

ST STEPHEN BYZANTINE CATHOLIC CHURCH
FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE GREAT FAST
REMEMBRANCE OF ST JOHN CLIMACUS

To Our Beloved Parish Family,

I greet you with my prayers for you and your loved ones during these exceptional and unmatched times. I send my love for each of you to assure you of my concern for our entire parish family.

It is a touching experience to sit in a silent church, without the faithful, with the soundless flickering of the vigil light and with the still-lingering aroma of the fragrance of incense. Yet, it is not an experience of loneliness: the echoes of the voices of all of you resound around the walls, your faces, your smiles, the intensity in your eyes at prayer still populate the pews. You are truly present in my mind as I pray in our beloved church. And I eagerly await the day when these images will be replaced with your real presence in the flesh.

But for now, we live in a new reality. I trust that we all have a safe place in which to dwell, with our basic necessities all provided. We have all been alerted many times over about all the means to keep safe and healthy and to try to minimize the spread of COVID-19. Please be assiduous in following the directives of the health-care professionals. Pray for the doctors, nurses and other medical staff and assistants as they seek to share their God-given skills and specialized knowledge to assist others.

Additionally, each of us can offer our own support:

- Regularly check on family members, friends, neighbors, especially those who are elderly or alone and assist them if they need help with shopping for food, medications, etc.
- Pray daily, and especially with other family members, for those in need. Pray by name for each of these.
 - Read the daily Scripture selections on the church calendar from Genesis and Proverbs
 - Read and meditate on the Sunday Epistle and Gospel as found on the Church calendar.
 - Read aloud sections from the Psalms and the Gospels and reflect on them together.
 - Use the daily meditation booklets that have been offered, and use your own favorite prayer books.
 - Use the Jesus Prayer regularly to keep our minds focused on the Lord.
- One of our parishioners, Leia Shilabod, has graciously prepared an updated listed of internet resources that she is sending to our parishioners that are available from various sources in our Byzantine Catholic Church.

Please know that if I may be of any support in these trying times, please be free to contact me.

God be with you,

Fr John

ST. JOHN CLIMACUS

We live with a constant glut of *information* ... especially in a time of crisis. Twenty-four hour news/commentary can overload our systems.

In fact, our society has changed over from a *product* society to one of *information*. Just note how many of the older members of our families worked in the mines and mills, in the manufacturing of products, ... whereas, today, so many of us work in various *services* or the processing of *information*.

We have so much information available through television (with hundreds of channels!) ... newspapers ... magazines and journals of just about every imaginable type ... the Internet, with just about any information that a person would want (and much that we don't want!).

Yet, we seem to have so little time to *absorb* this information.

In fact, we *see* so much ... but we *notice* very little. We often do not notice what is happening to us ... and how it affects us.

The Great Lenten Fast is a time to *slow down* ... *and notice!* And now with most of us spending more time at home, we have the opportunity to take the time to slow down and notice.

One of the models given to us by our Church is St. John Climacus (meaning "Ladder" ... because his book is called the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*). John lived at the end of the 6th century and early 7th century ... and his book on the spiritual life has been a major influence on the spirituality of our Church.

Writing about *talkativeness* (*the 6th century equivalent of too much information!*) and *silence* ... he says:

Talkativeness is the throne of vainglory on which it loves to preen itself and show off ... it is a sign of ignorance ... a doorway to slander ... the darkening of prayer ... it often comes from gluttony, for only the one who can keep a hard check on the stomach can more easily restrain the foolish blabbering of the tongue!

Silence, however, is the mother of prayer ... a guard on our thoughts ... the opponent of rigid thinking ... hidden progress ... the secret journey to God. By his silence, Jesus shamed Pilate.

It is hard to keep water in without a dike. But it is harder still to hold in one's tongue.

THE LADDER OF DIVINE ASCENT



In this icon of the *LADDER OF DIVINE ASCENT*, we see people (actually men because this was originally written for monks since St John was the abbot of a monastery) seeking to climb the ladder to heaven. At the beginning, we see demons (i.e., the various temptations) trying to pull them back. You know how hard it is in the beginning to break a bad habit! There are many temptations pulling back to our old ways. Just think about one habit that you have tried, or are trying to break. Make it real for yourself. It is a struggle to try to change for the better. The demons pulling us back are very real!

In terms of our adjustment to the Coronavirus, we are just now at the beginning of a new way of life and new adjustments. We see many things that we did previously, and probably did them without much thought or appreciation, and now are not able to do them. We miss our gatherings, our freedom to come and go as well as going out socially. We probably miss more the things that

we cannot do and do not appreciate what we can do. These are the demons pulling us down.

Even in the middle, and this is often another difficult time, we see the struggle. We might be over the initial struggle, but we are still far away from the end. This is why our Church gives us the image of the Holy Cross in the middle of the Fast to encourage and strengthen us. This is where we are now in the Fast. It can seem as if it just goes on and on, but there is still so much more to go.

In our COVID-19 journey, we are far from the middle of it! We don't even know what the middle of it will look like. But this icon calls us to perseverance at that time. It calls us to be faithful even when we do not know what is coming next. This will be a rough and a very dry time.

Finally, we see that as the people near to the top, the saints and angels are reaching out with their assistance, their prayers and encouragement. Yet even then, there are temptations to give up and not complete the journey to the top where our Lord waits to welcome his people.

There is much on which we can meditate in this icon this week. Let's add it to our list of ways of praying when we cannot come to church.