

To Test Our Love

As the scribes and Pharisees were led by Judas to apprehend Jesus, Peter was found fleeing the scene naked. This is an amazing and profound statement about us when we are found fleeing from our Lord. Departing from God strips us of any dignity. Peter stands as an example to the faithful of the Church. As Lent begins we are called to follow Christ and to have our love for Him tested. The Church's sacred mission for the next forty seven days is nothing less than to evaluate our love for God and to see how weak it has become because of sin.

Our Lord appeared after His resurrection and questioned Peter three times. "Peter do you love me?" Peter answered, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."

The Lord's questioning of the sincerity of the apostle's love was based upon Peter's affirmation that his love was greater than the other disciples'. In Matthew 26:33, Peter said, "Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away." Jesus being all knowing prophesied, "Truly I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times" (Matt. 26:34). Peter replies, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you." And so said all the disciples.

When it came to actually suffering the consequences of loving Christ, Peter was not willing to follow it through. His love had not matured. His love was zealous and bold, outspoken and honest, yet it lacked depth.

In the tradition of the Church, as Orthodox we are always called to adjust ourselves to the standards set by the Church. The standard has been a very serious and demanding one from the beginning of Church history. Perhaps Peter's denial set the stage for this high standard. If Peter's love for Christ had problems, then ours must also. We think we love God, but in God's eyes how are we seen? Lent is the time at which we must ask some hard questions about our faith and devotion to God - is it real?

In the book, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, a holy monk makes his confession and acknowledges that he always commits the same sins:

1) I do not love God.

"For if I loved God I should be continually thinking about God with a heartfelt joy. Every thought of God would give me gladness and delight. On the contrary, I much more often and much more eagerly think about earthly things, and thinking about God is labor and dryness. If I loved God, then talking with God in prayer would be my nourishment and delight and would draw me to unbroken communion with God. But, on the contrary, I not only find no delight in prayer, but even find it an effort. Even if I am unwillingly drawn by others into a spiritual conversation, I try to shift the subject quickly to one which please my desires. "I am tirelessly curious about novelties, about civic affairs and political events; I eagerly seek the satisfaction of my love of knowledge in science and

art, and in ways of getting things I want to possess. But the study of the law of God, the knowledge of God and of my faith, make little impression on me, and satisfy no hunger of my soul. If love for God is recognized by keeping God's commandments, and I not only do not keep them, but even make little attempt to do so, then . . . I do not love God" (The Way of a Pilgrim).

2) I have no love for my neighbors.

3) I have no religious belief.

4) I am filled with pride and self-love.

Every Lent the standard that challenges our love for God is set before us. Here are just a few guidelines to consider as we meet this challenge:

- absolutely no meat for forty days,
- on time attendance at the divine services,
- time alone in prayer with God,
- confession,
- a change in one's life style- limited exposure to the media in its various forms and more time spent reading the Bible or attending a Lenten seminar, and
- more time spent with others in fellowship.

These standards are given so that our love for God may be tested and strengthened. Our love for God is always compromised when we fail to follow His will and choose to live as independents. In the Church, we are all dependents of our heavenly Father, His co-eternal Son, and His Holy Spirit.

+Fr. Andrew Barakos