14). By walking miles without shoes, she was saying that she belongs to Christ Jesus and has crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Gal 5:24).

We are called upon during Great Lent to walk with feet of faith like the repentant sister who crucified her flesh and changed her life. As Orthodox Christians we fast for an extended period of time in order to bring the flesh into submission. Fasting is an act of self-crucifixion; it is no different from what St. Paul identifies, “And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Gal. 5:24-25). Fasting is not abusive but liberates the Spirit from being controlled by the flesh. It is an act of devotion that produces spiritual fruit.

On Mount Sinai, Moses was “with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote upon the tables the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments” (Exodus 34:28). By fasting forty days, Moses received the Ten Commandments. Our Lord taught that spiritual blessings are indeed acquired when fasting is combined with prayer.

He said, “But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:17-18). Fasting is to be done so that no one is aware. The lives of the desert fathers are full of examples of monks breaking their fasts so that visiting pilgrims would not be made to feel bad about their own lack of strictness. This takes away any spirit of competitiveness because the contest is against sin not one another. True rewards are found in victory over sin.

We have entered upon the holy work of Great Lent and are encouraged to fast and pray (Acts 14:23) so that when Holy Week arrives we may hear, “The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come.’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price” (Rev 22:17).

In Christ’s love,
+ Fr. Andrew Barakos