

1] In the year 250AD the Roman Emperor Decius launched a terrible persecution against the Church. Many, of course, fell away from the Faith of Christ at that time, but many others bore witness, and in the famous phrase attributed to Tertullian, 'Plures efficimur, quotiens metimur a vobis: semen est sanguis Christianorum.' That is, we multiply when you reap us. The blood of Christians is seed. It is often represented as the idea that the blood of the martyrs became the seed of the Church. Sixty-two years later, with the victory of Constantine the Great and his coming to power, these occasional persecutions ended.

2] Even before that liberation from fear something very dynamic began to happen. With the threat of possible death or deprivation of property now gone, Christian people might ask themselves where now was the cutting edge of their spirituality; what, now, the cost of taking up the cross? In other words, they wondered whether Christianity would be compromised if it became just another religion within the Empire.

3] There began a movement, often associated with St Anthony the Great of Egypt, where certain Christians, often young people from rich families, abandoned the world and entered the deserts of North Africa and Palestine to pursue an ascetic life of fasting and prayer. This even alarmed the governing authorities, for these people did not pay taxes and they would not serve in the army. Wealthy families and dynasties wondered how they might pass on their possessions.

4] This movement spread from the Mediterranean world as far as these British Isles. Today, we commemorate, St Piran of Cornwall, one of those early ascetics who died around the year 480AD. This early movement was eventually to be organised into what we know today as the monastic life. At the same time many pagans turned to Christ and the gentile world now supplied the majority of Catechumens, learners of the Faith. They might spend up to three years in instruction; they would attend the first part of

the Divine liturgy, before being dismissed with a blessing. Then, for forty days before their baptism, they would fast and undergo various exorcisms in preparation. Members of the congregation would also fast and pray in sympathy with the candidates for baptism. And what you will have already noticed is that we have here the origins of Great Lent.

5] We might not lead the ascetic lives of those who entered into the desert, or who are now in monasteries. Indeed, we cannot, for the full ascetic life, like the call to martyrdom, is a vocation. Yet the tradition of the Orthodox Church is for all to undertake this struggle, in as much as they are physically able. This cutting edge of spirituality, as we might call it, has largely become blunted in Western Christianity now. The late Metropolitan Kallistos of blessed memory, wrote in his celebrated book, *The Orthodox Church*, 'The rules of fasting in the Orthodox Church are of a rigour which will astonish and appal many western Christians.'

6] In the letter to the Hebrews this morning we were told, 'By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season.' The apostle sees Moses as making a moral decision, choosing a greater, more blessed future, rather than enjoying what was presently on offer for a time only.

7] For those concerned with their own physical fitness there is a slogan that inspires them to keep pressing forward: No pain, no gain. They are content to put themselves through strains, sweat, exertions, fatigue and even injuries, in order to reach their goal, imagining perhaps, that they are putting off, if only for a time, the inevitable decline of the flesh. Well, if they can do physical training for such a temporal goal, can we not train the spiritual man, the inner man; can we not, for a time, set our minds on the health of our souls, restraining the demands of the flesh in its proper place, for the goal that we pursue will bear for us eternal fruit.

8] We cannot be like those olympian athletes of the spirit that might be found in such places as Mount Athos, but as the amateur

runner might try his best to emulate the professional sportsman, so we must strive in prayer and fasting and almsgiving. We are not called in the gospel to remain static once we believe, as if grace worked by magic. Growth, whether spiritual or physical, is the evidence of dynamic life. In this world the static soon turns back to atrophy and decline.

9] The story of the life of St Syncletica is ascribed to St Athanasius of Alexandria. St Syncletica was one of those who had spurned marriage and her own wealth, and had entered that ascetic life of the desert. She is quoted as saying, 'In the beginning there is struggle and a lot of work for those who come near to God. But after that there is indescribable joy. It is just like building a fire: at first it is smoky and your eyes water, but later you get the desired result. Thus we ought to light the divine fire in ourselves with tears and effort.'

10] The troparion for her feast day on 5th January, says, 'In you, O mother, the divine image was strictly preserved; taking up your cross, you followed Christ. You taught us by example how to spurn the flesh, for it passes away, and how to care for the soul, which is immortal. Therefore, O venerable Syncletica, your soul rejoices with the angels.' In other words, her asceticism revealed clearly the divine image.

11] That same image is to shine forth in us, as well: not to impress those around us, as if we wanted to boast before the world of our own impressive self-denial. We leave that to the secular virtue-signallers of this age, who have had their reward, as the gospel says. Rather, as Christ commanded us, 'Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.' [Matt.5:16] Note well! We do all this to give glory to God, not for our own kudos or prestige.

12] Last Sunday we commemorated the expulsion of Adam from paradise. There, we forfeited the divine likeness and buried the image of God under sin. It is no coincidence that today we move from that expulsion to the restoration of the image, the icon of God. Since the year 843 the Church has observed this Sunday as the

Triumph of Orthodoxy. The iconoclastic heresy took root in 726, threatening the fundamental understanding of the incarnation of Christ in this world; that God, having created Man in His own image as His vice-regent in paradise, united Himself, without confusion, with our human nature in the mode of this world, surpassing the second commandment of Moses and giving for Himself an image as the God-Man.

13] The Seventh Ecumenical Council at Nicaea in 787, was convened by the Empress Irene and led by Tarasios, Patriarch of Constantinople. The Council of 367 bishops restored the veneration of the holy images. And down to this very day and this very hour, the decisions of the Council were established and are celebrated in our procession of the icons at the end of the Liturgy, together with the declaration of the Synodikon.

14] 'We venerate Thy sacred image, of Good One,' says the troparion of the day. 'And ask forgiveness of our transgressions, O Christ our God.' Let us, with great attention at this time, paying heed to that image before us and indeed, that is within us. As St Paul writes to the Philippians, 'Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.' [Phil. 4:8]

15] Our very senses have been anointed with the Holy Myron; our eyes and ears, our nostrils and mouths have been consecrated. Let us be very circumspect as to what we admit, allowing entry into this current man of flesh. Let us follow those ascetics of the early days: our watchwords being vigilance and watchfulness over our souls, lest our outward religion, venerating holy images and participating in processions, is shown to be hollow within the spirit and all form without substance.